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**THESIS**

**TROLLING NEW MEDIA: VIOLENT EXTREMIST  
GROUPS RECRUITING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA**

by

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December 2015

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**TROLLING NEW MEDIA: VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUPS RECRUITING  
THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

With the advent and subsequent growth of several new media technologies, violent extremist groups have incorporated social media into recruiting strategies. How are violent extremist groups using social media for recruiting?

This thesis explores several new media technologies—websites, blogs, social media, mobile phones, and online gaming—to determine if violent extremist groups rely on social media for recruiting. By comparing the communication of al Qaeda and ISIS, this thesis concludes that violent extremist groups rely on social media, and they employ a wide range of new media technologies to attract and recruit new members. In some instances, virtual interaction still requires face-to-face communication to adequately recruit someone into a violent extremist group.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

To remain effective, violent extremist groups must recruit new members continuously. Counterterrorism authors Deborah Browne and Andrew Silke argue that “whoever communicates the most compelling message significantly improves their chances of winning” the battle for hearts and minds of new recruits.<sup>1</sup>

Extremist organizations’ recruiting messages are important, but the method and mode of communication are equally critical. To maintain an advantage over agencies that counter them, violent extremist groups have incorporated social media completely into their recruiting repertoire. How are violent extremist groups using social media for recruiting?

### A. SIGNIFICANCE

Violent extremist groups’ ability to communicate and recruit globally threatens U.S. interests and allies. In his Worldwide Threat Assessment to the Senate Armed Services Committee, James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, identified al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)<sup>2</sup> as top threats to the nation. Since 2011, Clapper said ISIS has recruited over 20,000 foreign fighters—3,400 came from Western nations.<sup>3</sup> In a hearing before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, National Counterterrorism Center Director Nicholas J. Rasmussen elaborated on Clapper’s foreign fighter estimate: he said 150 of the 3,400 Western recruits were recruited from the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Brown and Andrew Silke, “The impact of the media on terrorism and counter-terrorism,” in *The Psychology of Counter-Terrorism*, ed. by Andrew Silke (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 89.

<sup>2</sup> This paper’s author acknowledges the existence of multiple ways of referring to al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). For the purpose of consistency and standardization, ‘al Qaeda’ and ‘ISIS’ will be the version used throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community: Hearing Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 114th Cong. (26 Feb 15) (statement of James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence): 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Current Terrorist Threat to the United States: Hearing Before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 114th Cong. (12 Feb 15), (statement of Nicholas J. Rasmussen, National Counterterrorism Center Director).

Internet access and social media use continues to grow. According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center that surveyed 32 countries, 11 countries had a majority population that owns computers and accesses the Internet regularly.<sup>5</sup> In emerging and developing countries, two-thirds of Internet users accessed the Internet daily.<sup>6</sup> Once online, 82 percent of Internet users regularly used social media as a news source or as a way to stay connected and interact regularly with friends and family.<sup>7</sup>

New media allows violent extremist groups to actively connect with and recruit from vast and globally distributed audiences. This thesis describes how violent extremist groups have incorporated several new media technologies—social media, in particular—into recruiting efforts. Additionally, it illustrates how violent extremist groups have adapted their communication structures to utilize social media networks for distributing propaganda, biased information used to influence beliefs or behavior. Furthermore, this thesis details how violent extremist groups use social media to identify popular topics or collect individual preferences.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The amount of academic literature on violent extremist groups' use of new media, the Internet, and social media is expansive; however, literature correlating social media usage to recruitment effectiveness is limited. As a result, the amount of empirical data proving or disproving extremists' reliance predominantly on social media for recruiting is minimal.

This literature review covers five main areas. First, it introduces four media definitions: new media, Web 2.0, echo chamber, and narrowcasting. Second, it highlights new media characteristics that provide advantages over old media, which are beneficial to violent extremist groups. Third, it illustrates several new media technologies and social

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<sup>5</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence on Education but Negative Influence on Morality in Emerging and Developing Nations,” Pew Research Center’s Internet, Science & Technology, March 2015: 4-5, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/03/Pew-Research-Center-Technology-Report-FINAL-March-19-20151.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

media outlets that violent extremists use for recruiting purposes. And, fourth, it explains why online gaming attracts vast numbers of networked gamers. As a result, violent extremist groups have developed games to access these large audiences. This section also offers a number of counterarguments. They contend that new media and social media are equally beneficial to both violent extremist groups and the agencies that attempt to neutralize them.

## **1. Definitions**

Similar to the definition of terrorism, a consensus definition does not exist for “new media.” Bailey Socha and Barbara Eber-Schmid of the New Media Institute provided a general definition: “New media is a 21st Century catchall term used to define all that is related to the Internet and the interplay between technology, images, and sound.”<sup>8</sup>

As a distinct difference from old media, several authors discuss the technological and distributional aspects of new media. Author Chenoy Ceil notes that new media “integrate[s] computers with multimedia,” which allows end-users to traverse the Internet freely or choose topics based on personal interests.<sup>9</sup> Just as technology continues to change, so does the definition of new media.<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, the Internet and passive websites are generally included in new media.

Beyond simple searches or navigating to websites for information, the Internet has evolved into a highly interactive, user-based environment that involves active participation. Neil Y. Yen and his co-authors discuss how “Web 2.0” is considered the “read-n-write Web, or the Social Web” because it is highly interactive and “prompts [users] to participate in creating and publishing information.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, it allows users the ability to view, download, and upload audio and video files while commenting

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<sup>8</sup> Bailey Socha and Barbara Eber-Schmid, “What is New Media?,” New Media Institute, last modified 2014, <http://www.newmedia.org/what-is-new-media.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Chenoy Ceil, “The Role of Old Media in New Communication Environment,” 4 June 2011, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1884906>.

<sup>10</sup> Socha and Eber-Schmid, “What is New Media?”

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

on and communicating with other social media users.<sup>12</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, Web 2.0 and social media are used interchangeably.

Once online, the Pew Research Center reports that over 80 percent of Internet users maintain and use social media regularly to stay connected and share information.<sup>13</sup> This information is easily accessible to other users. It can be used to tailor media and messages toward user preferences or other social media account demographics. Author Gabriel Weimann explains that this targeted approach of tailoring propaganda toward a specific audience or individual preferences for recruiting purposes is known as narrowcasting.<sup>14</sup>

In an effort to connect and interact with people of similar interests and feelings, Internet users seek various social media groups that exhibit characteristics that are congruent with their own. Once established within a group, other members within social forums can produce what Peter R. Neumann calls an “echo chamber”—the process of amplifying interests and emotions through constant messaging and reinforcement.<sup>15</sup> Within this echo chamber, Neumann says that people develop a “skewed sense of reality.”<sup>16</sup> Violent extremist groups use the skewed reality that echo chambers create to portray terrorism as a normal, desirable act.

## 2. New Media

Before the Internet, the public was forced to rely on mass media to communicate with other groups or government officials. Author Brigitte L. Nacos refers to this phenomenon as the Triangle of Political Communication.<sup>17</sup> In the triangle, mass media

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<sup>12</sup> Peter R. Neumann, “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 6 (2013): 434, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.784568>.

<sup>13</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence,” 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” *Wilson Center Common Labs*, no. 2 (2014): 3, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/new\\_terrorism\\_v3\\_1.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/new_terrorism_v3_1.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Neumann, “Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization,” 437.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>17</sup> Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: the Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2007), 15.

regulated communication between the public and political leaders. With the advent of the Internet and continued advances in technology, new media freed the public from Naco's communication triangle.

Authors Phillip Seib and Dana M. Janbek agree with Nacos; new media technology circumvents the media controls of old media by allowing users the ability to create, edit, and distribute media and messages quickly and globally.<sup>18</sup> Seib and Janbek go on to explain that "communication is at the heart of terrorism" and thereby argue that violent extremist groups must maintain a constant flow of new recruits to remain effective and sustain ongoing operations.<sup>19</sup> With the advent of a more interactive Web 2.0, they pose that online recruitment has replaced the face-to-face interaction that was once required before the advent of new media.<sup>20</sup>

For violent extremist groups, framing is a key component to a successful propaganda strategy. By portraying acts of terrorisms as deeds committed by jihadis, violent extremist groups attempt to frame terrorism as a justifiable act committed by a devout Muslim. Seib and Janbek explain that this religious affiliation helps to portray acts of terrorism positively, attracts new media users, and potentially entices them to join the group or commit terrorism in the name of jihad.<sup>21</sup>

By utilizing the Internet, violent extremist groups' propaganda is highly persistent and accessible. The video in which Musab al-Zarqawi decapitated Nicholas Berg was posted in May of 2004. Within 24 hours, the video was downloaded over 500,000 times and viewed over a million times.<sup>22</sup> These downloads and viewings could take place quickly because the video was repeatedly posted on a number of different sites. As the video was posted, links were distributed widely to the new website locations. As sites

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<sup>18</sup> Phillip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; The Post-Al Qaeda Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

were blocked or removed, new sites would emerge and links were redistributed to the video's new location.<sup>23</sup>

In their book *New Media*, authors Nicholas Gane and David Beer relay two important benefits of being online: low relative costs and expansive connectivity.<sup>24</sup> Since technology allows vast amounts of data to be physically stored or transmitted, user costs to store or distribute data goes down significantly. Alternatively, users' connectivity goes up substantially because they are networked with other users over vast geographic areas.

Gane and Beer provide a concise explanation of reliable, instantaneous connectivity and how it pertains to low costs. They said "simultaneous access to networked information means distributing the same underlying content or product many times over without the difficulties and costs implied by shifting physical products through a supply chain."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, distributing information through the Internet is an inexpensive way of providing consistent and reliable information.

From the violent extremist perspective, the Internet offers unfettered access to an endless number of global users. Author Gabriel Weimann provides a substantial list of advantages the Internet offers extremists:

- Easy access
- Little or no regulation, censorship, or other government controls
- Potentially huge audiences spread around the world
- Anonymity of communication
- Fast flow of information
- Inexpensive development and maintenance of a web presence
- Multimedia environment (ability to combine texts, graphics, audio, and video—allows users to download films, songs, books, posters, etc.)

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<sup>23</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Gane and David Beer, *New Media: The Key Concepts*, (Oxford: Berg, 2008), e-books edition, 7-8.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

- Ability to shape coverage in the traditional [old] mass media, which increasingly uses the Internet as a source of stories<sup>26</sup>

In another of Gabriel Weimann's works, he says that, "since the late 1980s, the Internet has proven to be a fast and efficient platform for the flow of communication, reaching an ever-growing worldwide audience."<sup>27</sup> The Internet, therefore, has become a communication tool that is vital to violent extremist groups. It allows them to communicate over long distances within the group or with others outside of the group—nonmembers or potential new recruits.<sup>28</sup>

Over the span of 20 years, violent extremist groups' online presence has grown from a dozen websites to nearly 10,000.<sup>29</sup> At the turn of the century, virtually every group had established a presence online. By 2003, the number of known extremist group websites had grown to over 2,600. In 2013, the groups and their supporters managed more than 9,600 sites online.<sup>30</sup>

The Internet offers a diverse and expansive number of new media technologies that provide "ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, fast flow of information,...[and] anonymity," as Weimann says.<sup>31</sup> Since it attracts vast amounts of activity and information, the Internet allows violent extremist groups to communicate overtly and hide in plain sight.<sup>32</sup>

An expansive study from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime supports Weimann's theories. It says that the Internet offers easy access, global reach, and anonymity, but it further explains how extremist organizations use the Internet to

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<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Www.Terror.Net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet*, United States Institute of Peace, 2004, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; the Next Generation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 22.

distribute propaganda specifically for the purpose of recruiting new members.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in his testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, Brian Jenkins said that, “terrorists use the Internet to disseminate their ideology, appeal for support, spread fear and alarm among their foes, radicalize and recruit new members, provide instructions in tactics and weapons” and more.<sup>34</sup> But how are they able to scope messages for recruiting purposes and create “virtual communities of like-minded extremists,” as Jenkins explains?<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Social Media**

To determine the most used social media sites, the Pew Research Center conducted a study that found 71 percent of worldwide Internet users have a Facebook account, which is the highest used social media site on the Internet. After Facebook, users preferred LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter.<sup>36</sup> In addition to social media site preferences, the Center also conducted a separate study to determine why users joined social media networks and the types of information users shared.

Over 70 percent of social media users share information about music and movie preferences, 56 percent publicize sports interests, and 37 percent recommend or discuss products they use.<sup>37</sup> Social media is also a main source of news and politics for members. Therefore, within social media networks, users can determine political and religious preferences or general likes and dislikes of others within their network based on the information shared.<sup>38</sup>

Catherine Theohary and John Rollins, from the Congressional Research Service, argue that extremists are online and using social media to help tailor recruiting messages

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<sup>33</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, September 2012 (New York: United Nations), 3-5.

<sup>34</sup> *Is Al Qaeda’s Internet Strategy Working?: Hearing Before the Committee on Homeland Security, 112th Cong.* (6 Dec 11), (statement of Brian M. Jenkins, The RAND Corporation).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence,” 10.

<sup>37</sup> “Political Polarization and Media Habits,” Pew Research Center’s Internet, Science & Technology, 21 Oct 14, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>

<sup>38</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence,” 10.

toward specific audiences. To help focus propaganda, violent extremist groups collect social media information on popular topics or individual users.<sup>39</sup> This information allows violent extremists groups to align propaganda with popular topics or narrowcast propaganda toward personal preferences. Popular propaganda helps maintain a large online presence. Narrowcasted propaganda is used to produce echo chamber effects that resonate within potential recruits.

Gabriel Weimann also supports the concept of narrowcasting. He says that 90 percent of all online extremist activities take place within social media networks.<sup>40</sup> In these vast social media networks, violent extremist groups collect social media users' information that show interest in extremist websites, watch propaganda videos, or participate in extremist discussions. By collecting information from social media users, violent extremist groups can narrowcast propaganda to align with audience preferences or other popular topics.<sup>41</sup>

By incorporating social media into communication organizations, Weimann believes that violent extremist groups have adapted hybrid communication structures. The top of the pyramid consists of central leadership that crafts major media and message themes. They also initiate the communication chain. Below the top are the well-recognized supporters and new media managers. At the base of the pyramid are the virtual supporters that run chat rooms and independent sites.<sup>42</sup> Blogs, social media, or mobile devices allow violent extremist groups to quickly communicate and widely distribute recruiting propaganda globally.<sup>43</sup> Once propaganda is centrally created, which aligns with the overall agendas and goals, it is flatly distributed through online virtual supporters' networks.

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<sup>39</sup> Catherine A. Theohary and John Rollins, "Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace," CRS Report to Congress, 8 Mar 11.

<sup>40</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 43.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

Violent extremists can share seemingly benign posts or links to harmless sounding videos throughout social media networks. Author Yael Stein explains how recruiting propaganda is often hidden behind benign titles. Violent extremist groups create propaganda with titles such as “tactical shooting” or “how to field strip an AK-47.”<sup>44</sup> By titling propaganda with innocent names, violent extremist groups can potentially attract attention from social media users that may be interested in weapons.

Marc Sageman briefed the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and said that communication and coordination through social media are essential elements for recruiting. He said social media has replaced face-to-face recruiting with “virtual marketplaces.”<sup>45</sup>

Within these marketplaces, potential recruits are weeded out of broad audiences when they show interest in the propaganda. These individuals are advanced through the recruiting process of sharing increasingly violent videos, forwarding links to violent videos, or discussing emotionally charged topics. Additionally, social media users are virtually introduced to more hard-core sympathizers.<sup>46</sup> This virtual recruiting process utilizes the noise within an online echo chamber by bombarding potential recruits with violent propaganda and ideas to elicit emotional responses. The process of continued exposure to propaganda is an attempt to normalize violence and, in the future, potentially invoke a violent response from new members.<sup>47</sup> After potential recruits are identified, they are transitioned to more secure and private forums.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Yael Stein, “Social Networks - Terrorism's New Marketplace,” *Genocide Prevention Now* 7, Summer (2011), <http://www.genocidepreventionnow.org/GPNSearchResults/tabid/64/ctl/DisplayArticle/mid/400/aid/324/Default.aspx>.

<sup>45</sup> Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat, 110th Cong. (8 May 2008) (report presented to Joseph Lieberman, Chairman, and Susan Collins, Ranking Minority Member): 13, <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/IslamistReport.pdf?attempt=2>.

<sup>46</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 6.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Drogin, “‘It's Like the Vanity Fair’ of Al Qaeda,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 November 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/nov/26/nation/la-na-terror-magazine-20101126>.

<sup>48</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Radicalisation: The Role of the Internet,” 6, [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/allnewmats/idandsc2011/StockholmPPN2011\\_BackgroundPaper\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/allnewmats/idandsc2011/StockholmPPN2011_BackgroundPaper_FINAL.pdf).

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism details several types of propaganda that is produced and spread by al Qaeda and ISIS throughout social media. Examples include pictures, production-quality videos, glossy magazines, and video games, which will be discussed further in the following chapters.<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. Online Gaming

The video game industry involves over a billion new media users annually.<sup>50</sup> Online games “set the mood, establish the setting, and introduces the narrative,” as Lev Manovich says, and thereby attracts enormous numbers of networked gamers.<sup>51</sup> Matt Byrne of the *Morning Sentinel* says that these networked gamers represent huge communities where players can chat and interact freely and relatively anonymously.<sup>52</sup>

Bridgette Nacos notes how several violent extremist groups have created online video games to access these larger numbers of gamers. Since its initial video game—*Ummah Defense*—was an online hit, al Qaeda produced and released *Ummah Defense II*. Al Qaeda continues to advertise their online games, and both games remain available for free download on the Internet.<sup>53</sup>

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism explains how ISIS tailored its video game after the popular game called *Grand Theft Auto*. By setting players in combat situations as ISIS members, the game exposes players to violent situations and potentially normalizes the concept of fighting with the group. The game’s high-end graphics and thrilling, violent scenarios acclimates players to the

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<sup>49</sup> “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture, and Lethal Attraction,” National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, November 2014 31-3.

<sup>50</sup> Bohyun Kim, “The Popularity of Gamification in the Mobile and Social Era,” *Library Technology Reports* 51, no. 2 (February 2015): 5-10, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1658221210?accountid=12702>.

<sup>51</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), 83.

<sup>52</sup> Matt Byrne, “Players of Online Video Games such as “World of Warcraft”... Derived Headline],” *Morning Sentinel*, 13 December 2013, [http://www.pressherald.com/2013/12/13/spy\\_games\\_\\_players\\_scoff\\_at\\_news\\_that\\_the\\_nsa\\_looks\\_for\\_real-life\\_evil-doers\\_in\\_the\\_online\\_gaming\\_worlds\\_\\_saying\\_not\\_much\\_is\\_secret\\_there\\_/](http://www.pressherald.com/2013/12/13/spy_games__players_scoff_at_news_that_the_nsa_looks_for_real-life_evil-doers_in_the_online_gaming_worlds__saying_not_much_is_secret_there_/).

<sup>53</sup> Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Central Role of Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*, 113.

concept of fighting and entices gamers to seek additional information about the group.<sup>54</sup> These online games can serve as a gateway to transition gamers from a virtual environment into actual membership.

## 5. Counterarguments

A number of authors believe violent extremist groups must still rely on face-to-face interaction to effectively recruit new members. In a hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, William F. McCants, Andrew A. Weisburd, and Brian M. Jenkins testified that most people who view online propaganda are immune from its effects.<sup>55</sup> They went on to say that “only .00001% of the people who viewed [Al Qaeda propaganda] would go out to fight for Al Qaeda and even fewer would carry out suicide operations.”<sup>56</sup> As a result, recruitment rates have not increased at a rapid pace.<sup>57</sup> Beyond the virtual networking and coordination, there is a belief that interested social media users require offline elements and influences to be recruited.<sup>58</sup>

Author David C. Benson argues that governments and violent extremist groups benefit equally from social media. He says that “the Internet leaves the states in the same position vis-à-vis extremist campaigns as it was prior to the Internet.”<sup>59</sup> Since there is an absence of empirical data supporting the connection between social media and effective extremist recruitment, he argues that new media is similar to old media and all users profit from it equally.

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<sup>54</sup> “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture, and Lethal Attraction,” 32.

<sup>55</sup> Jihadist Use of Social Media—How to Prevent Terrorism and Preserve Innovation: Hearing Before the Committee on Homeland Security, 112th Cong. (6 Dec 11), (statements of William F. McCants, Andrew A. Weisburd, and Brian M. Jenkins).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Radicalisation: Role of Internet,” 3.

<sup>59</sup> David C. Benson, “Why the Internet Is Not Increasing Terrorism,” *Security Studies*, vol. 23, issue 2 (2014): 293, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09636412.2014.905353>.

Lorraine Ali of the *Los Angeles Times* says that violent extremist groups do not rely on social media as a main recruiting method. She argues that social media supplements the “old shoe leather method of recruiting, which still happens and is very effective.”<sup>60</sup> Since social media is potentially a supplemental tool, Ali believes that social media is one of many tools that violent extremists exploit to distribute propaganda and potentially recruit new members.

### **C. THESIS OVERVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS**

This thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter I includes the research question, the topic significance and relevance, the literature review, and potential explanations and hypothesis. Chapter II details how violent extremist groups utilize websites, blogs, social media, mobile devices, and online gaming when developing and distributing recruiting propaganda. Chapter III identifies how al Qaeda and ISIS have incorporated new media technologies into their communication structures. Additionally, this chapter compares and contrasts how each group uses social media to broadcast or narrowcast their recruiting messages and propaganda. Chapter IV reviews the proposed hypothesis and compares it to findings from Chapters II and III. This chapter also discusses counterterrorism efforts that can potentially corral violent extremist groups’ uses of new media and social media. Finally, Chapter IV offers potential areas for future study that can further enhance the limited empirical data surrounding violent extremist groups employing social media to recruit new members.

Violent extremist groups have incorporated new media technologies and social media into recruiting strategies and propaganda. This thesis attempts to relay how violent extremist groups rely on social media to widely distribute propaganda and recruit new members. Within this thesis, several examples illustrate how violent extremist groups organize their communication structures to accommodate various new media technologies and social media in particular. By incorporating social media into communication structures and strategies, violent extremist groups project large online

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<sup>60</sup> Lorraine Ali, “ANALYSIS; Terror Brand Built on Social Media; Islamic State is using Digital ‘Arms’ to Control Message and Image and to Recruit,” *Los Angeles Times*, 22 September 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1563913337?accountid=12702>.

presences and propagate messages directed toward specific audiences to attract new members. Several propaganda examples also illustrate how violent extremist groups rely heavily on social media to recruit new members.

## II. NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

New media has become *the* recruiting tool for violent extremist groups because, as Bridgette Nacos says, it “circumvent[s] the gatekeepers of traditional media and communicate[s] directly” with new media users.<sup>61</sup> In addition to skirting media controls, new media grants users the ability to create and edit media quickly and distribute it globally.<sup>62</sup>

Chapter II details five new media technologies that have grown in overall popularity: websites, blogs, social media, mobile devices, and online gaming. This chapter illustrates specific examples of how online users employ social media technologies to remain connected and interact through social media.

### A. WEBSITES

Internet access continues to grow around the world, and the majority of Internet users access it on a daily basis.<sup>63</sup> As a result, new media technologies have become intertwined with regular, daily social activity and have become a recognized piece of cultural influence.

Unlike social media, websites are generally less interactive; they wait passively for Internet users to browse websites and require minimal user interaction.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, websites offer an endless supply of information in varying mediums that is filtered back to the user based on user-input.<sup>65</sup> To provide easily accessible information

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<sup>61</sup> Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 16

<sup>62</sup> Phillip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; The Post-Al Qaeda Generation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17.

<sup>63</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence on Education but Negative Influence on Morality in Emerging and Developing Nations,” Pew Research Center’s Internet, Science & Tech, March 2015: 9, <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2015/03/Pew-Research-Center-Technology-Report-FINAL-March-19-20151.pdf>.

<sup>64</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 2.

<sup>65</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2001), 35, 46.

to online users, several violent extremist groups maintain an overt online presence and wait for curious or interested Internet users to visit their websites.

Over the span of approximately 20 years, the number of violent extremist group websites has grown from a handful in the mid-1990s to nearly 10,000 by 2013.<sup>66</sup> In a hearing before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Bruce Hoffman relayed a post to al Qaeda's *al Neda* (the Call) website that directed group members to harness the power of the Internet: "The more Web sites, the better. We must make the Internet our tool."<sup>67</sup> In addition to *al Neda*, al Qaeda maintains several other websites such as *al Ansar* (the Helpers) and *al Shumukh*.<sup>68</sup> Al Qaeda, however, is not the only violent extremist group that maintains an online presence.

Despite condemning new media technologies, the Taliban maintains a webpage called *al Emarah* (the Emirate).<sup>69</sup> The group produces videos that venerate their fighters and posts them to their webpage. Additionally, the website contains articles that are translated into Pashtu, Dari, Urdu, Arabic, and English.<sup>70</sup> These videos have a two-fold intent. First, by highlighting and publicizing their fighters, the Taliban improves group morale because fighters receive notoriety. Second, the videos are a recruiting tool. By posting these videos online, the Taliban portrays their fighters as celebrities and purports that any new members will similarly receive world-wide distinction. Multi-language articles broaden the target audience and thereby increase the likelihood of attracting new members. The allure of long-lasting and enduring fame is a common tactic employed throughout violent extremist groups' propaganda.

A number of violent extremist groups maintain martyr sections on their webpages that glorify and publicize the actions and deaths of group members. Some webpages allow users to see pictures of martyrs; read their biographies and associated articles; and

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<sup>66</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*, 1-10.

<sup>67</sup> *The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 109th Cong. (4 May 06) (statement by Bruce Hoffman, RAND): 6, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND\\_CT262-1.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf).

<sup>68</sup> Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization," 434.

<sup>69</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media: Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 38.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

watch videos of the individuals before, during, and after their deaths.<sup>71</sup> The al Nusra Front<sup>72</sup> posts articles, photos, and videos to their website immortalizing their *shaheeds* (martyrs for Islam).<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine maintains a martyr section on its webpage. Prior to their deaths, several videos portray members reading verses from the Quran, being surrounded by other members of the group, or holding various weapons.<sup>74</sup> These martyr videos relay several messages to online viewers.

By posting videos of people reading from the Quran before they die, violent extremists attempt to publically justify acts of terror, death, and destruction. Although those in the martyr videos die violent deaths, observers see that they will be forever immortalized on the Internet. By surrounding the would-be martyr with other violent extremists, the videos portray a sense of belonging and group membership, which can be a strong appeal to potential recruits. For those that find excitement in handling weapons or the ability to release aggression through fighting, videos display people with several types of guns and discuss the impending violence and destruction that awaits their enemies.

Hamas uses a similar approach of exposing viewers to concepts of martyrdom; however, they target children. Hamas hosts *al Aqsa*—a children’s television series—and posts the episodes to their webpage. The show portrays characters that resemble Mickey Mouse, a bumblebee, and a rabbit that act out scenes of violence. Throughout several episodes, characters achieve martyrdom at the hands of their enemies. Seib and Janbek relay a stark reminder from one of the show’s characters: a bear tells children that they “must sacrifice everything that is dear to us until we regain our country” by avenging the martyred characters from previous seasons.<sup>75</sup> By exposing children to themes of

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<sup>71</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 46.

<sup>72</sup> This paper’s author acknowledges the existence of multiple naming conventions for al Qaeda’s branch in Syria. For the purposes of consistency and standardization, al Qaeda’s branch in Syria will be termed the al Nusra Front.

<sup>73</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 2.

<sup>74</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 46.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

destruction, revenge, and death, young viewers are acclimated to violent concepts and potentially normalize the concept of martyrdom. This process of acclimation and normalization can later be reinforced with other hardcore martyr videos.

Despite their multi-faceted approaches to attract new members, websites are a passive approach to online recruiting. Therefore, when recruiting through websites, violent extremists must wait passively for Internet users to visit their pages or view propaganda hosted on their sites.

## **B. BLOGS**

With continued technological advances and increased bandwidth, the Internet of the 1990s evolved from textual, low-level interaction to high levels of user-generated content, increased audio and video posts, uploads and downloads, and social networking.<sup>76</sup> This highly interactive Web 2.0 is a user-defined and user-dependent online environment. The interactive aspects of new media and social media also allow violent extremist groups the ability to actively recruit rather than passively wait.

Blogs developed out of the newly interactive Web 2.0, and they continue to project a substantial online presence. The Pew Research Center reports that roughly 33 percent of all Internet users rely on blogs for focused information or late-breaking news.<sup>77</sup> Users can choose from hundreds of thousands of blogs based on a broad range of topics.

Similar to websites, blogs include texts, pictures, videos, or other forms of media pertaining to a specific topic. Unlike websites, however, blogs allow users the ability to leave comments or actively engage in online discussions.<sup>78</sup> Because blogs or message boards are more interactive than websites, they allow online users to openly discuss

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<sup>76</sup> Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization," 434.

<sup>77</sup> Aaron Smith, "New numbers for blogging and blog readership," Pew Research Center's Internet, Science & Tech, 22 July 2008, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2008/07/22/new-numbers-for-blogging-and-blog-readership/>.

<sup>78</sup> Erica Boling, Jill Castek, Lisa Zawilinski, Karen Barton, and Theresa Nierlich, "Collaborative Literacy: Blogs and Internet Projects," *Reading Teacher* 61, no. 6 (03, 2008): 504-506, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/61950173?accountid=12702>.

issues, comment on topics, or share ideas and thoughts. This free-flow of information also allows violent extremists to observe unsuspecting bloggers engage in opinionated discussions, gather their personal preferences or perspectives on topics, engage in discussions, or distribute links to extremist propaganda or websites. Once interested bloggers are identified, violent extremists can refer them to other more hardline websites or blogs.

Violent extremist groups have expanded recruiting efforts into blogs because they help recruiting efforts in two main ways. First, by their very nature, blogs inadvertently assist violent extremists by helping them narrow or filter audiences. By searching through various blog topics, violent extremists can identify and further refine audiences based on specific blog topics. Once the specific blog and audience is identified, discussions and propaganda can be narrowcasted toward specific bloggers and their preferences. As an example, a simple search of *The New York Times* allows an online user the ability to select blogs based on politics, family-related issues, age-related issues, or several other topics. By selecting the family-related link, a user can join a blog that only pertains to motherhood, thereby producing an audience that is likely a female majority.<sup>79</sup> Refining searches based on blog topic can further refine the target audience. After joining a specific blog and observing and interacting with bloggers, violent extremists can then interject comments, propaganda, or links that play off of bloggers' personal preferences.

The second benefit blogs afford violent extremists is popularity projection. Blogs unintentionally assist violent extremist groups by allowing them to identify popular topics based on trending data<sup>80</sup>—the popularity or amount of online activity. Having identified popular blogs or trending blog topics, violent extremists can interact with users, engage in discussions, and share links to propaganda or other violent extremist and thereby benefit from the popularity of a trending blog.

Al Qaeda and ISIS provide two examples of using the popularity of blogs as a method of generating additional attention. In 2007, al Qaeda published over 48

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<sup>79</sup> Blogs, *New York Times*, last accessed 7 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/blogs/directory.html>.

<sup>80</sup> Trending, *New York Times*, last accessed 7 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/trending/>.

propaganda videos and posted them online.<sup>81</sup> Shortly after each video was posted, several al Qaeda supporters began discussing the videos on various blogs and shared links to sites that hosted the propaganda videos.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, after posting English and Arabic versions of shows from its official radio station online, ISIS supporters began to create an online buzz by discussing topics related to the propaganda.<sup>83</sup>

In both instances, al Qaeda and ISIS posted propaganda to websites and then began to generate discussions and interest on popular blogs. Once interest levels were increased and discussions began to expand online, the heightened levels of online activity continued to further generate interest and attention for each group and its videos. By using popular blogs, violent extremist groups projected themselves as being similarly popular, increased the group's online attention, and potentially generated more recruiting opportunities.

An article from the *Technical Mujahidin*, an online magazine that supports violent extremism, illustrated the increased interest in using blogs to recruit new members. The article's author directs readers to completely exploit message boards and reminds readers to focus propaganda toward specific audiences—to narrowcast recruiting messages.<sup>84</sup>

Although blogs vary by content, they allow violent extremist groups to focus on specific audiences based on specific blog topics and tailor recruiting propaganda toward audience preferences. Once a specific audience or popular blog is identified, violent extremists can virtually interact with bloggers and share propaganda or links to other sites based on user comments or preferences.

Compared to websites, blogs allow violent extremists to actively interact with potential recruits. Additionally, blogs allow violent extremist groups the ability to narrow audiences by blog topic and thereby focus recruiting propaganda toward the target

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<sup>81</sup> Jim Krane, "Al-Qaeda's Videos Grow in Quality, Quantity; the Internet and Mobile Phones Help the Terrorist Network Recruit, Experts Say," *Orlando Sentinel*, 2 June 2007, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/284039657?accountid=12702>

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> "More ISIS Websites in Malay to Recruit Fighters," *Straits Times*, 17 June 2015, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/more-isis-websites-in-malay-to-recruit-fighters>.

<sup>84</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 27.

audience. Alternatively, websites and blogs lack the networking aspects of social media and the regular, constant communication of mobile devices.

### **C. SOCIAL MEDIA**

The number of social media sites that exist online, the amount of users that use them, and the amount of time spent on social media is massive. Approximately 70 percent of Internet users maintain a social media account; they use it as a news source, for staying connected with friends and family, or sharing information with other users within their network.<sup>85</sup> In the United States alone, social media use increased 37 percent from 2011 to 2012: in one year, social media use increased over seven billion hours in the United States.<sup>86</sup>

Social media has quickly grown in popularity because it is user-friendly, accessible, and usually free.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, social media affords Internet users the ability to find and virtually interact with family or friends. Social media also allows users to find other friends with common interests, preferences, or demographics, or they can share information about themselves. Once virtually networked with family or friends, users maintain connections and communications with others and further expand their network and audience by forwarding information and media to other users or networks.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, social media users can disperse information and media widely, quickly, and effortlessly throughout their personal and extended networks. Users are similarly exposed to information from other social media users and their extended social networks.

These online social media networks have evolved into virtual communities based on varying demographics and social media platforms. Users view and interact with others

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<sup>85</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence.”

<sup>86</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 2.

<sup>87</sup> Gane and Beer, *New Media: The Key Concepts*, 7-8.

<sup>88</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 2.

or voluntarily publicize personal information, photos, and videos via texts, voice, computers, or mobile devices.<sup>89</sup>

In a recent Pew Research Center study, the most popular social media site online is Facebook.<sup>90</sup> As of September of 2012, Facebook had an estimated 1 billion users around the world.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, approximately 50 percent of all Americans had a Facebook account—more than 150 million users.<sup>92</sup> To maintain relevance and popularity among social media site users, Facebook released an update in May 2015 called ‘Instant Articles’ that allows news agencies the ability to publish articles directly to users’ personal pages. Additionally, in June of 2015, Facebook introduced the ‘Trending’ sidebar as a way for users to filter social media content by online volume or popularity.<sup>93</sup> Similar to blogs, Facebook introduced these new features to help users identify late-breaking news or popular issues.

Gabriel Weimann says that “90 percent of terrorist activity on the Internet takes place using social networking tools,” but some recruiting tactics are more overt than others.<sup>94</sup> As an example, a simple search for al Qaeda on Facebook produced more than 40 results.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, in 2012, the Taliban established a Facebook page that quickly gathered over 280 “likes” from other social media users. The page was soliciting contributions for the Taliban’s quarterly magazine called *Ahyah-e-Khlifat* (Sign of the

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<sup>89</sup> Akemi Takeoka Chatfield, Christopher G. Reddick, and Uuf Brajawidagda, “Tweeting Propaganda, Radicalization and Recruitment: Islamic State Supporters Multi-Sided Twitter Networks,” in *Proceedings of the 16th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research, Social Media and Government* ed. Andrea Kavanaugh (Phoenix: Digital Government Research), 241.

<sup>90</sup> “Internet Seen as Positive Influence.”

<sup>91</sup> CORRECTED-UPDATE 1-Facebook reaches 1 billion monthly active users, Reuters, last 4 October 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/04/facebook-idUSL1E8L44UW20121004>.

<sup>92</sup> Jytte Klausen, Eliane Tschaen Barbieri, Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, and Aaron Y. Zelin, “The YouTube Jihadists: A Social Network Analysis of Al-Muhajiroun’s Propaganda Campaign,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, no. 1 (2012). <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/klausen-et-al-youtube-jihadists/html>.

<sup>93</sup> Michael Barthel, Elisa Shearer, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Amy Mitchell, “The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook,” Pew Research Center’s Internet, Science & Tech, 14 July 2015, <http://www.journalism.org/2015/07/14/the-evolving-role-of-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>.

<sup>94</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 1.

<sup>95</sup> Stein, “Social Networks – Terrorism’s New Marketplace,” 1.

Caliphate) before it was shut down.<sup>96</sup> In 2014, Facebook users could buy various ISIS souvenirs such as toys or clothes. Figure 1 is an example of clothing that was available to Facebook users before administrators removed the site.<sup>97</sup>

Figure 1. ISIS T-shirt once sold on Facebook



For some time, Facebook users could purchase black ISIS T-shirts until accounts that were selling them were shut down. Shirts contained the ISIS logo, an AK-47, and Arabic writing that was also translated into English. Source: “Isis Souvenir Gift Shops Shut Down by Facebook,” *Telegraph.Co.Uk*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10925871/Isis-souvenir-gift-shops-shut-down-by-Facebook.html>.

When using Facebook, violent extremist groups remind members to remain amicable and hide aggression by creating innocent, misleading, and less aggressive Facebook pages.<sup>98</sup> This alternative and unobtrusive Facebook activity allows violent extremists to interact covertly within social media networks. Once innocuous Facebook pages are established, violent extremists can invite others to join their network, or they

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<sup>96</sup> Caitlin Dewey, “Facebook Shuts Down Taliban Recruiting Account (Posted 2012-12-12 17:06:09),” *Washington Post*, 12 December 2012, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2012/12/10/facebook-shuts-down-taliban-recruiting-account/>.

<sup>97</sup> “Isis Souvenir Gift Shops Shut Down by Facebook,” *Telegraph.Co.Uk*, 25 June 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10925871/Isis-souvenir-gift-shops-shut-down-by-Facebook.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 7.

join other networks where more benign information can be shared. As an example, an ISIS member created a Facebook account that indicated he worked for a humanitarian group. He posted pictures of distributing food to refugee camps, shared personal experiences, and relayed the joys of belonging to the group.<sup>99</sup>

Whether overt or surreptitious, a large Facebook presence provides violent extremists with access to a diverse and vast global audience. For some social media users, the “fiery Facebook pages [and] hate-filled chat rooms,” that Bob Drogin of the *Los Angeles Times* describes, are more appealing than the subtle allusions to violence.<sup>100</sup> For others, violent extremists can spread propaganda throughout social media networks by hiding their true intentions and identity. Regardless of the tactic employed, online videos are a key component to propaganda attracting new media users and recruiting new members.

New media users produce, watch, or discuss considerable amounts of videos or online television shows. Within social media, users often share videos or participate in discussions, post comments, or share links to video clips. To share videos or links to videos, video files must be uploaded to sites that allow networked users the ability to file-share. YouTube, an Internet site that specializes in video sharing, is one of the most popular sites social media users frequently use to share videos.

On a monthly basis, more than one billion social media users watch approximately six billion hours of online videos.<sup>101</sup> Once videos are posted to YouTube, links to videos can be shared via blogs, social media, or other new media technologies. Another key YouTube feature is the ability to leave comments on videos. This ability to post comments is important for determining popularity and trending data, but it can also be used by violent extremists. The ability to post comments to videos can be exploited by violent extremists and is discussed further in Chapter III.

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<sup>99</sup> Deborah Richards, “The Twitter Jihad: ISIS Insurgents in Iraq, Syria Using Social Media to Recruit Fighters, Promote Violence,” *ABC News*, 20 June 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-20/isis-using-social-media-to-recruit-fighters-promote-violence/5540474>.

<sup>100</sup> Drogin, “‘Vanity Fair’ of Al Qaeda.”

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

Similar to blogs and Facebook, violent extremists have expanded recruiting efforts into YouTube. In 2004, a video was produced that portrayed terrorism as being “cool.” The four and a half minute rap video entitled *Dirty Kuffar* begins with an interview of a U.S. Marine after he killed a violent extremist. Afterwards, a masked man raps and dances around with a Quran in one hand and a gun in the other.<sup>102</sup> He discusses the atrocities committed by the U.S. and Russia and praises the actions of September 11, 2001. The video also encourages viewers to throw President Bush and Prime Minister Blair into fire. Figures 2 and 3 are taken from the *Dirty Kuffar* video, which is still available on YouTube.<sup>103</sup>

Figure 2. Masked Man with Quran and gun from *Dirty Kuffar* video



Screen capture taken from the *Dirty Kuffar* video. Source: Sheikh Terra feat Soul Salah Crew *Dirty Kuffar*, YouTube, last accessed 7 October 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP\\_95eSLBI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP_95eSLBI).

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<sup>102</sup> Sheikh Terra feat Soul Salah Crew *Dirty Kuffar*, YouTube, last accessed 7 October 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP\\_95eSLBI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP_95eSLBI).

<sup>103</sup> Antony Barnett, “Islamic Rappers’ Message of Terror,” *Guardian*, 8 February 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2004/feb/08/arts.politics>.

Figure 3. World Trade Center bombing praised in *Dirty Kuffar* video



Screen capture taken from the *Dirty Kuffar* video. Source: Sheikh Terra feat Soul Salah Crew *Dirty Kuffar*, YouTube, last accessed 7 October 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP\\_95eSLBI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWP_95eSLBI).

In 2010, approximately 750 Anwar al-Awlaki videos were posted on YouTube.<sup>104</sup> These videos contained violent themes and inflammatory rhetoric. Online viewers watched these 750 videos 3.5 million times before accounts that hosted the videos were disabled. Before the videos were removed from YouTube, Major Nidal Hasan, a U.S. Army officer, reportedly watched several videos and corresponded with Al-Awlaki prior to killing 13 people and injuring several others in the 2009 Fort Hood shooting.<sup>105</sup>

Because YouTube is easy to use, it allows violent extremist groups the ability to distribute propaganda widely. Once videos are uploaded to a file-sharing site like YouTube, violent extremists can publicize the propaganda by distributing links to the video throughout blogs, social media, or other new media technologies. Additionally, YouTube provides violent extremists the ability to collect comments from viewers and thusly use them to further refine the distribution and application of propaganda or modify already existing propaganda based on user feedback.

Similar to blogs, social media networks allow violent extremist groups to directly interact with large numbers of distributed social media users. Because they are extremely

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<sup>104</sup> Anwar Al-Awlaki is the Yemeni-American cleric who allegedly inspired the Fort Hood shootings in November 2009 and the attempted underwear bombing in December 2009.

<sup>105</sup> James Gordon Meek and Kenneth R. Bazinet, "Youtube's Got to Gag Jihad Mouthpiece: Weiner," *New York Daily News*, 24 October 2010, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/youtube-gag-jihad-mouthpiece-anwar-al-awlaki-rep-anthony-weiner-article-1.187619>.

popular and easy to use, social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube provide violent extremist groups with expansive networks in which to distribute propaganda. By projecting a large online presence and utilizing multiple tactics throughout social media, violent extremists can focus propaganda toward attracting new members.

#### **D. MOBILE PHONE DEVICES**

Cell phones and smart phones have become ubiquitous in everyday life. As a result, social media has adapted to incorporate mobile phone technology. Mobile devices ensure social media networks remain intact through regular and constant communication.<sup>106</sup> To incorporate mobile device technologies into new media technologies, social media sites have adapted succinct message formats and short video clips.<sup>107</sup> By limiting the number of words in text or video sizes, messages and media can be drafted, disseminated, or consumed quickly throughout social media networks by anyone with a smartphone. For longer messages and videos, links are forwarded via text or email to the location of the large-format files.

Smartphones are an important new media technology that incorporates social media and regular, constant contact among networked users. Smartphones allow social media users the ability to receive instantaneous updates on news and information from various online sources and throughout social media networks. The speed of information updates and dissemination attracts social media users to smartphone technology. To satisfy the desire for “as-it-happens coverage and commentary on live events”—as Michael Barthel and his co-authors describe it—Twitter has established itself as a popular new media technology for mobile devices.<sup>108</sup>

Twitter is designed as a phone-based social media application, and it has a global online presence.<sup>109</sup> For late-breaking news, new media users are more likely to seek information on Twitter than other social media sites. Later, users can share related

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<sup>106</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 46.

<sup>107</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 52.

<sup>108</sup> Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, and Mitchell, “Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook.”

<sup>109</sup> Klausen, Barbieri, Reichlin-Melnick, and Zelin, “YouTube Jihadists.”

information or further discuss topics on other social media networks.<sup>110</sup> In the 2012 presidential campaign season, approximately 140 million tweets were posted through Twitter accounts on a daily basis.<sup>111</sup> By 2013, over half a billion users tweeted approximately 9,100 messages every second.<sup>112</sup> Therefore, Twitter has shown it has the capability to produce vast amounts of online volume through mobile devices and social media networks.

Since cell phones have become popular around the world, some violent extremist groups have incorporated this new media technology into recruiting efforts. As an example, some violent extremist groups allow members to download ringtones that can be installed on members' phones.<sup>113</sup> These identifiable and distinguishing downloads are likely intended to establish a sense of identity and group membership and, in doing so, recruit new media users.

Violent extremist groups have also incorporated Twitter's expansive network and ability to produce an enormous amount of online activity on a global scale into their recruiting strategies. To help maintain high levels of online propaganda and project a large presence, Loraine Ali of the *Los Angeles Times* says that ISIS amasses large "Twitterbot armies."<sup>114</sup> Groups can amass tens of thousands of Twitter accounts to create 'Twitter bombs' that flood the virtual landscape with tweets pertaining to propaganda or topics relating to violent extremist groups.<sup>115</sup> By presenting large numbers of associated tweets, Twitter armies create trending topics, portray violent extremist groups as being popular, and thereby attract more attention and potential recruits. The massive amounts of tweets also allow audiences to easily find propaganda or inadvertently view recruiting

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110 Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, and Mitchell, "Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook."

111 "Twitter and the Campaign; How the Discussion on Twitter Varies from Blogs and News Coverage and Ron Paul's Twitter Triumph," Pew Research Center's Internet, Science & Tech, 8 December 2011, <http://www.journalism.org/2011/12/08/twitter-and-campaign/>.

112 Weimann, "New Terrorism and New Media," 8.

113 Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 52.

114 Ali, "ANALYSIS; Terror Brand Built on Social Media; Islamic State using Digital 'Arms' to Control Message and Image and Recruit."

115 "30,000 Twitter Accounts have been Set Up to Support Islamist Jihad," *Computer Act!Ve* no. 432 (September 2014): 10, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1563603006?accountid=12702>.

propaganda, which can also help connect potential recruits with other members already in the group.

Twitter or other smart phone applications limit message sizes, so violent extremists modify propaganda to accommodate mobile devices. Brian Bennett of the *Orlando Sentinel* relayed a number of short tweet examples from the Taliban: “Mujahideen fighter kill 4 American cowards, hurts several more in encounter: Ghazni. US terrorists martyr 12-year-old boy, detains many others: Paktika. American criminals martyr 5 innocent civilians in raid: Kandahar.”<sup>116</sup>

These quick and concise tweets provide the Taliban or other violent extremist groups that use similar new media technologies with two main benefits. First, the Taliban floods social media with provocative propaganda—either slanted toward itself or against opponents. By producing large amounts of propaganda and distributing it widely throughout social media networks, the Taliban begins to establish support or sympathy for victims and aggression against those that purportedly martyred them. Second, the quick and widespread propaganda forces an opposition to fight both a physical and virtual battle. By quickly distributing information throughout social media networks via mobile devices, the opposition must defend itself from the Taliban claims concerning ongoing operations. Therefore, the Taliban puts its opponent on the virtual defense by attempting to refute the Taliban propaganda.

Beyond the ability to distribute propaganda quickly, L. Gordon Crovitz of *The Wall Street Journal* says that smart phones provide violent extremist groups with a distinct advantage over opponents. After identifying potential recruits, violent extremist groups instruct them to transition future communications to a smartphone because of its encryption capabilities. If correspondence, propaganda, or other terror-related communications are detected or smartphones are confiscated, Crovitz says that efforts are

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<sup>116</sup> Brian Bennett, “Taliban Propaganda Channeled Via Twitter,” *Orlando Sentinel*, 25 November 2011, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/905977354?accountid=12702>.

useless because “the signal is indecipherable.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, in addition to providing violent extremist groups with a quick method of distributing propaganda broadly, smartphones encrypt communications between associated participants, so violent extremists can continue recruiting efforts via secure communications.

For many, social media is a popular and easy way of remaining connected with a group of networked users and informed of ongoing news. For violent extremist groups, social media provides direct access to dispersed networks and vast audiences. Since mobile devices help users maintain social media connections, violent extremists have similarly adjusted recruiting propaganda to account for mobile device restrictions. Additionally, mobile devices provide violent extremist groups with an encryption capability so recruiting efforts can continue uninhibited via secure communications.

## **E. ONLINE GAMING**

Similar to social media, the video game industry gathers huge amounts of users into large, distributed networks. On any given week, new media users spend 3 billion hours per week playing games online.<sup>118</sup> In 2009, a single game—Activision Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*—amassed 11.5 million users worldwide.<sup>119</sup> In 2013, the number of people playing online games was expected to reach 1.2 billion by the end of the year.<sup>120</sup>

Online video games involve networked communities and a substantial number of players that can chat and interact freely and anonymously.<sup>121</sup> Beyond email, texts, or normal social media interaction, online gaming offers numerous communication avenues and ways of organizing into groups and networks.

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<sup>117</sup> L.Gordon Crovitz, “Why Terrorists Love Silicon Valley; Technologists Say there's no Way to Design Privacy Encryption that also Lets Government Agencies Conduct Legal Searches. Really?” *The Wall Street Journal* (Online), 5 July, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1693570820?accountid=12702>.

<sup>118</sup> Ryan B Johnson, “Online Gaming Can Make a Better World: Jane McGonigal,” *Perspectives* (University Of New Hampshire) (Spring2010 2010): 1-3, SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed 7 October 2015).

<sup>119</sup> Evan Hessel and Peter C. Beller, “Gaming Gold Mine,” *Forbes* 184, no. 1 (13 July 2009): 86-87. Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed 7 October 2015).

<sup>120</sup> Kim, “Popularity of Gamification in the Mobile and Social Era,” 5.

<sup>121</sup> Byrne, “Players of Online Video Games such as “World of Warcraft” ... Derived Headline].”

Lev Manovich says that online gaming is one of the largest growth industries where “cinematic interface is being transformed into a cultural interface.”<sup>122</sup> Gaming has an enormous cinematic appeal to users because it allows players to interact and explore with other players and navigate through a narrative and new environment. Additionally, when playing online, gamers strategize cooperatively to overcome virtual obstacles and, through several emotional highs and lows, tend to bond with other online players.<sup>123</sup> This bonding aspect of online gaming helps to reinforce relationships that can potentially flourish through other new media technologies.

Several violent extremist groups have developed games to interact with these large online communities. In the anti-Israeli game entitled *Under Ash*, users can choose from a variety of weapons to destroy Israeli military installations. Its sequel, *Under Ash 2*, remains available for free download to Internet users. Figures 4 and 5 are screen captures from the game download page. Figure 4 shows a player in armed conflict against a large military group. Figure 5 depicts a player engaging an Israeli tank, which is a reference to the David and Goliath story. The download page also informs players that the game is based on actual events.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 83.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>124</sup> Under Siege, “Under Ash,” last accessed 7 October 2015, [http://www.underash.net/en\\_download.htm](http://www.underash.net/en_download.htm).

Figure 4. Player from *Under Ash* assaulting military forces



Screen capture taken from the *Under Ash 2* video game. The image is available to view on the game download page. Source: Under Siege, Under Ash, last accessed 7 October 2015, [http://www.underash.net/en\\_download.htm](http://www.underash.net/en_download.htm).

Figure 5. Player from *Under Ash* fighting a tank with rocks



Screen capture taken from the *Under Ash 2* video game. Image is available to view on the game download page. Source: Under Siege, Under Ash, last accessed 7 October 2015, [http://www.underash.net/en\\_download.htm](http://www.underash.net/en_download.htm).

Another game, *The Resistance*, sets players as the Islamic resistance in South Lebanon. Rebecca Armstrong from *The Independent* relays that the resistance defends homelands against the “invading Zionists.”<sup>125</sup> In a final example, Hezbollah’s *Special Force* game allows players to virtually experience conditions similar to those of actual group members. Gamers fight in tough weather conditions, navigate mine fields, and battle against enemy troops. Additionally, when training for missions, players can hone their sniper skills by executing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.<sup>126</sup>

Just as violent extremist groups have expanded recruiting efforts into blogs, social media, and other new media technologies, they have incorporated online games into their recruiting strategies. By developing games with a cinematic appeal and narrative that requires players to cooperatively overcome tough obstacles,<sup>127</sup> violent extremist groups attempt to tap into the vast numbers of people playing games online and potentially establish an online relationship with gamers that can potentially metastasize through social media or other new media technologies.

The growth of Web 2.0 has allowed online users to transition from passive website browsing to active interaction with others. Similarly, violent extremist groups can actively interact with bloggers, social media users, or online gamers. This direct contact with potential recruits allows violent extremist groups to employ various overt or less obtrusive recruiting methods and transition potential recruits from open online networks to mobile devices that provide unbreakable encryption and communication security. As the Internet, Web 2.0, and other new media technologies continue to evolve, so do the recruiting efforts of violent extremist groups.

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<sup>125</sup> Rebecca Armstrong, “Science & Technology: Jihad: Play the Game; Western PC Games Feature US Forces Destroying Arab Enemies. Now Islam is Fighting Back. Rebecca Armstrong Reports,” *The Independent*, 17 August 2005, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/310828371?accountid=12702>.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 83.

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### III. VIOLENT EXTREMIST GROUP COMMUNICATIONS

Social media provides violent extremist groups with direct access to a global audience and increases the likelihood of crossing virtual paths with would-be recruits.<sup>128</sup> Once access is established, messages and media must resonate within audiences to attract the largest amount of attention and thereby recruit new members. This is why communication structures and strategies are key components to analyze within violent extremist groups.<sup>129</sup>

Chapter III identifies the communication structures of two well-known violent extremist groups—al Qaeda and ISIS. The second part of the chapter covers each group’s communication strategies and messages for recruiting. Within this section, particular attention is given to the two groups’ similar communication structures, strategies, and delivery method, but they have divergent recruiting messages.

#### A. COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES

Two general communication structures exist within organizations: vertical or horizontal. Hierarchical organizations often use vertical communication structures for message control and consistency. In these structures, themes and major messages are established centrally and then later distributed throughout the rest of the ranks. Because messages are developed centrally, they are congruent with overall organizational strategies and therefore align with future operations.<sup>130</sup>

Alternatively, horizontal or flat structures communicate throughout the organization quickly and simultaneously. These organizations often rely heavily on the

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<sup>128</sup> Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 130.

<sup>129</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 1.

<sup>130</sup> Donald L. Shaw, “VERTICAL VERSUS HORIZONTAL MEDIA: Using Agenda-Setting and Audience Agenda-Melding to Create Public Information Strategies in the Emerging Papyrus Society,” *Military Review* 86, no. 6 (November 2006): 13-6, [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/shaw\\_novdec2006.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/shaw_novdec2006.pdf).

networking aspect of social media to increase the speed of communication, breadth of distribution, and often involve audiences in additional circulations.<sup>131</sup>

Both communication structures have a downside. Vertical structures can be cumbersome or slow and cause unwanted delays. Alternatively, messages in horizontal structures can become incongruent with organizational strategies, confusing to audiences, and potentially disrupt achieving goals within established timelines.

A large online presence is instrumental to a violent extremist group's ability to gather attention and recruit new members.<sup>132</sup> To attract attention and thereby recruit new members, violent extremist groups have adapted hybrid communication structures that combine the benefits of both vertical and horizontal structures. At their center, leadership controls the core structure and manages main operations and communication strategies.<sup>133</sup> As messages and media flow from the core, the communication structure flattens so propaganda can be distributed quickly and globally.

Weimann describes this hybrid structure as a communication pyramid. At the top, the central leadership develops objectives and strategies and initiates the communication chain. The middle portion consists of well-recognized supporters and new media managers that oversee official websites and publicize sanctioned messages. As the structure flattens, websites and messages become less controlled and less official. New media technologies such as blogs, social media, or mobile devices allow violent extremist groups' virtual supporters—the base of the pyramid—to communicate quickly and distribute propaganda globally.<sup>134</sup>

In this hybrid structure, propaganda is centrally created to align with overall agendas and goals, propagated through middle tiers and sanctioned sources, and distributed flatly through new media technologies, unofficial websites, and social media

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<sup>131</sup> Shaw, "VERTICAL VERSUS HORIZONTAL MEDIA," 17-9.

<sup>132</sup> Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 36.

<sup>133</sup> Djamchid Assadi and Britta Lorünser, "Strategic Management Analysis of Al Qaeda. The Role of Worldwide Organization for a Worldwide Strategy," *Problems and Perspectives in Management* 5, no. 4 (2007): 65, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/216269999?accountid=12702>.

<sup>134</sup> Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; the Next Generation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), 39-41.

networks. Since virtual supporters are socially networked and globally dispersed,<sup>135</sup> they provide violent extremist groups with a large online presence, despite producing messages that are potentially inconsistent with central objectives and strategies.

### **1. Al Qaeda Communication Structure**

Al Qaeda has adopted the hybrid communication structure. At its core, the organization is hierarchically structured and contains several branches and committees. The Media Committee formulates propaganda to align with the group's strategy and is closely aligned with the Al Sahab (the Cloud) Institute for Media Production<sup>136</sup>—the group's main media producer. Al Sahab uses high-end equipment to produce media and follows tight distribution protocols for uploading videos to websites and chat rooms.<sup>137</sup> Once propaganda is centrally created and posted online, it progresses through the lower and flatter levels of the organization.

In the middle of al Qaeda's communication structure, groups and individuals are closely aligned with the core's central objectives. The Al Fajr (The Dawn), an element aligned with Al Sahab, coordinates and distributes media through webmasters around the world.<sup>138</sup> These webmasters and other middle members help to distribute guidance and propaganda posted to the group's main websites: Al Ansar and Al Shumukh.<sup>139</sup> This middle group also helps coordinate logistical movements, travel for new members, or local operations.<sup>140</sup>

At the periphery of the hybrid structure are those that participate in the "media jihad," as Manuel Torres Soriano, senior lecturer at the Pablo de Olavide University of

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<sup>135</sup> Weimann, "New Terrorism and New Media," 6.

<sup>136</sup> Rohan Gunaratna and Aviv Oreg, "Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and its Evolution," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 12 (12, 2010): 1054-63, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.523860>, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/815278453?accountid=12702>.

<sup>137</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 31.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-3.

<sup>139</sup> Neumann, "Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization," 434.

<sup>140</sup> Gunaratna and Oreg, "Al Qaeda's Organizational Structure and its Evolution," 1050.

Seville, terms it.<sup>141</sup> These online supporters operate autonomously, further distribute links to sites and propaganda, and maintain loosely aligned sites that produce lower quality propaganda. This group plays an important role in maintaining al Qaeda's online presence by translating media into local languages, further disseminating it, and maintaining a constant distribution flow of propaganda and media.<sup>142</sup>

By adopting this hybrid communication structure, Rohan Gunaratna, Director of International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University, says that al Qaeda's core guides and manipulates the main "global jihad movement," and remains in the background.<sup>143</sup> The lower levels execute the communication strategy by maintaining a large online presence and distributing propaganda throughout social media networks.

## **2. ISIS Communication Structure**

Similar to al Qaeda, ISIS has developed a three-tier hybrid communication structure: a central core, provincial information offices, and broad members and supporters. At its core, ISIS created four central media outlets to produce large propaganda pieces that align with core objectives and manage dissemination operations—al Hayat, al-Furqan, al-Itisam, and Ajnad.<sup>144</sup> For al Hayat, recruiting is a primary objective. As a potential recruiting tool, Richard Barrett, Senior Vice President of The Soufan Group, says that al Hayat regularly publishes a video series called "Mujatweets."<sup>145</sup> These videos are well-prepared and well-choreographed to portray ISIS positively to online audiences. They provide first-hand accounts and experiences from

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<sup>141</sup> Manuel R. Torres Soriano, "Between the Pen and the Sword: The Global Islamic Media Front in the West," *Terrorism & Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012): 770, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09546553.2011.643934>.

<sup>142</sup> Torres Soriano, "Between Pen and Sword: Global Islamic Media Front in West," 770.

<sup>143</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, "Understanding the Challenge of Ideological Extremism," *UNISCI Discussion Papers* no. 18 (10, 2008): 114-6, <https://www.ucm.es/data/cont/media/www/pag-72511/UNISCI%20DP%2018%20-%20GUNARATNA.pdf>.

<sup>144</sup> Haroro J. Ingram, "The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* (2015): 6, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10357718.2015.1059799>.

<sup>145</sup> Richard Barrett, "The Islamic State," *The Soufan Group* (28 October 2013): 55, <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>.

fighters and relay the benefits of belonging to the group. Barrett says that ISIS' central media outlets are "well-disciplined and well-organized," focusing largely on international audiences, overall strategies, and aligning major messages with overall operations.<sup>146</sup>

The mid-level tier of provincial offices is distributed regionally throughout Iraq and Syria. This group also contributes to ISIS' vast online presence by supplementing the central communication apparatus with massive quantities of smaller communications.<sup>147</sup> Additionally, prior to publicizing major propaganda pieces, provincial offices conduct online popularity surveys to determine if new propaganda will be received positively by online viewers. As an example, before ISIS declared itself as a caliphate, the group conducted market research through social media to see if social media users would support the announcement.<sup>148</sup> By prefacing releases with online surveys, the group attempts to gauge online reactions and anticipates future levels of public support. Additionally, by polling social media, publications and announcements can be modified to incorporate audience preferences, or they can be delayed until adequate levels of online support are generated.

At the lower level of the hybrid structure are virtual supporters. This group publicizes issues and discussions and further distributes propaganda via new media technologies and social media networks.<sup>149</sup> To help maintain a large online presence and constant flow of propaganda, this group uses several social media applications that automatically forward messages and links. As an example, some virtual supporters use the application called Dawn of Good Tidings. It remains below social media spam thresholds but continues to forward propaganda throughout social media networks.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>147</sup> Ingram, "Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations," 9.

<sup>148</sup> Barrett, "Islamic State," 14.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 52-3.

<sup>150</sup> J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World Analysis Paper, no. 20 (March 2015): 24-5, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis\\_twitter\\_census\\_berger\\_morgan.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf).

Unlike al Qaeda, ISIS attempts to maintain control of the lower levels of its hybrid communication structure. To maintain order and communication discipline within social media networks, ISIS enacted two internal control mechanisms. The first is a fine system: users are fined for improper communication procedures, not following protocol, or sending messages that contradict other propaganda. After a number of fines, users have their social media account deactivated or are ostracized completely from the group.<sup>151</sup>

In December 2014, ISIS issued the second control measure that required members to disable GPS on all mobile devices. If members disobeyed the order or missed the one-month suspension, their phones were confiscated or destroyed.<sup>152</sup> Though the second control measure was not intended to affect propaganda themes, both examples illustrate that ISIS exploits the benefits of flat communications and new media technologies, but it attempts to maintain centralized control over its hybrid structure. For ISIS, members in the flat portion of their structure contribute positively to the group's virtual identity and global persona; however, the group attempts to centrally control propaganda so messages do not conflict with central strategies or negatively impact recruiting.

Al Qaeda and ISIS both utilize a hybrid communication structure. At their cores, propaganda and message themes are centrally developed and controlled. As propaganda flows from the center, both groups' communication structure flattens. Propaganda is then distributed quickly and broadly throughout social media networks. Additionally, as new propaganda pieces are distributed, al Qaeda and ISIS both utilize the flat portions of their communication structures to generate online attention and interest, which was discussed in Chapter II.

Unlike al Qaeda, ISIS attempts to maintain communication discipline and message consistency. To manage messages throughout its communication structure, ISIS forces members to adhere to control measures. Additionally, ISIS uses the middle tier of its communication structure to poll audience preferences and support levels.

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<sup>151</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 92.

<sup>152</sup> Berger and Morgan, "ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," 11.

## **B. COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**

To reach diverse audiences, violent extremist groups create propaganda that can appeal generally to broad audiences. Alternatively, narrowcasted propaganda focuses a message toward specific groups or individuals. Gabriel Weimann defines narrowcasting as tailoring messages toward “specific segments of the public defined by values, preferences, demographic attributes, or subscription.”<sup>153</sup> When adjusting propaganda, violent extremist groups must consider the preferences of the audiences they wish to influence.

Violent extremist groups’ ability to broadcast and narrowcast recruiting propaganda depends upon social media users’ comments on videos, television shows, or other types of media.<sup>154</sup> This comment option allows groups to identify trending social media topics and gather specific user information and preferences. After trending data and personal information is collected, the group can shape propaganda that aligns broadly with popular topics or focuses on individual preferences.

In addition to collecting social media users’ comments, violent extremist groups frame propaganda to appeal to audiences.<sup>155</sup> As an example, a terrorist is an evildoer that commits illegal acts of terrorism against innocent victims. Alternatively, a jihadi is a freedom fighter that struggles under the oppression of a secular enemy. These two phrases describe the same action, but a positive portrayal of violence attempts to legitimize actions and elicit strong emotions that can potentially blossom into increased interest and recruitment.

### **1. Al Qaeda Communication Strategy**

Al Qaeda broadcasts its focused message of justified violence: terrorism is necessary for the *jihad* (the struggle) against unbelievers.<sup>156</sup> By using this Islamic term,

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<sup>153</sup> Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media,” 3.

<sup>154</sup> Berger and Morgan, “ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing population of ISIS supporters on Twitter,” 36.

<sup>155</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 20.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

al Qaeda concentrates propaganda toward the Muslim diaspora, and it attempts to create a correlation between violence and being a devout Muslim. For the audience, the message relays that terrorism is a necessary action that devout Muslims should commit against unbelievers. Weimann relayed al Qaeda's justification for violence; if Muslims do not accomplish their duty, al Qaeda threatened that they will be held accountable to "Allah on the day of judgment."<sup>157</sup> Although this message focuses on Muslims, al Qaeda broadcasts it by demanding all Muslims to attack non-Muslims.<sup>158</sup>

Al Qaeda uses several online magazines to broadcast its strategy to massive audiences. To attract readers and gather support for the group, Bob Drogin of the *Los Angeles Times* says that al Qaeda uses several "glitzy graphics" and "reader-friendly stories" in their online magazines.<sup>159</sup> In *Sawt al-Jihad* (Voice of Jihad), an article's author focuses on mobilizing Muslims to commit jihad.<sup>160</sup> In another online magazine, *Mu'askar al-Battar* (Camp of the Sword), an article covered online recruiting and suggested that new members should remain in their local surroundings after being recruited.<sup>161</sup> By instructing new members to remain in-place, al Qaeda can focus recruiting efforts in areas they wish to commit future acts of terrorism. These online magazines are not the only example of al Qaeda broadcasting while focusing on a specific group.

Al Qaeda's online magazine *Inspire* illustrates how the group broadcasts and narrowcasts simultaneously. The magazine provides readers with new and easy ways to commit terrorism against non-Muslims, but it is published in English to attract Western audiences.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, al Qaeda publishes *al Battar* (Sword of the Prophets), another

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<sup>157</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 40.

<sup>158</sup> Paul J. Smith, "Transnational Terrorism and the Al Qaeda Model: Confronting New Realities," *Parameters: U.S. Army War College Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (July 2002): 36, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/60185346?accountid=12702>.

<sup>159</sup> Drogin, "'Vanity Fair' of Al Qaeda."

<sup>160</sup> This paper's author acknowledges the existence of multiple spellings for this publication; *Use of Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 9.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>162</sup> *Use of Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 32.

online magazine translated into multiple languages. As Drogin described, the magazine attracts readers with colorful images, and it provides readers with several ways of conducting hand-to-hand combat.<sup>163</sup>

These online magazines focus on Muslim audiences, but they are distributed globally throughout social media networks and are openly available. Because they are translated into multiple languages, al Qaeda propaganda reaches diverse audiences and encourages them to commit terrorism against non-Muslims. Since al Qaeda has expanded into the massive and global social media networks, the group broadcasts its focused recruiting message.

Yael Stein, of Genocide Prevention Now, quoted al Qaeda leadership directing members to “invade” Facebook and interact with more “mainstream Muslims.”<sup>164</sup> Once members had gained access to social media networks, al Qaeda directed its members to collect information and comments from social media users pertaining to popular issues or topics with positive feedback.<sup>165</sup> Having access to and collecting this social media information allows al Qaeda to align propaganda with popular social media topics, thereby benefiting from the overall online popularity. This popularity helps draw attention to the group and potentially attracts new members. Additionally, having access to social media users’ personal preferences allows al Qaeda to narrowcast messages and potentially recruit with propaganda tailored toward individual preferences.

Figure 6 is an image from al Qaeda’s YouTube channel that was launched on 11 September 2012. Members are allowed to leave comments on speeches, videos, or other propaganda that are posted to the channel. Additionally, followers are notified when new information is added to the channel, so they can remain up-to-date on al Qaeda issues.<sup>166</sup> This feedback option on the YouTube channel allows al Qaeda to collect comments from social media users and adjust future propaganda toward popular posts or individual preferences.

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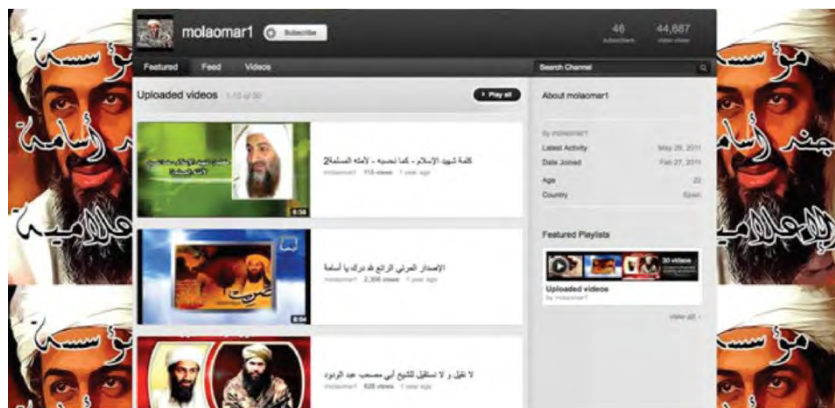
<sup>163</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 31.

<sup>164</sup> Stein, “Social Networks – Terrorism’s New Marketplace,” 3.

<sup>165</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 53.

<sup>166</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 5.

Figure 6. Al Qaeda's YouTube channel



An image of al Qaeda's YouTube channel. Source: Gabriel Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; the Next Generation* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), 5.

Al Qaeda also broadcasts throughout online games, but they remain focused on Muslims. In the group's online video game series called *Ummah Defense*, online players save the planet and rescue chapters of the Quran from invading robots. The game reinforces the concepts of remaining faithful to Islam and defending the community of believers from opposition. Additionally, the video game portrays al Qaeda members as elite, "sexy" fighters that support a worthy cause. Although this propaganda is another example of Muslim-focused narrowcasting, it is intended to appeal to the broad online gaming community.

Figure 7 is from the sequel to the original *Ummah Defense* video game. This game illustrates how al Qaeda attempts to utilize benign images and storylines to deliver messages of justified violence in the name of religion.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Chris Suellentrop, "The Evildoers Do Super Mario Bros.; The War on Terror's least-frightening video games," *Slate*, [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2005/08/the\\_evildoers\\_do\\_super\\_mario\\_bros.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2005/08/the_evildoers_do_super_mario_bros.html).

Figure 7. Al Qaeda video game entitled *Ummah Defense II*



*Ummah Defense II*—the sequel to al Qaeda’s popular video game *Ummah Defense*. Source: Chris Suellentrop, “The Evildoers Do Super Mario Bros.; The War on Terror’s least-frightening video games,” *Slate*, [http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2005/08/the\\_evildoers\\_do\\_super\\_mario\\_bros.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2005/08/the_evildoers_do_super_mario_bros.html).

Guns attract some thrill seekers, so al Qaeda posts seemingly benign gun videos throughout social media to attract their attention. Stein relayed three videos that al Qaeda created and publicized widely throughout Facebook: “tactical shooting,” “getting to know your AK-47,” and “how to field strip an AK-47.”<sup>168</sup> Social media users that attempted to watch the videos were redirected to al Qaeda webpages where more violent videos and other propaganda pieces were available. Once at the al Qaeda-hosted sites, social media users could peruse more terror-related videos or other propaganda pieces. Admittedly, all social media users do not explore every video and link posted throughout social media; however, these videos are examples of al Qaeda narrowcasting beyond Muslim audiences. They were intended for any social media user that enjoys the excitement of handling guns.

Two specific propaganda pieces encapsulate al Qaeda’s communication strategy: Al Neda, an official al Qaeda website, and an online al Qaeda video. The website says that the group’s ongoing operations are to defend the *ummah* (Islamic nation or community).<sup>169</sup> In this statement, al Qaeda broadcasts to Muslims that terrorism

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<sup>168</sup> Stein, “Social Networks – Terrorism’s New Marketplace,” 2.

<sup>169</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 26.

operations are justified when defending the nation of Islam. Since this message discusses an overall defensive strategy for the nation of Islam, it broadly calls for anyone willing to help in the overall struggle. Additionally, al Qaeda infers that anyone engaging in terrorism is considered a devout Muslim.

The second propaganda piece is an online video entitled “You Are Only Responsible for Yourself.”<sup>170</sup> In the video, al Qaeda encourages Muslims to conduct violence without having to wait for orders from the main group.<sup>171</sup> Since this video attempts to illicit violence against non-Muslims, al Qaeda predominantly narrowcasts toward Muslims but broadcasts to anyone willing to commit terrorism against non-Muslims.

Al Qaeda broadcasts its predominantly Muslim-focused recruiting message, but it has expanded its message to any group or individual willing to commit acts of terrorism against non-Muslims. By using passive websites and online magazines and expanding into interactive social media, al Qaeda maintains a large online presence and disseminates propaganda broadly. Additionally, the group exploits the online gaming environment as another way to expose vast audiences to the concept of using terrorism as a method of protecting beliefs. By broadcasting focused propaganda toward specific groups, al Qaeda attempts to recruit new members that are purportedly devout enough to commit terrorism in the name of jihad against non-Muslims.

## **2. ISIS Communication Strategy**

Similar to al Qaeda, ISIS broadcasts and narrowcasts recruiting propaganda. Unlike al Qaeda, ISIS propaganda contains two types of messages: legitimize violence through intimidation or project success to recruit new members. The message of intimidation that ISIS broadcasts via social media justifies terrorism as a legitimate means of protection. Haroro Ingram, Research Fellow at the Australian National University, said that ISIS devotes a “significant portion of its [propaganda] activities to portraying its governance apparatus as multidimensional, sophisticated, bureaucratized

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<sup>170</sup> Weimann, *Terrorism in Cyberspace; Next Generation*, 27.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

and well resourced.”<sup>172</sup> Therefore, when ISIS declared Muslim statehood in 2014, it telegraphed to the world that it had established a legitimate government. This message portrays that ISIS maintains the legal authority to violently defend itself from any opposition.

Bruce Hoffman supports the notion that violent extremists use propaganda to intimidate others.<sup>173</sup> For ISIS, their intimidation propaganda involves extremely violent acts of terror, and it is broadcasted to audiences via several new media technologies.<sup>174</sup> Examples of their intimidation propaganda include mass executions, mass beheadings, burning people alive, or other tortuous scenes. This propaganda is uploaded then to YouTube for wide distribution.

Figure 8 is taken from an ISIS video that was posted to YouTube, but YouTube has since removed the video. In the video, ISIS members execute several Yazidi prisoners.<sup>175</sup> Because ISIS’ virtual supporters repeatedly posted the video to a number of additional sites and widely distributed links to these sites, as the video was removed or sites were blocked, new sites would emerge and links would be redistributed to the new video locations.<sup>176</sup> Since ISIS declared it had established a Muslim government, it attempted to justify removing enemies of the state that, in this case, included Yazidis.<sup>177</sup> By publicly broadcasting this propaganda throughout social media networks, ISIS displayed its resolve and willingness to resort to extreme measures to defend its state, even against an enemy inside its border. Additionally, this propaganda is meant to

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<sup>172</sup> Ingram, “Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations,” 9.

<sup>173</sup> Use of Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 3.

<sup>174</sup> Deborah Richards, “The Twitter jihad: ISIS insurgents in Iraq, Syria using social media to recruit fighters, promote violence,” Australian Broadcast Corporation News, last modified 20 June 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-20/isis-using-social-media-to-recruit-fighters-promote-violence/5540474>.

<sup>175</sup> Jordan Schachtel, “Reports: ISIS Militants Mass-Murder 300 Yazidi Hostages,” *Breitbart*, 2 May 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/05/02/reports-isis-militants-mass-murder-300-yazidi-hostages/>.

<sup>176</sup> Seib and Janbek, *Global Terrorism and New Media; Post-Al Qaeda Generation*, 35.

<sup>177</sup> Schachtel, “Reports: ISIS Militants Mass-Murder 300 Yazidi Hostages.”

intimidate viewers and governments. It telegraphs that any opposition will face a violent and similar fate to that of the Yazidis.<sup>178</sup>

Figure 8. ISIS conducting an execution



An image of ISIS members executing Yazidi prisoners. Source: Jordan Schachtel, “Reports: ISIS Militants Mass-Murder 300 Yazidi Hostages,” *Breitbart*, 2 May 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/05/02/reports-isis-militants-mass-murder-300-yazidi-hostages/>.

The second messaging theme in ISIS’ communication strategy is broadcasting success. By projecting a large online presence, Lorraine Ali of the *Los Angeles Times* says ISIS portrays that the “crowd is in it, it is a cause worthy of joining, and you’re going to win” if you join them. Brand recognition helps promote the group as being successful and popular.<sup>179</sup> Like other well-known companies or organizations, ISIS publicizes its brand by selling hoodies, bandanas, and hats through online sales. Much of the group’s success-related propaganda is also devoid of a specific location or religious

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<sup>178</sup> Use of Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 3.

<sup>179</sup> Ali, “ANALYSIS; Terror Brand Built on Social Media.”

content.<sup>180</sup> Unlike al Qaeda's propaganda that predominantly focuses on Muslims, ISIS videos broadly invite anyone to join in the group's success and prosperity.

ISIS publicizes success through other means as well. The group internally developed an Android application that automatically spams Twitter accounts with vast amounts of tweets.<sup>181</sup> ISIS also employs applications such as Hootsuite, Tweetbot, BufferApp, or IFFT that spam social media users with propaganda.<sup>182</sup> Since these applications are publicly available, ISIS has incorporated them into its broadcasting-success strategy. By using these spamming applications, ISIS generates large amounts of social media propaganda and attention and thereby develops the group's online presence.

ISIS publishes propaganda in another broadcasting method that Ali calls "bait and switch."<sup>183</sup> In this technique, ISIS creates propaganda and posts it to popular social media sites such as Twitter. The group's virtual supporters then create Twitter messages that contain hashtags and links that closely relate to high-trending, large-scale, or global events. When users visit the hashtags or links, they are redirected to ISIS propaganda. As an example, in 2014, Scotland voted on independence from England. ISIS exploited the online popularity by creating and publicizing Twitter hashtags called #Scotland and #ScotlandDecides. When Twitter users clicked on the hashtags, they were redirected to tweets that contained links to ISIS propaganda posted on YouTube.<sup>184</sup>

Another bait and switch example includes focusing on soccer fans. During World Cup finals, ISIS posted an image of a decapitated Iraqi police officer on Twitter with the #WorldCup hashtag. When users clicked on the hashtag, they were redirected to the tweet containing the image of the decapitated officer. Under the image, Deborah Richards,

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<sup>180</sup> Jason Burke, "Video: War Images Aimed at Young Recruits in West," *The Guardian*, 18 September, 2014. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1562682451?accountid=12702>.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Berger and Morgan, "ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and describing population of ISIS supporters on Twitter," 24-5.

<sup>183</sup> Ali, "ANALYSIS; Terror Brand Built on Social Media."

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

from the Australian Broadcast Corporation, says that ISIS posted the caption “this is our ball.”<sup>185</sup>

Similar to al Qaeda, ISIS focuses propaganda toward specific groups. Richards relays posts from ISIS fighters on Facebook networks: “fighting in Syria is fun,” and the whole situation is “thrilling.”<sup>186</sup> By relaying these first-hand accounts from members fighting in the field, ISIS attempts to assuage any reluctance or fears from Facebook readers and thereby portrays membership as being “fun” and “exciting.” Members of ISIS also relayed that they were contributing to a worthy cause and felt a sense of fulfillment.<sup>187</sup> ISIS, therefore, portrays that membership provides individuals with an exciting way of gaining notoriety and establishing a sense of identity, which are both strong recruiting appeals when attempting to attract new members.

Similar to al Qaeda, ISIS has expanded recruiting efforts into online gaming. The group developed a video game tailored after the already popular online game called *Grand Theft Auto*. Figure 9 is a screen capture from ISIS’ first-person video game. Online players are set as ISIS fighters that encounter various combat situations. The game provides users with high-end graphics and thrilling, violent scenarios. It also exposes users to violent situations against an indiscriminant opposition.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Richards, “Twitter Jihad: ISIS Insurgents in Iraq, Syria Using Social Media to Recruit Fighters, Promote Violence.”

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture, and Lethal Attraction,” *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, November 2014, 32.

Figure 9. ISIS video game



An image from ISIS' first-person shooter video game. Source: "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: Branding, Leadership Culture, and Lethal Attraction," *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, November 2014, 32.

ISIS propaganda focuses on specific groups such as those interested in the Scotland referendum or World Cup soccer. The group utilizes social media to identify popular events or topics and broadcasts its messages around these popular topics to publicize their messages of legitimacy, intimidation, and success. Although these topics can apply to specific audiences, ISIS produces propaganda that applies broadly to popular topics and audiences.

Similar to al Qaeda, ISIS uses social media to broadcast messages to vast and distributed audiences, potentially garnering online attention and thereby attracting social media users. In addition to expanding recruiting efforts into social media, both groups access the huge numbers of online gamers by each producing their own video game. Additionally, after collecting trending information, Al Qaeda and ISIS both positively frame their propaganda to align with topics that are popular throughout social media.

Unlike al Qaeda, ISIS broadcasts the use of terrorism as the legal and legitimate use of force to govern and defend its territory and invites others to join in their success.<sup>189</sup> Al Qaeda, on the other hand, broadcasts a recruiting appeal toward a global

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<sup>189</sup> Barrett, "Islamic State," 39.

Muslim population. Despite predominantly focusing on Muslims, al Qaeda attempts to justify terrorism and recruit anyone to commit terrorism against non-Muslims. Although al Qaeda and ISIS both narrowcast, ISIS uses narrowcasting by focusing on popular topics or groups to help maintain a large online presence and further broadcast its messages.

### **C. CHAPTER ANALYSIS**

Al Qaeda and ISIS have both incorporated a hybrid communication structure. This structure allows both groups to centrally control communication strategies and propaganda themes. By expanding into expansive social media networks, al Qaeda and ISIS distribute propaganda flatly and quickly to global audiences. Although both groups utilize hybrid communication structures, ISIS attempts to control each section of its structure through a number of control mechanisms.

Several of this chapter's examples illustrate how both groups utilize several social media outlets to further distribute propaganda. By distributing and redistributing large quantities of propaganda throughout popular new media technologies, al Qaeda and ISIS expose large audiences to recruiting propaganda, maintain strong online presences, and thereby attract attention and potentially recruit new members.

Both groups survey audiences to focus propaganda. Although al Qaeda collects information from social media users, most propaganda is tailored toward Muslims. ISIS, on the other hand, uses popular or trending topics to mask its propaganda or redirect social media users to other propaganda sites. Additionally, unlike al Qaeda, ISIS uses social media to predict audience support prior to releasing major propaganda pieces.

Since online games attract huge numbers of networked players, al Qaeda and ISIS have both developed video games to access these vast audiences. Al Qaeda's games maintained a focus on Muslims by centering on the defense of Islam. ISIS, on the other hand, mirrored its game after another widely popular online game. This way, ISIS, exploited the popularity of another new media technology or topic and thereby benefited through association or assimilation.

A stark contrast exists between al Qaeda and ISIS messages. Al Qaeda attempts to recruit others to commit terrorism against non-Muslims anywhere in the world.<sup>190</sup> Alternatively, Richard Barrett says that ISIS is focused on a “violent revolution in Muslim majority countries [rather] than attacking their Western sponsors.”<sup>191</sup> Therefore, as Barrett puts it, ISIS is concerned with gaining and maintaining control of its territory, and they would like nothing more than for the West to “leave it alone to establish the Utopia.”<sup>192</sup> By projecting a large and successful online image, ISIS also invites others to join them in their success.

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<sup>190</sup> Smith, “Transnational Terrorism and Al Qaeda Model: Confronting New Realities,” 36.

<sup>191</sup> Barrett, “Islamic State,” 6.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

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## IV. CONCLUSION

This final chapter analyzes the validity of the posed hypothesis in Chapter I—violent extremist groups rely on social media to recruit new members. After the hypothesis is reviewed, counterterrorism recommendations are offered that can potentially degrade the effectiveness of violent extremist groups’ online recruiting strategies. The final area of this chapter offers future areas of study that would likely increase the limited amount of empirical data that explains the effectiveness of violent extremist groups’ new media recruiting strategies.

### A. HYPOTHESIS ANALYSIS

Violent extremist groups employ a diversified recruiting strategy. Loraine Ali calls it a “multi-platform” recruiting strategy.<sup>193</sup> This strategy utilizes several new media technologies—passive websites, active blogs, interactive social media, mobile devices, and online gaming—to project a large online presence and overwhelming success. Projecting a large online presence inflates violent extremist groups’ online personas, portrays them as being popular, and thereby attracts attention and new media users toward violent extremist groups.<sup>194</sup>

Because of the vast number of websites that violent extremist groups maintain, websites provide violent extremist groups with the ability to project a large online presence. Websites also allow violent extremist groups to publicize recruiting propaganda, which is used to influence new media users’ beliefs and behavior. Through websites, groups generate online attention and thereby attract potential recruits.

Although websites play an important role in projecting success and recruiting new members, they represent a passive component to violent extremist groups’ recruiting strategies because they passively wait for online users. By incorporating interactive Web

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<sup>193</sup> Ali, “ANALYSIS; Terror Brand Built on Social Media; Islamic State is using Digital ‘Arms’ to Control Message and Image and to Recruit.”

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

2.0 technologies, violent extremist groups can recruit actively rather than wait for users to visit websites.

Blogs and social media are key components of violent extremist groups' active recruiting strategies. Blogs inadvertently assist violent extremist groups in narrowcasting their propaganda, and they allow them to identify trending or popular online topics. Because they center on specific issues, blogs sort audiences by demographic, sex, religion, or a host of other factors. Once audiences are narrowed by blog topic, violent extremist groups can interact with audiences, gather preferences, and narrowcast propaganda toward these focused audiences.

Because blog sites identify trending or popular online topics, violent extremist groups can manipulate propaganda to align with these popular issues. By linking propaganda to popular topics or hiding propaganda behind related titles, violent extremist groups benefit from the large amount of attention and activity that blogs generate. By hiding propaganda behind misleading titles, violent extremist groups can entice bloggers to follow links to propaganda or interact unknowingly with violent extremists.

Facebook is the most popular social media venue online.<sup>195</sup> Within social media, users produce and consume an enormous amount of videos, movies, audio clips, and several other types of media. Violent extremist groups also produce vast quantities of propaganda and utilize overt and surreptitious recruiting tactics when discussing or disseminating propaganda throughout social media networks.

Some propaganda is obvious. It contains images of violence, logos from violent extremist groups, or is directly attributable to violent extremist groups. Other propaganda is less obvious. It portrays members as humanitarian aid workers or helping the poor.<sup>196</sup> Regardless of tactic, and similar to blogs, social media allows violent extremist groups to observe and interact with vast numbers of social media users, publicize propaganda, and project a huge online presence throughout globally distributed social media networks.

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<sup>195</sup> "Internet Seen as Positive Influence."

<sup>196</sup> Richards, "Twitter Jihad: ISIS Insurgents in Iraq, Syria Using Social Media to Recruit Fighters, Promote Violence."

Because social media is easy to use and involves expansive audiences, violent extremist groups have fully incorporated it into recruiting strategies.<sup>197</sup> Since social media attracts enormous and networked audiences, violent extremist groups push their members to exploit social media to its fullest.<sup>198</sup>

Mobile phones and smart phones are another new media technology that allows violent extremist groups to interact with vast and globally distributed audiences. Similar to social media, violent extremist groups exploit smartphone applications, such as Twitter, by publishing large amounts of tweets or titling propaganda after popular topics. Violent extremist groups create large amounts of propaganda and quickly distribute it through mobile phones. This propaganda contributes to groups' global images and overwhelming popularity.

Smartphones provide encrypted communications.<sup>199</sup> By using smartphones, violent extremist groups can communicate with each other and throughout social media networks via secure communications. Although counterterrorism organizations may confiscate them, smartphones are encrypted, and the encryption is difficult to break. By using smartphones, violent extremist groups can communicate securely throughout globally connected social media networks.

In another new media technology, online gaming connects over a billion new media users.<sup>200</sup> Since these games attract huge numbers of networked players, violent extremist groups have expanded recruiting efforts to exploit their overwhelming popularity. By producing video games that mirror other popular games, violent extremist groups attract attention in a manner similar to exploiting trending topics. By incorporating another new media technology that projects popularity, online gaming creates attention for violent extremist groups throughout vast gamer networks and thereby increases the potential for recruiting new members.

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<sup>197</sup> Gane and Beer, *New Media: The Key Concepts*, 7-8.

<sup>198</sup> Stein, "Social Networks – Terrorism's New Marketplace," 3.

<sup>199</sup> Crovitz, "Why Terrorists Love Silicon Valley."

<sup>200</sup> Kim, "Popularity of Gamification in the Mobile and Social Era," 5.

Al Qaeda and ISIS have both incorporated social media networks into their communication structures. Both groups also employ diverse new media technologies in their recruiting strategies—broadcast and narrowcast to recruit new members.

Al Qaeda’s message is broadcasted through several new media technologies, but it narrowcasts predominantly toward Muslims. The group’s message calls for attacks on non-Muslims. ISIS also broadcasts and narrowcasts, but its broadcast message is twofold. First, ISIS portrays acts of terrorism as a legitimate use of force and uses propaganda to threaten opponents.<sup>201</sup> Second, ISIS broadly invites anyone to join them and their success. When narrowcasting, ISIS portrays membership as “fulfilling” and “fun,” so the group focuses propaganda on new media users searching for sources of satisfaction or entertainment.

Throughout this thesis, several examples illustrated how al Qaeda and ISIS utilize several new media technologies to attract attention and recruit throughout vast and networked new media audiences. Therefore, violent extremist groups rely on social media to recruit new members, and they exploit several new media technologies to reach broad audiences. Additionally, groups focus propaganda to exploit the popularity of trending topics or craft propaganda to appeal to individual preferences.

## **B. COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS**

In a study consisting of over 40 YouTube channels, the majority of channels were maintained in Europe, but they were legally based in the United States.<sup>202</sup> Basing channels within the United States grants new media users U.S. Constitutional rights such as freedom of speech and protection from unreasonable search and seizure that can negatively impact counterterrorism efforts and further complicate these efforts because of the international relations implications.

U.S. citizens may express their freedom of speech by publicizing and disseminating propaganda. If, however, counterterrorism agencies wish to curtail

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<sup>201</sup> Use of Internet by Islamic Extremists: Hearing Before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 3.

<sup>202</sup> Klausen, Barbieri, Reichlin-Melnick, and Zelin, “YouTube Jihadists,” 36.

propaganda dissemination and online recruiting, they must coordinate with federal agencies to link individuals with known terrorist groups and prove that individuals or groups have overstepped First Amendment rights—freedom of speech.

In al Qaeda’s and ISIS’ communication structure, individuals in the middle tier play an important intermediary role by forwarding the centrally produced propaganda to the flat portions of the structure. Assuming that counterterrorism organizations and personnel can identify these middle tier individuals and can work within the legal framework of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, they are able to obtain the proper warrants to collect information on these individuals without infringing upon Fourth Amendment rights—unreasonable search and seizure.<sup>203</sup> Having identified these middle-tier individuals, counterterrorism agencies can work with the proper law enforcement organizations to highlight individuals and limit their online activity.

The U.S. State Department is the authority for determining whether an organization is considered terrorist-related or not. By coordinating with the U.S. State Department, counterterrorism agencies can link these middle-tier individuals to known terrorist organizations, which affords counterterrorism groups latitude to further highlight connections within violent extremist group communication networks and identify individuals within the upper and lower levels. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon counterterrorism organizations to educate legislators on the passive versus active aspects of violent extremist groups’ new media recruiting strategies.

### **C. FUTURE AREAS OF STUDY**

This thesis reviewed how al Qaeda and ISIS both narrowcast propaganda, but specific research surrounding narrowcasting techniques and intended audiences is warranted to determine whether diversified recruiting strategies are effective. Throughout research for this thesis, several examples emerged indicating that violent extremist groups narrowcasted toward specific audiences—women, teens, young men, the poor, or the

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<sup>203</sup> Laura K. Donohue, “SECTION 702 AND THE COLLECTION OF INTERNATIONAL TELEPHONE AND INTERNET CONTENT,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 38, no. 1 (Winter, 2015): 117-27, <http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2364&context=facpub>.

disenfranchised. Within each group, research can potentially identify specific characteristics to determine if an overall trend emerges across multiple groups. If trending data can be determined, research can potentially identify individuals or groups that may be more susceptible to violent extremist groups' recruiting propaganda.

Additional research can also focus on how violent extremist groups narrowcast toward specific individuals. Although various recruiting strategies may or may not apply universally, determining if violent extremist groups narrowcast toward individuals may help identify the process of moving individuals from virtual recruiting environments into physical contact and communication.

Furthermore, in an effort to counter violent extremist groups' new media recruiting strategies, some counterterrorism agencies maintain websites or publish various messages via new media technologies. Rohan Gunaratna says that these efforts are often "boring" because counterterrorism campaigns are not visually appealing and messages are inconsistent across multiple agencies.<sup>204</sup> If counterterrorism strategies wish to gain some semblance of parity with violent extremist groups' new media recruiting strategies, they must produce high-quality messages that are relevant to online audiences and resonate within diverse groups. Additionally, these messages must be distributable via several new media technologies.

In a final option for additional study, one may focus on the transition from virtual recruitment to actual physical contact. As an example, ISIS' virtual supporters recruited four brothers online. Prior to their secretive departure to Syria, the boys' father observed an unknown man talking to them face-to-face in their front yard.<sup>205</sup> Does online recruiting still require face-to-face interaction? What is the process that moves new media users from a virtual environment to actual membership?

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<sup>204</sup> Gunaratna, "Understanding Challenge of Ideological Extremism," 123.

<sup>205</sup> "IS Recruit Brothers just Too Fat to Fight [Townsville Edition], *Townsville Bulletin*, 18 November 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1625604450?accountid=12702>.

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