

# Radicalisation and Social Media

## Stream: Online Networks and Social Change

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#### Abstract

It is the versatility of current social media applications and their overall compatibility with a large and varied range of mobile Internet devices, which has seen them become a popular and influential medium for sharing information in the current era. It is also one of the many reasons why social media applications are used in the recruitment of radicalised individuals for extremist organisations, which essentially drives the content of this paper. However, there is one other important purpose of this paper, and that is to help readers understand how social media is able to have such a formidable influence on online populations, and how radicalised groups are able to gauge radicalised behaviour in individuals in order to successfully lure them to their radicalised organisations.

It is the convenience and the accessibility to such a wide-range of mobile Internet devices, as well as a solid stream of Internet data throughout most parts of the world, that many experts like Dr Robin Thompson believe exacerbates the power of social media (Thompson, 2011). Thompson (2011) also states that it is the relentless and fluent streaming of ungoverned information in such an engaging, however, relatively anonymous space that make extremist regimes almost impenetrable, and the construction of radicalised groups unavoidable. Thompson (2011) believes, it is the ability organisations and individuals have to access social media every minute of every day, that makes it the perfect space to present anonymously radicalised opinions and theories on a global scale. In this conference paper, I will present the argument that: Social media platforms have the capacity to influence online users and propagate the gradual incubation of radicalised networks.

Radicalism is a phenomenon mainly projected as an extreme form of expression that many associate with extreme political, social and religious opposition (Galland and Muxel, 2020). Many experts insist that radicalised and extremist groups are often political offshoots, unable to attain democratic political standing. And furthermore, they are groups that feed from negative political imbalances with the ultimate desire of eventually breaking down political, social and cultural barriers (Thompson, 2011). To achieve this, radicalised groups will often form politically motivated movements in an attempt to spark upheaval within communities with strategically organised protests, and other extreme forms of anti-social behaviours (Galland and Muxel, 2020). These movements are largely propelled by propaganda and other forms of provocative broadcast through various forms of media

organisations like the once controversial Aljazeera network, and extremist magazines like 'Inspire', which had once been widely circulated by al-Qaeda to manipulate and lure members from the English-speaking world into their extremist organisations (El-Kikhia and Jaspersen, 2013; Thompson, 2011).

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the incubation and recruitment of radicalised individuals by extremist organisations like al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) had swollen profoundly due to the introduction of varied social media applications (Yasin, 2017; Thompson, 2011). Online recruitment masterminds like Muhammad Wanndy Mohamed Jedi (Wanndy) are known as 'jihadist-celebrities' in Malaysian radicalised circles due to their success in recruiting members online for terrorist cells all over the world (Haziq bin Jani, 2016, p. 15). Wanndy — a self-radicalised individual — who was initially recruited online by IS, has been profoundly recognised for his involvement in the 'lone wolves' movement: A movement where online individuals are recruited to commit sole acts of violence all over the world, ranging from low level street violence and robberies, to suicide bombings (Haziq bin Jani, 2016, p. 16). Wanndy, along with other well know radicalised individuals and organisations, would use social media platforms such as Facebook to recruit and incubate future terrorists. Haziq bin Jani (2016) suggests that social media profiles of radicalised individuals and groups would often be shut down due to the illicit and graphic content being displayed. However, he also claims that this was no deterrent due to a lacking of online security and the ease of which radicalised individuals and groups were able to re-invent themselves on new accounts; enabling them to again amass substantial following in a short period of time (Yasin, 2017; Haziq Bin Jani, 2016).

Jarred Prier suggests that social media platform, Twitter, is one of the latest weapons in the modern-day recruitment and incubation process for radicalised groups (Prier, 2017). This is mainly due to the social media giant's ability to break down the parameters of distance and time, allowing users to communicate information more effectively at much greater speeds, and to wider audience (Mustafa and Hamzah, 2011 & Thompson, 2011). Prier (2017) also explains that radicalised organisations elect to use Twitter as their priority electronic medium to incubate and influence people into their organisations, because of its capacity to spread messages quickly around multiple networks with its powerful trending function. This particular function allows for the dissemination of such information over a multitude of social media platforms simultaneously using hyperlinks, links and hashtags (Prier, 2017). Many academics like Thomas Zeitzoff refer to the ease in which people can deliver and receive content and data so quickly as "Going viral" (Zeitzoff, 2017, p. 1972). This is one of the many attributes that sets social media platforms such as Twitter, apart from its mainstream predecessors. It is also why radicalised organisations, politicians and world leaders have become so dependent on social

media platforms to proliferate their political agendas and ideologies (Thompson, 2011 & Zeitzoff, 2017). Some academics like Prier (2017) and Zeitzoff (2017, p. 1975), go as far as saying that the importance of Twitter's advanced trending and microblogging capabilities, were seemingly as important to Trump's political advances and achievements as his wealth: Particularly, when referring to his presidential victory in 2016. Because of this fact, some experts are referring to the current online era, as the "Twitter Revolution".

Radicalised individuals and extremist organisations often use social media platforms to pursue users that are susceptible to believing suggestive and propagandist information. Users including children or those with underlying mental health issues or 'Process disorders' (a term coined by psychology experts referring to: Internet and social media addictions; computer gaming and gambling, and various other common addictions), are mostly at risk (Thompson, 2011; Hagedorn and Young, 2011, p. 251). Terrorist networks such as al-Qaeda use many forms of manipulated information to instigate hatred in children and adolescents, from the screening of radicalised cartoons, and other methods like hate speech (Thompson, 2011; Chen et al., 2020). Hate speech is a term referred to by academics, for the specific classifications of negatively insinuated utterance on social media platforms. Hate speech is just one of many linguistic tools used on social media platforms to propagate cause, and cultivate specific personnel for certain membership or qualification criteria needed, in order to carry out precise practices within radicalised organisations (Chen et al., 2020). Thompson (2011) explains that there is an articulated ability that coincides with the adoption and promotion of various ideologies, which provide subsequent recruits with an inherent feeling of importance, and in some cases, stature or identity amongst their peer members: A stature that is initially thrived upon in the normal social context. Some radicalised groups such as QAnon, which Ethan Zuckerman (2019) refers to as the Emergence of the Unreal - from his paper entitled (QAnon and the Emergence of the Unreal), will flood social media platforms with misleading and propagandist information to create bazaar and convoluted conspiracies, in order to encourage curiosity and intrigue as a way of luring potential members to their dogmatic regimes (Hannah, 2021).

In recent past, anonymity of such radicalised individuals and extremist groups has been sought in various ways, particularly in the online reality. Radicalised recruitment experts like Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi (Wannady), who I have referred to earlier in this paper (like many other extremist and radicalised organisations), would use decentralised offline cells to avoid being detected, or to minimise the potential impact to the regime's overall plans if a single cell happened to be detected or infiltrated by the authorities (Haziq bin Jani, 2016). Online, radicalised groups and

individuals like Wanndy, would scope and heavily scrutinise the credibility of followers and friendships on social media platforms (like Facebook and Twitter), then invite suitable recruits to better encrypted social media platforms to avoid spies and other form of infiltration (Yasin, 2017). Yasin (2017) explains how radicalised groups would use a funnelling system as a way of measuring the vulnerability of individuals, and their likelihood of radicalisation. He also suggests that this same system allows radicalised organisations to gauge current levels of radicalisation and, if there is potential for recruits to become radicalised further (Yasin, 2017). It has been suggested by academics like Bodle (2013), that in more recent times — due to crackdowns by various governments on all social media platforms — online anonymity is slowly becoming a thing of the past. Social media giants such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, are being pressured to accumulate real-time user identification, and come down hard on those that don't abide by the rules (Bodle, 2013). Facebook boss, Mark Zuckerberg, has stepped up the social media giant's security by enforcing a nothing to hide – real name only policy, which many academics and human rights experts insist, is in complete violation of the (online participants) human rights, and that anonymity is needed to protect potential on and offline victims (Bodle, 2013). Others will argue that anonymity is a mask for radicalised individuals and groups to hide behind whilst spreading potentially harmful propaganda, planning attacks, inciting riots, and recruiting followers to their organisations (Kim et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2020).

Throughout this paper, I have been able to underline through detailed research, the potential radicalised groups have to grow online. I have given examples of both recruitment strategies and online incubation methods, as well as an example of one of the world's most notorious online radicals, and how he was able to target particular online individuals. In the process of achieving all this we have been able to learn how influential social media is in a networking context, and how — not just radicalised groups — but various governments and world leaders have also been able to exploit various social media tools to propagate their own political agendas, and entice followers to their regimes. We touched on anonymity, and the methods radicalised groups use to continually stay anonymous long enough in the online environment, enabling them to incubate and screen recruits using what is referred to as the funnelling process. We have been able to learn about the various levels in the recruitment processes of radicalised individuals, and how radicalised groups were able to use social media, not only to develop and incubate individuals, but measure the resistance and potential or their recruits. This comprehensive and detailed analysis has led me to re-evaluate my thinking when it comes to social media platforms and their potential to generate and manipulate information, which is by no means restricted or governed to keep online users safe. Security on the Internet, whether you are cautious or not, has its potential pitfalls; Anonymity, as a form of security, can be potentially

dangerous in itself. My prognosis is that regardless of whether or not you are communicating in an online or offline environment, understanding your surroundings, as well as being well educated on the potential dangers is what needs to be reflected. Likened to the methods of some radicalised groups — screening and choosing your friends and followers wisely is the first big step to online and offline safety. As for anonymity, (as in fake names and avatars) now becoming more and more obsolete due to government pressure on social media platforms, choosing your friends wisely in both online and offline worlds is seemingly your greatest defence.

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