

Towards an evidence base for online radicalization: Recruitment rhetoric and strategy in the modern age

Abstract

The current paper reviews literatures comprising radicalization through a contemporary lens of online radicalisation. Literatures are critically reviewed and appraised, with the need for a common language concerning definitions of radicalization also discussed. Conceptual models working to conceive the role of the internet in radicalisation, for example context-dependency theory, are brought to bear on the issue in ascertaining whether online radicalisation and radicalisation warrant mutual consideration in discussions of extremist recruitment. Operational procedures from extremist organisations in recruitment are then considered and explored, with such supply-driven models posited as viable alternatives to populist consumption-centric approaches. Lastly, the paper works to highlight the empirical state of the field in terms of reviewing current research methodologies and approaches to researching radicalization, as well as evaluating the existing evidence base in light of such incoherence and suggesting optimal research methodologies in such approaches.

Keywords: online radicalisation; radicalisation; communication approaches; counter-terrorism.

Introduction

‘Online radicalisation’ is a phrase of growing concern for academics and policymakers seeking to understand radicalisation and the asymmetric warfare in the modern age (Neumann, 2013, p.431- 435). Current research efforts have yet to cohere and offer a convincing account of how radicalisation might be conceived in the light of unprecedented levels of communication offered by modern Web 2.0 and social media technologies (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010, p.889). Radicalisation is not a new phenomenon, although the coincidental rise of extremism with ever-sophisticated communication technologies begs causal questions regarding either event. Recruitment has been identified as one of terrorist organisations’ top priorities online (Keeney and Von Winterfeldt, 2010, p.1805-1087). With growing technological sophistication, radical groups have taken to using such technologies in efforts of recruitment, with much of the academic and international community evidently struggling to keep pace with such developments. Whilst radicalisation is not a new phenomenon, the fervent, committed and continued use of Web 2.0 and social media platforms in furthering extremist aims imbues the issue with renewed urgency (Heath-Kelly, 2013, p.394-398). The current paper seeks to critically examine the relevant theory and research concerning recruitment in online radicalisation, and in light of this offer some direction to this burgeoning field.

Recent years have borne witness to an unprecedented rise of extremist activity as indexed by use of social media and Web 2.0 (Klausen, 2015, p.12-14). Whilst conceptual work has endeavoured to keep pace with such developments, the evidence base as it currently exists has been described as very weak, consisting of exploratory more than explanatory work (Bouhana and Wikstrom, 2011, p.8-10). Despite a variety of literatures and areas of debate focusing on

the same phenomenon, at present there is an evident lack of cohesiveness in such work (Staun, 2010, p.405-407).

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