Original Paper

Counter Narrative: Weapon in the Battle against Jihadism

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Abstract

On 9/11 2001, as a result of the attacks carried out against various targets in the US, the world changed in many ways. New terms for the vast majority of society, new ways of carrying out terrorism, came to the fore. The globalization of Terror had arrived. And all this expanded exponentially by a new element that came into our lives such as the Internet. A tool that can be used for good, as has been demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, but that is also used for illicit purposes by more or less organized crime and, of course, by terrorism.

Thus comes a new phenomenon such as the counter-narrative with which states must work as one of the different tools with which to combat terrorism, both of a jihadist nature or ideology, which is what is currently the most latent danger against which the whole world is facing, but without forgetting the extreme right and left.

Keywords

Internet, radicalization, terrorism, narrative, counter narrative

1. Introduction

During the month of May 2022 (EUROPOL, 2022), the fourth edition of the EUROPOL report on jihadist propaganda was published. Nowadays, it is not strange for anyone to know the importance of cyberspace as a battlefield in the fight against all kinds of crime. And jihadist-style terrorism could not be less.

Throughout history, information, communications, the flow of information and its management have been a factor of power. From the battle of Marathon, (between Greeks and Persians in 490 BC in which a Greek messenger, Pheidippides, ran from Athens to Sparta asking for help, but the Athenians won

before it arrived and today famous for the race of the Olympic Games) there have been many examples that demonstrate the importance of communications. And in our days after the attack on Ukraine by Russian troops with the images of the destruction of the Ukrainian Communications Tower in kyiv by the impact of a missile in addition to the continuous bombardment of fake news by both sides.

With the idea of safeguarding this flow of communication in the midst of the Cold War, the first steps were taken in the creation of what we know today as the Internet. In 1957, the Advanced Research Projects Agency, known as ARPA, linked to the Department of Defense, was organized in the United States. It was created in response to the technological and military challenges of the then USSR and, a decade later, it would be considered the organization that laid the foundations of what would be known as the Internet decades later.

The system of connected computers was already a reality since the 1960s. However, if we ask ourselves when the Internet was invented as a term, the answer should be that, in 1974, which is when the concept was born. It was created by Vinton Cerf, Yogen Dalal, and Carl Sunshine at Stanford University, who also created TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), which allows computers on different networks to connect to each other. In 1983 TCP/IP became the standard Internet protocol.

It is the year 1983 that is usually marked as the year the Internet was born. It was then that the United States Department of Defense decided to use the TCP/IP protocol in its Arpa net network, thus creating the Arpa Internet network. Over the years it was left with the name of only "Internet".

On March 12, 1989, Tim Berners Lee first described the hypertext transfer protocol that would lead to the first web using three new resources: HTML, HTTP, and a program called Web Browser. A year later, the Internet was born in a closed way within CERN, and in August 1991, finally, users outside CERN began to be able to access that information. The World Wide Web grew very fast: in 1993 there were only 100 World Wide Web Sites and in 1997 there were more than 200,000. And from then on, the exciting history of the Internet continues to this day.

The exponential increase in the importance and relevance of the Internet phenomenon and what it entails (social networks, fake news, telework etc.), especially since the arrival of the new millennium, does not surprise anyone.

But like any new creation, it has the duality of being used for good or for evil. This has been recognized by authorities of international organizations such as the Secretary General of the United Nations in 2013: "The Internet is an excellent example of how terrorists can act in a truly transnational manner. In response, states must think and function equally transnationally" (UNODOC, 2013).

Anonymity is one of the strategic factors driving terrorist organizations and their supporters to make greater use of the Internet for a wide variety of purposes, including recruitment, financing, propaganda, training, incitement to commit acts of terrorism, and the collection and dissemination of information for

terrorist purposes. Therefore, the Internet is currently used by terrorist groups and criminal networks, including immigration networks, for their illicit purposes.

Focusing on jihadist-style terrorism, this use of the Internet to spread its message is not new. Al Qaeda launched its first website, Azam.com, and since then the phenomenon has done nothing but grow. Already in 2002 in a letter sent by the then leader of Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan, he indicated:

"It is obvious that in this century the media war is one of the strongest methods; in fact, it can reach a ratio of 90% of the total preparation for our battles" (Center, 2002).

2. Stages

The wide diffusion and low cost make the Network a powerful and coveted weapon. But this process has gone through various stages. As Aaron Y. Zelin explain, we can see four phases in this development (Zelin, 2014):

-In 1984, Azzam and other jihadist leaders began to send sermons and written notes, while using audiovisual media to distribute their ideological propaganda.

-The second would begin in the mid 90s with the appearance of the

first "vertical" websites: both the control and the content of the page were monopolized by individuals linked to jihadist organizations, and they decided what content was suitable for publication and dissemination. "porn" problem. "cyber-salvation".

-The third stage would begin ten years later with the introduction of interactive forums such as the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF). The site was managed by an administrator and it was the users themselves who contributed the content and videos to the forums, such as Al Hasbah, Jamia Hafza, Urdu Forum and Al Ansar by Al Qaeda and Shamukh. The importance of this phase lies in the fact that the jihadists understand the importance of this medium when it comes to expanding their area of influence.

-From 2007 the "boom" of social networks began and with it a fourth phase in evolution. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, along with blogs, become the most important channels of dissemination for terrorist groups.

-2014: Daesh expansión

Thus, the international community is aware that the response to jihadist-style terrorism should be global and include multifunctional strategies in addition to the military route. In this context, the United Nations, through its Committee Against Terrorism (CTT), undertook in 2014 a line of work that incorporated projects and recommendations to Member States on how to confront violent extremism through communication. and public opinion. The UN Secretary General advised the implementation of national communication strategies to combat the narratives associated with violent extremism, and

countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, France and Spain, among others, did so.

Spain in chapter 4 of the 2019 Strategy against Terrorism establishes:

"4. Generate a narrative of its own and specifically aimed at vulnerable groups against violent radicalization processes.

5. Promote campaigns on the Internet and social networks that confront the discourse violent extremist, collaborating and involving especially civil society and to the group of young people" (Nacional, 2019).

A new concept such as the "Counter narrative" born to deal with the extremist and violent discourse of these groups. The violent narrative seeks to divide and undermine social cohesion and its discourse is divided into:

-Victimization. Recurring element in the jihadist narrative. According to these groups, Islam is being attacked by Muslim governments and by the West. Victimization seeks to gain sympathy among the vulnerable population.

-Grievances. It is continually reiterated in jihadist propaganda. It can be individual or collective, it can be real or perceived. On many occasions, collective grievances derive from domination, oppression or foreign intervention, for example. This can provoke certain emotional reactions that violent extremist propaganda manages to take advantage of and turn into a feeling of revenge against the "oppressor".

-Violent acts. Violent extremist groups seek to recruit individuals to carry out violent acts, thereby dehumanizing their opponents and thereby legitimizing violence against them.

-Denial of their own crimes. They justify their actions to seek legitimacy, intimidate their opponents and offer rewards to their members for participating in acts of this nature.

To fight this phenomenon we have the counter narrative. According to the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) of the European Commission, counter narratives in response to violent extremist discourse can be divided into three groups:

1). Strategic government communication

Strategic government communication is driven by the government of a country and has two clear objectives. The first of these is to undermine violent extremist narratives through concrete actions and projects that explain to the public the measures it takes to fight violent extremism. The second objective is to raise awareness in society about the importance of dealing with the threat of terrorism. Likewise, governments must foster relationships of trust with the different communities with which they can collaborate in terms of prevention and the creation of alternative narratives.

2). Alternative narratives

They are ideas and perspectives that are presented to a target audience to make them reconsider the message of violent extremism. Alternative narratives have as their main goal to highlight positive values instead of questioning or judging other types of discourse. Civil society must be the one who

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promotes alternative narratives so that they can be credible and their discourse believable, for this they can count on the experience of deradicalized individuals, survivors, victims of violent extremism, community leaders, etc.

3). Shock narratives or counter narratives

The main objective of the shock narratives is to discredit, refute and challenge the violent extremist discourse, for this this ideology is presented as erroneous and its discourse is analyzed with the aim of exposing its false story and hypocrisy. Religious leaders are one of the actors who have the legitimacy to carry out this type of counter-narrative due to their moral authority, as are journalists or witnesses on the ground of violent extremist acts in conflict zones, for example. In this type of narrative, the role of governments should be relegated to the background, since their work is often perceived as less credible. Example Kayla Mueller (Sieteiglesias, 2019).

Therefore, in creating an effective counter narrative we need:

-Audience/target

-Sender/message

-Means of dissemination

-Evaluation of these measures.

3. Conclusion

Terrorist organizations know the importance of the Net, of the Internet and social networks. They use them not only to spread their message of hate, pain and death but also to recruit new followers, obtain financing, give training and even carry out attacks.

This obliges governments and companies that provide services on the network to provide the facilities to monitor these networks to avoid the radicalization of young people and prevent terrorist attacks against people, companies or critical infrastructure.

The task is neither easy nor short-term. Agreements between public administrations and private companies will be needed to block terrorist content in a relatively short time, in addition to providing the necessary data to prosecute creators and distributors of content that may violate national laws.

We will have to be very attentive to how the death of the leader of Al Qaeda Central, al-Zawahiri, on July 31, 2022, after a drone attack on his home in Kabul under cover of the Taliban in a CIA operation (Rivas Treviño, 2022).

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