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The Digital Revolution: Taking Action to Promote a Better World
through Technology

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Topic: The Technological Era: Combatting the spread of terrorism through social media

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Introduction

Terrorism has singularly become one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century and has continually evolved to counter all measures passed against it. The most prominent one of these evolvments has been its migration onto mainstream social media. Using these platforms, terrorists are able to plan attacks, communicate with their followers, and instill fear in the general population at increasingly alarming rates. Sites such as Youtube, Twitter, and Facebook have all become weaponized to promote extremist ideologies.

Terrorism previously was mostly confined to countries with civil unrest and rarely affected stable countries. Attacks used to require months of coordination through secure channels that security organizations often found. Due to this, the scale of terrorism was greatly reduced and was generally isolated to these countries. Though with the advent of the internet, the scale of its impact rapidly increased.

Currently, terrorism is an evergrowing phenomenon that has grown to affect the majority of the world. It is imperative that a solution to limit the spread of this activity is found and this is best done by stopping the online radicalization of individuals. A study conducted by the University of Haifa found that nearly 90% of organized terrorism activities online take place on social media. Social media not only allows for communication within terrorists groups but also plays a large role in allowing the recruitment of new members. Another increasingly concerning trend is the appearance of lone-actor terrorists, those who act without connection to a particular terrorist organization and sometimes, although rarely, without a clear ideology. This has made these attacks more unpredictable and, therefore, more prevalent.

It is in the interest of all countries to combat this issue as this conflict creates key emerging threats to peace and security for civilians globally as it continues to spread. Many countries have attempted to propose their own national security measures with varying degrees of success due to many factors including the prevalence of local terrorism as well as the resources possibly allocated. The role of social media in creating terrorists is not to be underestimated and is to be seen as a crucial priority.

Definition of Key Terms

Terrorism

Terrorist organizations are radical political actors that use violence to induce terror and publicize their beliefs. Usually, this includes religious extremists perpetrating attacks on local and foreign populations to pressure a political change. Previously, the damage inflicted by these attacks was confined to the city/town or country where the event took place but recently attacks in foreign locales possibly have global implications.

Radicalization

Radicalization is the action or process of a violent or extremist third party causing a neutral individual to adopt radical positions on political or social issues. This now occurs mostly on the internet under specific forums or on mainstream social media sites on smaller threads. It is a key term within this debate as it is the primary factor behind this new wave of terrorism.

Social Media

Social media is the conglomeration of websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. Almost 4.5 billion people use the internet and therefore social media has an enormous impact as well as a wide diversity in its content and format. Large corporations such as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter are the most popular sites but smaller platforms such as 4Chan and Reddit notorious for their lack of content restrictions play host to some of the central issues of this debate.

Artificial Intelligences

Artificial intelligence (AI) is an all encompassing term that details the development and the use of computer systems able to perform tasks normally requiring human intelligence, such as visual recognition, speech recognition, and decision-making. In the context of social media, It is often used to quickly recognize specific terms or images related to content which violates each sites guidelines and later censor it or remove the user from the platform.

Encrypted Messaging Systems

Encrypted messaging systems are an extension of social media that allows for users to communicate with end-to-end encryption preventing any intermediary authority from viewing the content of messages. The lack of monitoring within the content of these messages makes their use particularly susceptible to malicious actors and allows for the further dissemination of propaganda and recruitment.

Background Information

Roots of Terrorism

Terrorism is not a new issue as it has always been a part of radical political movements. Isolated incidents labeled as such have occurred from the very beginnings of human history but resurfaced into a broader epidemic in the 1800s with African, Latin American, and Asian colonial independence movements. Civilian access to explosives and weapons also heavily increased making destruction and large scale violence a particularly powerful way to disseminate a message. Terrorism changed drastically as it entered the political stage in the Middle East. Extremist religious groups became major perpetrators as such and began to expand beyond their local limits and focus on foreign targets. The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers in New York City marked a particular turning point in the nature of these assaults and their progression to the Western world.

Rise of Social Media

Previously, the only outlet terrorist organizations had to spread news of their attacks beyond their areas of impact was traditional media. Television, newspapers, and radios all posed a particular challenge to the spread of information because despite globalization most news was confined to a

province or country and the publishers had full control over what was published. But with the rise of social media in 2004, these organizations found a more benevolent outlet with massive reach.

Social media gained popularity in 2004 with the rise of popular networking app MySpace. It was primarily used by the younger generation though it quickly attracted all other types of people as well. As it has continued to grow, it has amassed nearly 4.5 billion users especially on major platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter. Since its infancy it has struggled to regulate content on its platforms which has led to disastrous consequences. Currently, these sites allow for the organization of mass attacks as well as the radicalization of individuals on their platforms.

Social media serves as the primary tool for the dissemination of terrorist information. It not only allows them to coordinate attacks through encrypted messaging systems with existing followers but also to instill terror in citizens by spreading media of these attacks. Organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State publish gory videos of beheadings and bombings in high definition which are spread on multiple forums with little regulation. ISIS tweets to its users hourly, and Al-Qaeda even publishes its own magazines with instructions on how to perform deadly attacks. But the radicalization of individuals and coercion to commit these attacks are problems that have cost thousands of lives.

A Path to Radicalization

Currently, young adults make up the largest percentage of social medias at around 26%. The propaganda terrorist organs spread online target these individuals as well as children who are isolated and promote their ideologies. Social media enables this by allowing for “recommended videos” and using a “suggested for you” section created by algorithms which often times can quickly become rabbit holes which introduce innocuous individuals at risk into pipelines of radicalization. Prominent online organizations extend beyond coordinated islamic terrorists but also included extreme social movements like QAnon and incels all hidden on smaller internet forums. These ideologies can spontaneously pressure their followers to “make a change” which results in actions like the recent school shootings in the United States and the 2011 Norway attacks in a white supremacist targeted a youth summer camp killing 77. The list of these events continues and affects nearly every single country making this issue a key priority to the global community.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United States of America

The United States plays a crucial role in counterterrorism globally and has been the key figure in spearheading security efforts on social media. Many of these media corporations are based in the United States as well which makes its cooperation particularly important. Additionally, it is one of the states most afflicted by foreign terrorist organizations as well as youth radicalization making it a large stakeholder in this conflict as well.

United Nations Counterterrorism Committee (UNCTC)

The UNCTC is the primary actor in the global effort against terrorism and through extension is now the largest contributor for preventing the spread of terrorism on social media as a part of its larger efforts. It has garnered the supports of the majority of the United Nations and has passed multiple resolutions hindering the operations of terrorist organizations globally.

Social Media Companies

Social media platforms present the largest actor in this debate due to their enormous power. As previously mentioned larger corporations (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook) retain the majority of user but unregulated sites are particularly prevalent among terrorist communities due to the freedom they afford the users. These corporations are caught between the necessity to censor content but lose users or provide less restrictions and becoming hosts for extremist networks. Most platforms have gradually adopted the previous approach but reluctantly and the media companies that have not play a very large role within this debate.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
September 11, 2001	The bombing of New York's World Trade Center towers marks the beginning of modern terrorism and demonstrates the power of

non-state actors, specifically Al-Qaeda. It is also the first instance of foreign attacks on Western soil which marks the rise of the prevalence of these attacks in American and European stages which were previously mostly excluded from these events.

Year of 2004

The rise of social media's popularity opens up a new unregulated form of communication primarily used by youth and provides an easily accessible platform for extremist content much larger than was afforded by traditional media.

June 10, 2010

The launch of the first issue of Al-Qaeda's online english "Inspire" magazine demonstrates the extent to which dangerous information is able to be propagated online. In its very first issue it detailed how to make bombs with household items, knowledge which was used in various attacks including the Boston Marathon and the attempted Times Square bombing.

December 15, 2010

YouTube recognizes the problem that terrorist content causes on their platforms and is the first social media site to announce guidelines to remove videos that incite violence and terrorism setting a precedent for all other major sites.

May 11, 2011

The Taliban creates a Twitter account and is able to contact its followers while also communicating with neutral individuals around the world. They tweet frequently, almost hourly until Twitter takes down their main account in a few weeks. Subsequent new accounts are created and continue to reappear after they are shut down.

January 27, 2012

Twitter takes an additional step towards blocking foreign radicalization by stating they would censor tweets in countries where the tweets risked breaking the local laws of that country. This was the second major progression in the limiting of complete freedom on major platforms in the pursuit of safer media.

April 15, 2013	The perpetrator of the Boston Marathon attacks said he learned how to make a pressure-cooker bomb with Al-Qaeda's inspire magazine.
August 20, 2014	Al Qaeda's viral video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley marks a change in the online strategy of terrorist organizations. Instead of solely promoting their ideology through posts, they begin to produce and publish high quality videos of executions of their "enemies" and other violent acts to elicit fear, further spread their content, and gain larger emotional responses.
December 5, 2016	In a move to better characterize the type of explicit images AI should filter Facebook, Twitter, and Microsoft share photo "hashes" to each individually expand their AI databases and more effectively censor disturbing content.
March 15, 2019	The New Zealand Christ Church mosque shootings serves as an example of the power social media has in the radicalization of individuals. The attacks were livestreamed on Facebook as 51 were killed and 40 were injured.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

[S/RES/1963 \(Adopted in 2010\)](#)

This resolution written by the Security Council passed on the 20th of December. It was the first resolution to formally admit that there was a problem with how terrorism was being tackled and emphasized the need for more than military technology and instead a probe into the roots of what was causing terrorism, specifically online.

[S/RES/2341 \(Adopted in 2017\):](#)

This resolution was again written by the Security Council and passed on the 13th of February. It was drafted during the annual counterterrorism summit and passed unanimously. Reaffirming the previous resolution in more depth, it specifically asked for member nations to use technology and

share their findings to help prevent terrorism. It also asked every country to criminalize terrorism which additionally gave more weight to social media's need to not violate the law in the country where it is being used.

[A/RES/72/284 \(Adopted 2018\)](#)

This resolution was written by the General Assembly and passed on July 2nd. It reiterated the need for a relevant strategy while also stating the need for non governmental actors to comply in the hindering of terrorism, including social media. It asked them to share their information for the security of all nations and was the first resolution to draw concern to the incidence of lone terrorists and their unpredictability and danger.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

[Counterterrorism Guidelines](#)

The United Nations has an annual counterterrorism summit in which they review the UNCTC's progress and strategy and aim to more comprehensively tackle the entire issue of terrorism. The issue with this strategy is that it has thus far not yielded any major results as the strategy towards terrorism is requested to be changed yearly but no understable strategy changes are implemented in these resolutions.

[Social Media Guidelines and Filtering](#)

Social media on its own has worked towards providing a more secure platform and has collaborated with national and international authorities to better prevent terrorism. This is most commonly done through the enforcement of its guidelines of use which allow it to suspend, block, and remove users and content who do not comply with them. This has by itself been one of the greatest contributors against terrorist content upon the most popular platforms. Its filters also preemptively check content before its posted to ensure there are no violations as well as removing graphic content which could contain harmful imagery.

[Calls for Legislation in Member Countries](#)

The UN has also repeatedly called for its member countries to directly address these issues in their national legislation though this call has been heard selectively. Some countries have confronted the issue with their full force while some countries are more reluctant to be involved and therefore allow the issue to be further perpetrated. The cooperation of all countries is needed to effectively yield a solution to this problem and the refusal of some countries to participate has greatly complicated the issue.

Possible Solutions

International Database and AI

The creation of an international database with the aim of collecting information of what terrorist content looks like as social media (e.g. videos, photos, messages, PDFs) could be created allowing each independent nation and their own companies to have access to a large database of international terrorist patterns and thus create a recognizable strategy to better confront or flag dangerous content.

This could be accompanied with the subsequent creation of an international counter-terrorism AI which could be used at each nations discretion to best monitor this content and remove it before it is posted or alert the authorities to suspicious activity and individuals, helping stop lone wolf attacks before they occur.

Social Media Cooperation

Another solution would be to establish a set of international guidelines that each country should give to their companies to follow for best combatting this issue. These guidelines could request the information of specific users as well as create a standard as to what type of content is allowed to be published and disseminated upon all these communities. By limiting the access of terrorists to large scale social media networks, their impacts upon citizens lives will also lessen.

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