National Defense College of the Philippines
EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

Key Points and Policy Recommendations

- In the fight against terrorism, the DND and AFP should engage and collaborate with social media companies to flag suspicious terrorist activities on the internet.

- Adequate training and advanced technological instruments should be provided to the law enforcement agencies and intelligence units to effectively deal with the threats and challenges of social media terrorist.

- The government should begin reviewing its existing laws such as the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 and the National Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism as well as its institutional capacity to respond to violent extremist activities on social media.

NDCP Executive Policy Brief (EPB)

The Cyber Battleground:
An Analysis on the Use of Social Media for Terrorist Recruitment

Johanna S Adap

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon, but the modern era of terrorism has already begun. With the advent of technological advancement and subsequent growth of new media technologies[1], terrorist organizations are creating a battlefield in the cyber arena to spread their ideology. They are using advanced technology in their missions by incorporating social media platforms into their communication structures and strategies. Hence, terrorist groups can project large online presence to communicate with their followers and donors, train their members, disseminate their propaganda to specific audiences, and recruit new members across the globe.

Through social media, the terrorist groups are becoming more organized and dangerous by threatening the peace and security of states. In recent years, there is a massive number of terrorist incidents and social media is accelerating these situations. According to scholars, this is a warning sign of the future threats of terrorism. Thus, it is crucial to discuss its threats and challenges.

In the Philippines, terrorist activity on social media is a relatively new phenomenon. However, following the proclamation of the Islamic State (ISIS) caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014, a significant number of pre-existing Mindanao-based terror groups were seen posting images and video online pledging allegiance to ISIS and its caliph. Months before the 2017 Marawi Siege, terrorist groups used social media to reach and recruit Moros across Mindanao. These actions were followed by the deliberate and tactical use of online media to spread materials about the attacks on the city. To note, the Marawi Siege is considered as the longest urban war in the Philippine history which caused the loss of hundreds of lives and properties[2].

Therefore, it is important to address the implications of utilizing social media platforms in recruiting individuals by terrorist groups and organizations. In particular, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the impact of the utilization of social media platforms in the spread of ideology by terrorist groups; 2) What are the terrorist incidents involving the use of social media platforms?; and 3) How can the Department of National Defense (DND), Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), and Philippine National Police (PNP) deter and counter terrorist recruitment through social media?

MAJOR CASE ISSUES

The global reach of internet has crossed borders, terrorist organizations took advantage of its intrinsic characteristics to achieve their strategic goals. Thus, this paper will discuss the utilization of social media platforms by terrorist groups for their recruitment purposes and operation process.

Social Media and Terrorism

The Concept of Terrorism

Based on several literature, it was highlighted that terrorism does not have a universally accepted definition. However, a discussion on its concept is crucial in eliminating ambiguity to prevent human rights violation and identify the proper legal measures if an action committed is an act of terror.[3]

Throughout the history, terrorism has undergone major changes in its definition based on political and social considerations[4] as it occurs in different contexts and forms.[5] According to Osorio (2018), various national security studies currently adopt the definition of terrorism as "*the premediated use of threat to use violence by individuals or subnational groups to obtain a political or social objective through intimidation of a large audience beyond that of the immediate noncombatant victim.*"[6]

However, it is important to note that the international community is unable to agree yet on the definition of terrorism, nonetheless, it has agreed on the acts that constitute terrorist offenses. The UN Security Council, in its resolution 1566 (2004), uses three cumulative criteria to characterize terrorism: (1) intent; (2) purpose; and (3) specific conduct, which consist of the following:

a. criminal acts, including against injury, or the taking of hostages; causing death or serious bodily injury;

b. regardless of whether motivated by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or similar nature, with the purpose of provoking a state of terror in the general public or in a group of individuals or particular individuals, intimidating a population or compelling a government or an international organization to carry out or to abstain from carrying out any act; and

c. which constitute offences within the scope of, and as defined in, the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism.[7]

It is apparent that the cumulative approach applied in resolution 1566 to define terrorism highlighted the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism in compliance with the rule of law.[8] It is important to note that the attempt to understand the notion of terrorism is vital since it is a threat that will continue to evolve and persist.

Social Media Platforms that Terrorist Use

While exploring the relationship between social media and terrorism, it is crucial to know the characteristics of social media. According to Hossain (2018), social media is an internet communication device which provide different features that enable users to quickly share content online and engage in fast-paced communication between users. Thus, the use of social media became popular among individuals and groups.[9] Based on statistics, there are around 4.65 billion people around the globe who actively use social media up to this date.[10] With the increasing number of users[11], it is evident that social media platforms has become one of the best and attractive ways for terrorist groups to conduct their operational communication, intelligence gathering, technical information sharing, training, and recruiting new members.[12]

Terrorist organizations have primarily relied on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, to spread their propaganda and actively recruit new members.[13] Facebook and Twitter remain to be the most crucial platform as it allows people to stay updated with different

issues. Because of it unique features to share, comment, react, and retweet information, users become more connected which makes it easier for terrorist groups to maximize their propaganda publicly. YouTube also plays an important role for propaganda purposes to politicize support and create powerful terror networks.

This has become a challenge to social media companies. Although they used sophisticated algorithms to improve search results and target advertising, their efforts to apply technology to root out contents that promote terrorist causes and recruit new members have been less successful.

The Internet therefore is becoming the virtual playground for violent extremist groups to reinforce their agenda.[14] Through these platforms, it allowed these groups to reach a wide variety of audience outside their geographical boundaries. Furthermore, scholars argue that social media continue to intensify and accelerate the process of radicalization as it allows anyone to access and publish information on the internet. Hence, it sped up the transmission of messages to a vast and globally distributed population.

According to Weimann (2014), the reason for this shift in trend lies in the fact that social media platforms are usually easier to run[15]; unrestricted regulation, censorship, or government controls; anonymity of information; fast flow of communication; low-cost maintenance of web presence[16]; and capability of reaching a larger audience.[17] Hence, social media has become a communication tool vital for terrorist groups to hide in plain sight.[18]

Terrorist Recruitment on Social Media Platforms

The post 9-11 global war on terror ultimately forced terrorist organizations to extensively exploit the concealment offered by the internet, particularly, social media platforms, in refining their strategy and coordinate their efforts in a rapid pace.[19]

Seib and Janbek (2011) explained that "communication is at the heart of terrorism", therefore, terrorist groups must maintain a constant flow of new recruits to remain effective and sustain ongoing operations.[20] Hence, the method and mode of communication is crucial.[21] In a general sense, violent extremist groups have incorporated social media platforms completely into their recruiting repertoire because it is effective to actively connect to a wider audience.[22]

Weimann believes that violent extremist groups have adapted hybrid communication structures. According to Chang (2018), at the top of the pyramid of terrorist groups consist of central leadership that crafts major media and message themes. They also initiate the communication chain. Just below them 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. Social media allow violent extremist groups to quickly communicate and widely distribute recruiting propaganda globally. Once propaganda is centrally created, it aligns with the overall agendas and goals, and it is distributed through online virtual supporter networks.[23]

Violent extremists groups can share seemingly benign posts or links to harmless videos throughout social media networks. Stein (2011) explains how recruiting propaganda is often hidden behind benign titles. By titling propaganda with innocent names, violent extremist groups can potentially attract attention from social media users that may be interested in weapons.[24] In this regard, the public is often unaware that they are already being virtually indoctrinated to violent propaganda and ideas. According to scholars, the process of continued exposure to propaganda is an attempt to normalize violence which can potentially invoke a violent response from new members.[25] This strategy is supported by the social learning theory[26] which asserts that individuals learn deviant behavior from groups which may lead to extremist learning. Scholars further argued that the mechanisms

of this theory are used by terrorist groups on social media platforms as a tool to facilitate attacks and recruitment. This perspective of deviant behaviors offers a thought-provoking insight into the processes that transform innocent individuals into violent extremists. Hence, social media platforms are creating a terror network.[27]

Considering these facts, several studies highlighted that the ease of online radicalization shows a significant increase in the involvement of large number of people globally. Terrorist groups are finding new and unique ways to appeal to a wider audience by disseminating curated messages and contents to recruit new members. Scholars pointed out that this danger would intensify since people around the world stays connected through social media and therefore often exposed to radically different viewpoints including extremist ideology.

Terrorist Incidents involving the use of Social Media

Scholars highlighted that terrorist attacks have increased drastically in recent years and social media had worsened the situation. The following cases present how terrorist groups are using social media platforms to recruit and attack in different states.

India is one of the South Asian countries where terrorist groups are trying to spread their ideology. In October 2017, a terrorist group in Kashmir has successfully recruited fifty (50) young individuals. One of the terrorist members admitted that they were using Facebook to connect with people to recruit them in his group. Given these facts, social media is becoming a useful tool to terrorist groups in spreading their ideologies and recruit new members.[28]

In Texas, USA, Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a US army officer, gunned down several people which left thirteen (13) killed and thirty-two (32) injured in the Fort Hood Army Base in 2009. This officer turned terrorist, is a supporter of Anwar al-Awlaki which was known as the bin Laden of the internet. The late al-Awlaki used various social media platforms such as Facebook, Blogs, and YouTube videos to recruit and develop a cadre of terrorists. His charismatic and stirring lectures earned him a growing corps of loyal internet followers across the globe. More importantly, he understood the intricacies of the internet and used it to disseminate his message overseas. Reports have shown that before the incident, Hasan attended his sermons on the internet as well as email exchanges between Hasan and al-Awlaki encouraging him to kill.[29]

Even European countries like Paris is susceptible to terror attacks. In 2017, three suicide bombers struck outside the Stade de France stadium which was followed by several bombings and shootings at various cafes and restaurants in the city. Hundreds of people were killed and injured. The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant claimed the responsibility for the attacks. Studies reported that the terrorist groups constructed the timeline of the attack using Twitter.[30]

In the case of the Philippines, some reports suggest that both the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Maute Group used social media and other online platforms for spreading their propaganda following the Marawi Siege in 2017.[31] Although there is no concrete evidence that these attempts were successful, it is evident that these groups utilized social media to recruit combatants from various countries as well as across Mindanao.[32] However, it is important to note that the extremist use of social media may provide international reach, but in practice, online interactions and networks in the Philippines typically mirror offline dynamics. This means that radicalization and recruitment often follow pathways that existed in the Philippines before social media existed.[33] Nonetheless, social media played a key role during the Marawi siege in enhancing recruitment of several members.

It is evident that there is a significant increase of terrorist incidents in the last few years involving the use of social media platforms as there is no universal regulation that may control the cyber world. Terror groups are becoming more organized

especially in targeting not only the Western world but also countries in Asia. The borderless flow of information from social media platforms paved way for violent extremist groups the ability to have their propaganda communicated in a more potent and instantaneous way with a lens of biased information to influence and manipulate wider population.[34] Apparently, terrorist groups have mastered the use of social media platforms to safeguard internal communications, radicalize new recruits, spread propaganda, and create virtual training camps and online education for its members and followers. Hence, it is making the situation more dangerous and challenging the peace and security of the world.[35]

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

This paper puts forward policy considerations as a contributing point to initiate further discussion to prevent the breadth of terrorist groups utilizing social media platforms.

Increase Awareness among Communities. Raise awareness among communities on how social media platforms are being used by terrorist groups to promote their agenda. Law enforcement agencies can use the whole-of-society approach to work directly with communities in sharing appropriate information and best practices in building their own capacity to disrupt and challenge online recruitment of terror groups.

Engagement and Collaboration with Social Media Companies. In the fight against terrorism, the DND and AFP should create cooperative strategies in initiating information exchange with social media companies and alert them of the characteristics which these companies can flag as suspicious intent related to terrorist activities. Thus, it can bring change in the society in upholding the peace and security of the country.

Adequate Training and Advanced Technological Instruments. The government should take initiative to provide law enforcement agencies and intelligence units proper training to develop their capabilities and equipped them with technological instruments to effectively deal with the threats and challenges of social media terrorists. The government should also ensure that these agencies and units are using these instruments in considering the protection of individual right to privacy, freedom of expression, and freedom of speech.[36]

Cooperation and Collective Action. It is apparent that terrorist group will continue to use social media platforms to spread their propaganda and operations. It will be difficult for security forces to keep up with the rapid advancements in technology. Therefore, it is imperative for the government to have a collective action and cooperation between and among domestic, regional, and international organizations for an exchange of perspectives on how to counter the threats of terrorism in social media.

Enhancement of Policies and Strategies. Along with other recommendations, the government should begin reviewing its existing laws and institutional capacity to respond to violent extremist activities on social media. The 2017 Marawi Siege shows the insufficiency in cyber resiliency of the government. Given this fact, the government should consider crafting a clear strategy to the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012 and the National Action Plan for Countering Violent Extremism to meet the inevitable challenges of social media terrorism.[37]

CONCLUSION

It is apparent that terrorist groups have established their virtual center of operation through social media platforms to develop vital activities in pursuing their objectives. Social media has become a strategic tool to communicate and enact terrorism thereby revolutionizing its impact which is reflected to the increasing number of terrorist attacks around the globe.[38] This paper recommends some policy considerations for the DND, AFP, and PNP to develop their capabilities, both strategic

and technological, in addressing social media terrorism. At its core, the Philippine experience highlights the need for timely interventions in response to the opportunistic approach that violent extremist groups have taken advantage online.[39]

Johanna S. Adap is a Defense Research Officer I at the Research and Special Studies Division of the National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP). For comments and suggestions, please email johannaadap9@gmail.com.

Please scan the QR code to access our Feedback Form for your comments, opinions, and suggestions. Thank you very much and we look forward to hear from you!

[1] Mark D Chang. Trolling New Media: Violent Extremist Groups Recruiting Through Social Media. (Naval Post Graduate School, 2015). Accessed 27 February 2022, https://www.voxpol.eu/download/ma_thesis/Trolling-Media-Violent-Extremist-Groups-Recruiting-Through-Socal-Media.pdf

[2] Chad Patrick Osorio. Tackling Terrorism in the Philippines: Legal Policies Addressing this Non-Traditional Security Threat. Perspectives on Terrorism in the Philippine Context. University of the Philippines Law Center Institute of International Legal Studies (2018), 2.

[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] Walter Enders & Todd Sandler, The Political Economy of Terrorism (Cambridge Univ. Press 2nd ed. 2012), quoted in Chad Patrick Osorio, Perspectives on Terrorism in the Philippine Context, (University of the Philippines Law Center Institute of International Legal Studies, 2018), 5.

[5] Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach. Organization for Security and Co-operation (2014), 25-30. Accessed 20 June 2022, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/1/d/111438.pdf

[6] Op. cit., 5.

[7] Op. cit., 29-30.

[8] Martin Scheinin, Ten Areas of Best Practices in Countering Terrorism, (Sixteenth Session of the Human Rights Council, 2010), quoted in Preventing Terrorism and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that lead to Terrorism: A Community-Policing Approach. (Organization for Security and Co-operation, 2014), 30.

[9] Md Sazzad Hossian. Social Media and Terrorism: Threats and Challenges to the Modern Era. South Asian Survey 22(2) 136-155 (2018). doi:10.1177/0971523117753280

[10] Kepios quoted in Global Social media Statistics. Datareportal. Retrieved 21 June 2022, https://datareportal.com/social-media-users

[11] Op. cit., 139.

[12] Hegghammer, 2014, quoted in Hossain, Social Media and Terrorism: Threats and Challenges to the Modern Era(2018) 140.

[13] Cibra, op. cit., 2.

[14] Imran Awan. Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media. *Soci*al and Public Policy 54, 138–149 (2017). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-017-0114-0

[15] Vincenzo Cibra. "Social Media and Terrorist Organizations: Observing Success of Recruitment Through Social Media". Honors Undergraduate Theses. University of Central Florida (2017) 1. Retrieved 21 June 2022, https://stars.library.ucf.edu/honorstheses/288

[16] Op. cit., 26

[17] Cibra, op. cit., 1.

[18] Gabriel Weimann, Www.Terror.Net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet, United States Institute of Peace (2014) quoted in Mark D. Chang, Trolling New Media: Violent Extremist Groups Recruiting Through Social Media, 7.

[19] Alberto Miguel Urena Figueroa. Terrorist and Cyberspace: The Digital Battleground. (Master Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2018).

[20] Phillip Seib and Dana M. Janbek, Global Terrorism and New Media; The Post-Al Qaeda Generation (New York: Routledge, 2011), 17) quoted in Mark D. Chang,Trolling New Media: Violent Extremist Groups Recruiting Through Social Media.

[21] Chang, op. cit., 2.

[22] Chang, op. cit., 2-3.

[23] Op. cit., 8-9.

[24] Yael Stein, "Social Networks - Terrorism's New Marketplace," Genocide Prevention Now 7,
Summer (2011), 10. quoted in Mark D. Chang, Trolling New Media: Violent Extremist Groups Recruiting Through Social Media.

[25] Chang, op. cit., 13

[26] Tina Freiburger and Jeffrey Crane. A systematic examination of terrorist use of the internet. International Journal of Cyber Criminology, 2(1) (2008), 309–319 quoted in Awan, par 6.

[27] Awan, op. cit., par. 6.

[28] Hossain, op. cit., 145-146

[29] Seth G. Jones, Awlaki's Death Hits a-Qaeda's Social Media Strategy. RAND Corporation. Retrieved 22 June 2022, https://www.rand.org/blog/2011/09/awlakis-death-hits-al-qaedas-social-media-strategy.html

[30] Pooja N. Jain and Archana S. Vaidaya, Analysis of Social Media Based on Terrorism – A Review. Vietnam Journal of Computer Science., 8,1, (2021), 8. DOI: 10.1142/S2196888821300015

[31] Asia Foundation and Rappler, Understanding Violent Extremism: Messaging and Recruitment Strategies on Social Media in the Philippines. (2018) 14, 20; quoted in Rhoades and Helmus, (2018), 29.

[32] Ashley L. Rhoades and Todd C. Helmus. Countering Violent Extremism in the Philippines: A Snapshot of Curernt Challenges and Responses. RAND Corporation (2020), 29-30.

[33] Asia Foundation and Rappler, quoted in Rhoades and Helmus (2018), 29.

[34] Kajal Saxena. Social Media – A Tool for Terrorism?. Security Distillery (2022). Retrieved 22 June 2022, https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/social-media-a-tool-for-terrorism

[35] Hossain, op. cit., 147

[36] Hossain, op. cit., 149

[37] Asia Foundation and Rappler Inc, op. cit.,41

[38] Saxena, op. cit., par 5.

[39] Asia Foundation and Rappler Inc, op. cit., 40.