



THE TERRORIST PHENOMENON, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET. SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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The paper examines how terrorism uses social media and the internet, exploring the social and psychological implications of these modern media. Starting with an assessment of migration from print to online media, the paper highlights the particular impact of social networks, such as Facebook and X (e.g. Twitter), in the dissemination of terrorist information and propaganda. The study highlights cases such as that of ISIS, which used the online space to recruit thousands of individuals from around the world. The paper also explores the concept of “filter bubbles” through which social media algorithms facilitate the meeting and interaction between people with similar radical views, thus contributing to the polarization and radicalization of users. The paper argues that while the internet facilitates academic collaboration and rapid communication, it is also a source of threat, facilitating access to information that supports terrorist acts.

Keywords: *counter-terrorism; national security; social media; intelligence analysis; security policies; radicalization; propaganda.*

Introductory Considerations

This paper is titled *The Terrorist Phenomenon, Social Media and the Internet. Social and psychological implications*, aiming to critically assess the way in which online social networks and, in a broader sense, cyberspace together with the media, interact and are used in terrorist activities.

From the beginning, it is important to mention that, although the number and circulation of print media publications has decreased significantly in recent decades,

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at the same time as their popularity, people’s access to news and information has not experienced a direct-proportional trend. On the contrary, people’s access to the media has increased significantly with the popularization of the services offered through the Internet. According to a 2021 study, a total of 4.66 billion people were active users of the internet, of which 4.22 billion also actively used social networks on the internet (Statista.com, 2021). Social networks, such as *Facebook*, *X* (the former *Twitter*) and *Instagram*, allow users not only to connect with other users, but they constantly distribute news and press articles, according to their preferences. We can thus compare these data with others, provided by a study on the sales of printed publications in the United States of America, which revealed that they fell from an absolute record, around 60 million copies per week in the 70s and 80s, to an all-time low of only 24,299,333, in 2020. Thus, the initial hypothesis is confirmed, the migration of the population from written to online press articles being obvious (Barthell & Kristen, 2021).

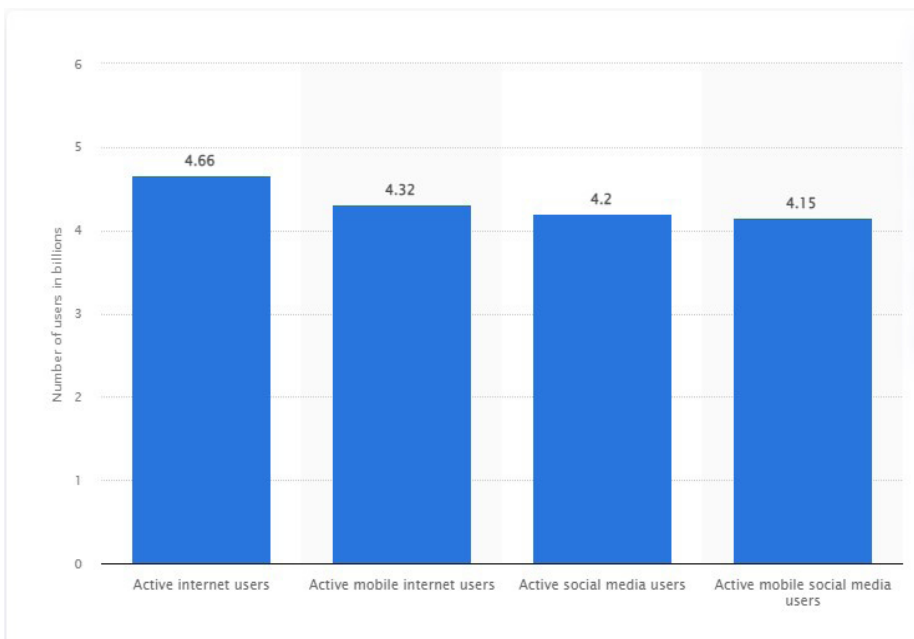


Figure no. 1: Digital population statistics, as of January 2021¹

This is probably due to a number of factors, the most relevant of which are the ease and speed with which they can be obtained and read, combined with the relatively low cost of this type of publication, or even free of charge, as anyone who already owns a device with internet can access an extremely large number of publications, as we have already stated, some of them are even free of charge and

¹ Source: <https://www.statista.com/>



have a good reputation, for example *The Guardian*, *BBC News* and *Reuters*, among others. Also, articles from these publications have been incorporated, as we have shown, into social networks, on which readers can react to by providing feedback or even comments and have debates on the topics of these articles. Thus, on the one hand, in a broader and theoretical sense, anyone who posts an article, a personal idea or other kind of information on one of these social networks, has theoretically the chance to have an audience of about 4 billion people. Obviously, such an ability to reach such a large number of people in a relatively short time has been unimaginable for many centuries, new discoveries in the field of information and communication technology making such a relatively recent achievement possible. Such a capacity can serve certain positive causes, making it possible to communicate over long distances by videoconferencing, for example, or to exchange ideas, scientific articles or results of studies, thus facilitating academic and scientific collaboration. On the other hand, those new technologies may be the victim of their own success, in particular if they serve to facilitate communication or to obtain information and instructions for the perpetration of certain anti-social, illegal or violent acts, in particular acts of terrorism, or for the publication of material enhancing the capacity for ideological propaganda, or acts committed by certain groups or individuals using such means. In the following, we will address exactly this fact, analyzing the ways of its use and its limits within the terrorist phenomenon.

1. Clarification of the Definition of Terrorism

In order to be able to undertake a rigorous process of academic research and analysis, I believe that an explanation is necessary, a definition of the terms with which we are going to operate.

In this regard, although terrorism still does not have an unanimously accepted definition by researchers and practitioners in the field of preventing and combating terrorism, for various reasons, we can nevertheless offer several elements considered particularly important, even essential, when we talk about the terrorist phenomenon. Thus, violence or the threat of violence, exercised by groups or individuals, who deliberately target civilians, non-combatants, in order to influence the actions of a target audience or a government, also wishing to have an impact on a wider audience than the target group, are common characteristics of terrorism, extracted from the works of several authors, experts in the field.

It is also common knowledge that terrorism, although it often involves physical violence, is essentially likely to have a greater psychological impact. Thus, killings and lethal terrorist attacks do not, in and by themselves, constitute an end, but rather a means to achieve an objective, namely to bring a particular issue to light, to make it known to the widest possible public and, indirectly, to call into question the legitimacy of a particular target government, underlining its inability to defend its citizens.



Nowadays, with an extensive number of people having access to the internet, social networks and mass media publications, in physical or online format, never in the history of the World has it been easier than information coming from a single source, reach such a large number of people. Thus, the characteristic of terrorism according to which violent actions serve as a means to achieve the ultimate objective of influencing the actions of a certain segment of the population or of a government, is facilitated precisely by this unprecedented access to the internet and to official or alternative means of information (Nacos, 2019) (Mingst & Arreguin-Toft, 2017).

2. The Process of Recruitment and Radicalization through the Online Environment

The virtual space serves not only for the rapid and extensive dissemination of information about the perpetration of certain violent acts of a terrorist nature, but also to facilitate the recruitment process of future members of terrorist organizations. According to statistics, the terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) which, since 2013, has committed numerous acts of terrorism and violence with the aim of seizing as much territory as possible in the targeted regions, trying to eventually create an Islamic Caliphate based on Sharia, has actively recruited in the online space, managing to reach a number of 40,000 foreign recruits from over 110 countries, which is due to the accelerated spread of internet access in the Middle East and Africa, but also in Europe, numerous recruits coming from countries such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany (Ward, 2018).

A study by Stanford University also found that Tweeter profiles and accounts associated with ISIS propaganda generally manage to post more content before being reported and terminated, compared to other types of suspended or terminated accounts. Moreover, given the fact that on social networks, in general, the interaction between users is facilitated or, sometimes, even conditioned by the pre-condition that they have the status of *acquaintance/ friends* (Alfifi & al., n.d.), we can assume that either there is a certain link between them even before the use of these social networks, which has a correspondent in the real world, or this link is created within these networks, in the virtual cyberspace, the corresponding link in the virtual world being created later. There is also the possibility that certain people, within certain social networks, belong to certain *Groups*, within which a sense of belonging is created, with a greater or lesser degree of awareness, and those *Filter bubble*, which we will detail a little later. Thus, the recruitment process is facilitated, recruits and recruiters already having a certain connection, real or perceived, making viable the theory that an explanation for terrorism lies in the social component. More specifically, it states that, in most cases, the recruiter is a known person or, at least,



familiar to the recruited, the actions and speech of the leader of the group having a greater impact on the decision to join, compared to the ideological and doctrinal particularities of the terrorist group. *In 88 % of cases where the nature of the link with the recruiter is known, he or she is not a stranger. In 44 percent of cases, he or she is a personal friend. In 22 %, he or she is a relative* (della Porta, 1995). Thus, through the existence of these *friendships* in the virtual environment, the meaning of the notions of *friendship* or *acquaintance* can expand dramatically, compared to the classical meaning, which limited them to the physical interaction between individuals, nowadays it is possible for a person to claim to be *a friend* with another, thousands of kilometers away and whom he has never physically met.

What is even more worrying that these social networks belong to a certain segment of cyberspace, namely the *surface web*, which accounts for only about 5 % of the total, which is the only one accessible by the general public. The remaining 95 % fall under *deep web* and *dark web* sections of the internet that are not widely accessible, are sometimes illegal to access, and require expert knowledge to access, representing more than 550 times more information than that available on the *surface web* (Montra.io). In these deep layers of the internet, organized criminal groups or terrorists, hackers and other entities that want to carry out activities generally outside the law or away from the eyes of the general public operate. Moreover, in the *dark web* space, the absolute anonymity of all those who access it is ensured, they can resort to illegal means of action against everyone, the services and sites also enjoying anonymity and transactions and exchanges that cannot be traced or monitored. In view of the above, i.e. this (Kaspersky.com) *Exclusive* of the majority segment of the internet, it is still impossible to quantify or analyze the precise role it plays in terrorist activities, but it certainly exists and poses a real threat.

However, even if, as we have seen, *Deep Web* and *dark web* facilitates, or even makes possible, interactions and transactions that would not be possible in the space open to the public, it is not necessary for those who want to commit certain terrorist attacks to access these restricted segments to find out information or to obtain guidance on, for example, the best methods to set fire to a room or the optimal way to build an Improvised Explosive Device. For example, organizations like ISIS not only have certain publications and even dedicated magazines published online, such as *Rumiyah* or *Naba*, but they even have a department specialized in social media and propaganda, in a very similar way to Hitler's Nazi regime, the equivalent of the propaganda minister at the time, *Joseph Goebbels*, Being *Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami* (Nacos, 2019).

Although it may seem that, in particular, religious terrorist groups publish such documents, news and propaganda online, other types of organizations also provide users with multiple means of information. For example, there is the website of the Animal Liberation Front, a group that aims to identify and counter violence against



animals, it is sometimes associated with what is also known as *eco-terrorism*, that is, violent actions to achieve the desired objectives or to bring to light injustices, real or perceived, in the field of ecology or animal protection. Inside this site, among others, a section entitled *ALF First*, where those interested can quickly and easily find out detailed information on how to destroy towers of telephone networks, how to build simple incendiary devices and how not to get caught by the police.



Figure no. 2: The functional layers of the Internet.
95% not accessible to the general public²

The Anarchists Manual or *Home Workshop Explosives* are examples of other books, available on sites such as *Amazon.com*, often attracting fewer positive comments from shoppers, such as this: *Almost all (except for some) of the things found here are accurate in the sense that they simply show you how to build something specific, but also in the sense that the way you are told what and how to do it will most likely lead to failure... If you really want to know how you can build explosive devices at home, you can try Home Workshop Explosives by Uncle Fester, that's what you need. This book presents techniques taken from military manuals over 30 years old (Amazon.com)!*

Thus, a person who already has certain sympathies towards a terrorist group, towards the ideology that underlies it or towards the acts he commits, simply, has an extremely wide range of information *just a click away*, to learn all about how to make a homemade bomb, for example, or how to commit an arson without being caught by the police. The next step, for some of them, is trying to find, on social networks, other people who share their point of view.

² Source: Montra.io



This is relatively easy to do, the algorithms of operation of these social platforms making it easy to meet people who have the same opinions as you and view only those news materials that confirm and enhance your opinions, even if they are radical. Moreover, if several users with a similar point of view interact regularly, the probability increases that they will confirm each other's opinions, thus creating those *filter bubbles*, which no longer allow information contrary to the personal points of view already created to reach the users, who eventually have the impression that the contrary information simply no longer exists, or, if they exist, they are not popular or are believed only by a minority of individuals. Thus, it can create what we today call *exaggerated polarization* of the population, or it can even lead to radicalization.

3. Press Reports and the Perception of the Terrorist Threat

Certainly, the first and most shocking propaganda video of ISIS was represented by the video of about five minutes in which the assassin who would later be named *Jihadi John*, cut off the head of the American journalist James Foley. Committed with unprecedented violence and streamed on *YouTube*, it shocked the world, unfortunately representing the first of a long series of such videos showing how infidels and those who oppose the Islamic State will die. Still, this initial video served as a huge catalyst for the newly established terrorist group, with press reports and mentions of its name doubling in the months that followed.

Table no. 1: Press reports with and about ISIS before and after the publication of the video of the beheading of J. Foley³

	<i>Month Prior to Beheading (July 18–August 18, 2014)</i>	<i>Month Following Beheading (August 19–September 19, 2014)</i>
<i>New York Times</i>	124	375
<i>Newsweek</i>	3	15
CNN.com	45	296

In view of these facts, we can identify a preliminary conclusion, namely that the materials, in particular video or photo, have the potential to bring certain groups out of anonymity and to bring them to the attention of the public and, with them, the objectives and issues they promote, thus serving the dual role of both informing the following public, as well as to lead to the fulfillment of the operational objectives of the terrorists, namely that the information about the atrocities committed reaches the widest possible audience, influencing as many people as possible.

³ Source: Marissa Young (2015)



This seems to lend credence to the theory that more authoritarian and repressive regimes are better at deterring terrorist acts because they are able to impose measures that sacrifice certain citizens' rights in order to achieve security, and the fact that the flow of information can be relatively easily controlled within them, there is a possibility that news about committing a terrorist act will never spread in mass, the primary objective of the attackers being thus defeated.

In Figure no. 3 we will be able to observe the trend that indicates something somewhat intuitive, namely that peoples' perception of the importance and centrality of the terrorist problem is influenced and relatively directly-proportional to the number of news articles with and about terrorist acts.

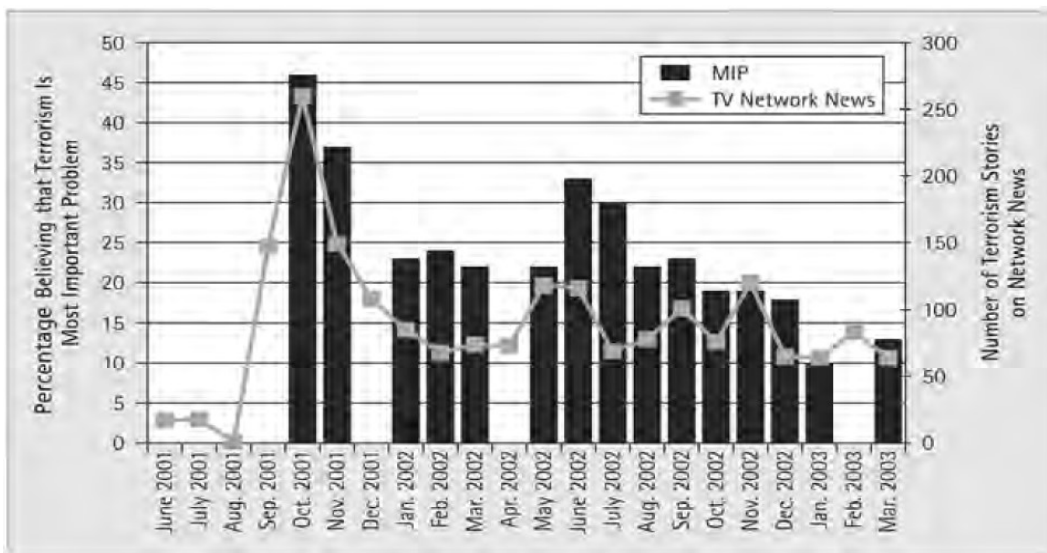


Figure no. 3: Perception of the terrorist threat in relation to the amount of news about terrorist acts⁴

Thus, we can say that the actions of terrorists can get disproportionately high attention, if their online strategies are corroborated with a particularly high attention of national news agencies. These terrorist acts manifest on two levels, one micro, national, in which the press, the public and the national government are influenced, the second being the macro, international, in which the international press, the public and governments are influenced, the relationship between the two levels being a complex and interconnected one, as shown by the graph below.

⁴ Source: (Norris, et al., 2003)

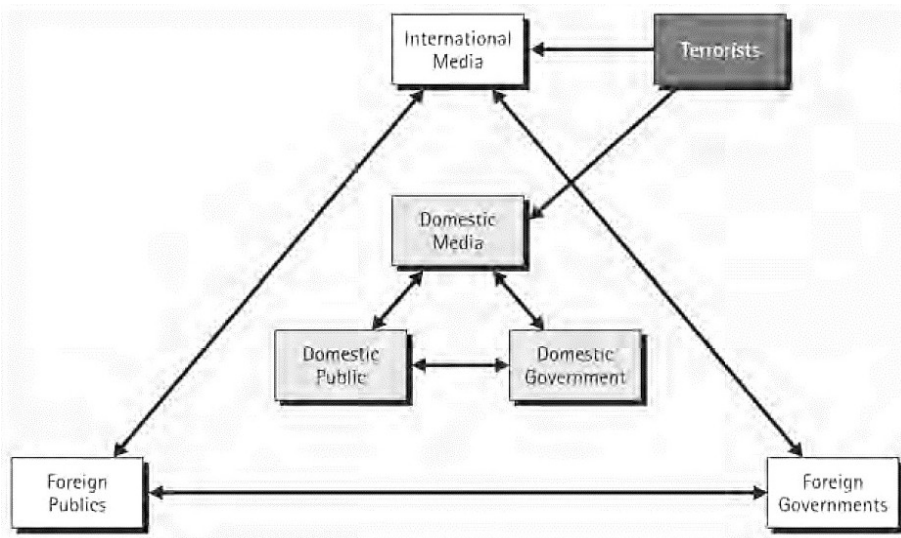


Figure no. 4: Terrorism and the Triangle of Political Communication⁵

The Psychological Dimension of Radicalization through Social Media

From a psychological perspective, radicalization through social media is a process that exploits fundamental human vulnerabilities such as the need for belonging, validation, and significance. Social networks allow users to quickly find communities that reflect their pre-existing opinions and beliefs, thereby enhancing a sense of belonging. In many cases, individuals going through this process first experience an identity crisis, followed by a search for a greater cause or a group that provides them with a clear purpose and direction (Horgan, 2008).

Relative deprivation theory suggests that the feeling of social or economic marginalization plays a key role in radicalization. Those who feel deprived of the social or economic opportunities others have may become more vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Social media exacerbates this perception, as users are often exposed to images and narratives that confirm their resentments and frustrations, thereby reinforcing a sense of “us versus them” (Moghaddam, 2005). The social validation mechanism is extremely important in this context. Social platforms create an environment where psychological rewards (such as “likes” and positive comments) reinforce individuals’ ideas and behaviors. In the process of radicalization, extremist sympathizers receive validation and approval from other group members, which strengthens their beliefs and encourages them to more firmly adhere to the extremist ideology (Della Porta, 1995).

The echo chamber, a phenomenon widely discussed in social psychology, is an effect amplified by social media algorithms. These echo chambers restrict users’

⁵ Source: (Nacos, 2019)



experiences to content that confirms their existing beliefs, reducing their exposure to opposing opinions and contributing to extreme polarization. In this way, users come to believe that their opinions are widely shared, while contradictions become rare and less visible (Sunstein, 2001). Another essential aspect is the emotional impact of visual propaganda, such as violent videos or news that trigger strong emotional reactions. Studies have shown that materials evoking intense emotions, such as fear or anger, can accelerate the radicalization process, as these emotions reduce the capacity for critical thinking and facilitate the adoption of a radical attitude (Frijda, 1986).

These psychological dimensions explain why social media has become a powerful tool in the radicalization process. Easy access to radicalized communities, along with mechanisms of emotional reward and social validation, makes vulnerable users more easily influenced and more likely to adopt extremist ideologies with less internal resistance.

Conclusion

As we have shown, violent terrorist actions aim not only to actually commit them, but to influence a wider audience, much more numerous than the target audience of terrorist attacks. This was, and still is, best served by the media reports of traditional news companies. However, with the technological progress of recent decades, the internet and the large interconnected global network it possesses are beginning to serve these objectives of terrorist groups more and more. In addition to this, the internet proves to be an almost endless source of resources and information that can be used to commit violent and/or illegal acts. Thus, in addition to the obvious benefits it brings to users, it also represents a possible source of threat to them. Given the new capabilities, particularly Artificial Intelligence ones, which are constantly developing, it is important to follow how public policies aimed at the field of national security will keep up with the fulminant technological advance and the imminent threats and risks it entails, including from the point of view of terrorism.

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