

Bob Ash

## **How Effective Is Online Terrorist Propaganda?**

**War between man has existed since the beginning of mankind. Each side of conflict performs military operations in order to defeat their adversary. This is the first thought that comes to a person's mind when there is war amongst two or more parties. However, there are many aspects to war besides physical battle. One aspect of war is that of psychology. Usually, a large amount of resources are given to the psychological tactics of a war. Usually, this aspect of war is used in order to influence the minds and thoughts of people.**

**All groups have used this form of warfare in the past via the technological tools that have been available to have their influence spread to the masses (Television and Radio). Influence is still spread to the masses as the progression of time has allowed new technologies to be introduced. Influence or otherwise known as "Propaganda" is now used in a medium that has existed for us in the past decade or so. The Internet is now used as an effective tool in order to dictate the ideas and goals of an organization. Government and terrorist organizations use the Internet effectively in order to wage battle against each other and to influence thought process.**

**I have been intrigued by the fact that these groups use this new medium to influence. I have based my research on this topic. The research that I have performed will suggest how effective on line terrorist propaganda is. The research that is presented will be broken down into four main parts. 1) Terrorists use of the Internet, 2) The influence of terrorist propaganda on people, 3) Efforts to curtail terrorist propaganda and finally, 4) the outcome of terrorist propaganda (success or failure).**

### **1) Terrorist Use of the Internet**

**Terrorists use of the Internet has increased substantially over the last 10 years or so. This is evident since there were only less than 100 web sites that existed at the beginning of the last decade. Today, there are over 4000 web sites that are maintained by known terrorist organizations (Kaplan, 2009). These sites are used in order to broadcast a number of messages to the masses. These web sites serve many functions. They offer instruction of techniques on how to build bombs killing soldiers and even how to join the battle against the enemy. These web sites are also used as a tool to raise money for their efforts. These sites also include footage of bombings that have been carried out. Hostage footage can also be seen on their web sites.**

**These sites are viewed by a large portion of society in such places like Iraq (Kaplan, 2009). The target audience is not only to spread their propaganda to their supporters but also to sympathizers and their enemies. (Weimann, 2008, p.75). The Internet is appealing to these groups since the Internet is**

accessible to those that would like to use it. The use of these web sites offers stealth. It is difficult to locate those that have created the sites since the Internet is decentralized. Organizations that run these sites are Internet savvy. They use sophisticated encryption tools that hide messages such as e-mail and graphic files that can only be accessed by those who have a proper password (Kaplan, 2009). Terrorist groups such as Hamas and Al Qaeda also use forms of communication on the Internet such as e-mail chat rooms, e-groups, forums and message boards and instant message in order for them to spread their propaganda. (Weimann, 2008, p.76). The intention of this propaganda is to seek the decline of support for their enemies and to seek a change in public opinion in order to gain more support of their efforts.

## **2) The influence of terrorist propaganda on people**

It is well documented that terrorists have gained support for their efforts by the use of the Internet. The rhetoric of these web sites has influenced their intended target of potential supporters. A British study regarding Islamist propaganda on British Muslims in 2008 (Baines, O' Shaughnessy, Moloney, Richards, Butler & Gill, 2010) discovered that 13 percent of British Muslims were sympathetic to suicide bombers that carried out a suicidal terrorist attack in the U.K. in 2005. They looked upon these four individuals that carried out the attacks as martyrs. A lower percentage of 7% British Muslims indicated that attacks against U.K. civilians can be justified under certain circumstances. This study has led U.K. authorities to believe that propaganda from media sources such as Internet sites has an influence on a segment of the population. A population segment that is generally sympathetic to the cause of the terrorist. The segment of society that can be radicalized by terrorist groups.

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This study also focused on discovering the type of person that could be lead to into performing service for these groups. The study touched upon

personality traits. Personality trait boredom to the allure of excitement can bring arousal to certain segments of a population. The terrorists influence their potential subjects by using these psychological methods. These methods have been used during contact seasons via chat rooms and e-mail. Those that seek to contact potential participants have been likened to predators.

One such victim of contact with a known terrorist was Haris Ahmed (Thomas, 2010) Haris was drawn into a site that appeared to innocently enough to be a site where Muslims would share religious texts amongst each other. It looked to be innocent enough on the surface. However, information exchange would soon turn into anti-Western rhetoric. Brainwashing techniques would begin and applied by the web master Aabid Hussain Khan. Aabid Hussain Khan soon influenced Haris Ahmed to become an aspiring terrorist that planned to wage a biological attack in Atlanta, Georgia. The terror plot was foiled and both men have been tried and convicted and are currently serving long-term sentences in prison. This is just one example of how terrorists have used the Internet in order to make contact with potential recruits. Simply, they use their rhetoric in order to influence other in order to justify their actions as a terrorist and dehumanize their potential victims. Dehumanizing their potential recruits by brainwashing these young minds to think of western people as "lowly people" and that they must be destroyed due to a "holy imperative". (Weimann, 2008,p.80)

### **3) Efforts to curtail terrorist propaganda**

Efforts to curtail the spread of terrorist propaganda on the Internet have been underway since the terror attacks of 2001. The United States has made an effort to counter attack the efforts of terrorists by a number offering alternative information and taking steps to influence the minds of people in the Western and Middle Eastern world. The United States has also attempted to remove such site from the Internet.

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The United States has attempted to "collect, shape, process and disseminate an uninterrupted flow of information while exploiting or destroying an adversary's ability to do the same"(Winseck, 2008, p. 424). The United States has used their influence to achieve the same goals as the terrorists seek. Their goal is to change opinion. The United States has created ties with Muslim media and think tanks in order to achieve this goal. All information on the main television network's web site is

controlled by the Pentagon. The Pentagon influences public opinion by interjecting stories that have a pro-Western edge. The web site/television station reaches 80% of the Iraqi population. The United States has spent well over \$400 million dollars on this resource that includes web sites and blogs.

The United States has also attempted to influence media networks that they do not control. Media networks that are considered main stream in the Middle East have at times felt the wrath of the United States. The United States has disrupted the flow of information from networks such as Al Jazeera by bombing their facilities. It is clear that the United States does not favor opposition in any form (Kellner, 2004). The United States has developed a characterized on their propaganda web sites an adversary that is evil and has cast their values as universally accepted" (Winseck, 2008, p. 427). Therefore, creating a distinction between the terrorists and themselves.

4) The outcome of terrorist propaganda (success or failure).

It is difficult to ascertain who is winning the war of information on the Internet since both sides claim victory. However, it is clear that the United States has been successful in disrupting the influence of such terror groups since the their ideas have never been taken into the main stream of middle eastern society. The message of hate only engages a small percentage of a population as stated in the British Muslim research project. The United States has been successful in disrupting the flow of terrorist propaganda since they have partnered with Muslim media networks and think tanks. There has been a thinning of the ranks (Boot, 2008) of prominent terror networks due to their ideas not taking hold and also with the elimination of prominent figures within terrorist networks. Everyone has been aware of the deaths of such prominent terrorist figures such as Osama bin Laden. However, the recent death of Anwar al-Awlaki has been a huge blow in anti-Western propaganda since Anwar was in charge of propaganda via the internet (Tapper, 2011). Anwar, also known as the "Osama bin Laden" of the internet was internet savvy and used the media forums of Youtube.com and other social networking sites in order to influence. His death has been a huge blow to the Al Qaeda's motives. Therefore, terrorist propaganda has not been as effective on the Internet as much as terror groups would have liked it to be.

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Influence of information has always been a tool in regards to warfare. Even Napoleon understood the fact that people can be influenced by propaganda since he was stated as stating that "three hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets"(Mcluhan, 1994, p. 205). It is clear that war will always exist. All mediums have and always will be used in order to promote ideas for the end goal of influencing minds. Today, we have the Internet that is used as such a tool. Tomorrow it may be another medium in combination with the Internet and other contemporary mediums.

#### **References:**

**Tapper, J. (2011,September). The terrorist notches on obama's belt. ABC NEWS, Retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2011/09/the-terrorist-notches-on-obamas-belt/>**

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