

## The Use of Social Media by Terrorists

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### Recommended Citation

Balk, Jan; Clarke, Benjamin; and Stembler, Charles () "The Use of Social Media by Terrorists," *Student Papers in Public Policy*. Vol. 3 : Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/sppp/vol3/iss1/1>

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# The Use of Social Media by Terrorists

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HONR 399: *Security, Technology, and Society* | Spring 2021

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## Introduction

With the rise of digital technology, particularly social media, terrorist groups have gained a valuable new tool for furthering their goals. Terrorist propaganda, for the purposes of this brief, is defined as any video, picture, post, or any other form of media posted to the internet to further the cause of the terrorist organization, such as recruitment or communication with followers around the world. The manipulation of technology by non-state actors is not a new phenomenon; however, social media and other new digital technologies have proven a valuable resource for many terrorist organizations. Not only have terrorist groups been adept in using new technologies such as Twitter, Bitcoin, and small drone aircraft, but the use of new technologies has also fundamentally changed their methods of operation [1]. This issue leads us to ask how the interaction between terrorist groups and emerging digital technologies has created challenges in the counterterrorism landscape of the twenty-first century? In this brief, we specifically address these three questions: (1) how have terrorist groups used social media to further their causes, (2) how has the use of social media changed the operating nature of these groups, and (3) what are governments doing to protect against it? We also suggest policy to counter this emerging threat.

## Current Policy

While social media platforms, such as Twitter, actively work to ban accounts spreading terrorist propaganda, there are accounts or messages that are missed. Currently, most governments rely on these platforms self-policing and the companies themselves are largely shielded from legal risk if their services are used for nefarious purposes. In the United States, this regulation occurs under Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act [2]. Large social media companies rely primarily on automated and manual content moderation, done by the community and professional moderators.



In Canada [3] and the European Union [4], a stricter requirement is imposed that content be immediately removed; failure to do so can lead to legal action. Other methods, such as counter-messaging, have been attempted on a small scale, such as the U. S. State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" program [5], but found limited effectiveness. The current policy consisting mainly of in-platform content moderation efforts prevents mainstream social media from becoming a major propaganda outlet, but many other channels are still available to terrorists on these platforms.

## Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

Unlike traditional methods, terrorists' social media use has the potential to reach or influence a far larger number of people, as an estimated 3.96 billion people use social media [6]. This potential audience presents a massive risk, leaving a huge number of people susceptible to radicalization. In addition to mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, there are many lesser-known forms of social media, including the dark web. All of these can be dangerous when used by terrorists. For example, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), used a mobile app called "Dawn of Glad Tidings" to not only update followers but hijack their twitter accounts for propaganda purposes [5]. All of these strategies come together to allow terrorist propaganda to propagate, increasing the likelihood that it reaches individuals vulnerable to radicalization, who may then support the terrorist cause. Additionally, there is risk of the terrorist message becoming normalized, granting the group additional legitimacy.

While dangers of social media are often discussed, it has numerous benefits to society in its relatively short existence. There may be a temptation to eliminate or restrict it heavily but would be counterproductive and remove many of the benefits, discussed below. A social media benefit is that it has enabled almost every person to connect with a wider range of people. This connection has manifested in the formation of communities enjoyed by millions, built around common interests, from television series to astrophysics, which has positive effects on mental health [7]. Additionally, it has empowered small businesses by reducing the cost of targeted advertising [8] and provided individuals with ways to accelerate their careers through sites like LinkedIn.

Content moderation on social media also comes with unique ethical considerations. The most discussed is large companies' power to restrict individual access to the global exchange taking place on social media. It can often be necessary for companies to take action when dangerous content is being spread. Many people do not trust for-profit corporations to police speech, particularly regarding domestic matters; between July 2020 and January 2021 Twitter banned 70,000 accounts affiliated with "QAnon" [9]. "QAnon" is a collection of conspiracy theories holding, among other things, that former President Trump was battling a secret group of elites who control the U.S. government. This situation was further complicated when former President Trump was banned from Twitter after the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. This action raises concerns about who has the power to deny social media usage, as it becomes a more critical form of communication.

## Associated Costs

Any response to the use of social media by terrorists carries with it a set of costs. These costs can come in many forms, such as societal, financial, and political. A policy which is more lax on this issue would incur costs associated with the increased success of terrorist propaganda. This “success” includes financial costs for security from this new threat, societal cost in the form of exposing civilians to radicalization, and political cost in the form of the government appearing weak. Being too aggressive entails risks of its own, however. One concern intrinsic to the regulation of speech, particularly of citizens, is that of government overreach and the formation of a “big-brother” or “police” state. In addition to content moderation being fairly expensive [10], free speech and expression is a cornerstone of Western identity. Governments, such as China’s, have implemented expansive social monitoring programs that make it far easier to regulate the behavior of its citizens, but this is often not done in good faith [11]. Programs monitoring civilians have faced strong criticism in the U.S., and it is likely that any expansion in surveillance would prompt widespread repercussions, which is a huge political cost to consider.

## Policy Alternatives and Recommendations

As previously discussed, stopping terrorist propaganda online is very difficult. Of the 4.2 billion social media accounts in the world [12], it is practically impossible to monitor every account, view every post, and watch every video on social media. The United States government understands this is a daunting task. Additionally, the government is also required to respect the First Amendment and free speech, and the

values embodied therein. One alternative to the current policy is to increase the accountability of social media companies. For example, there is some discussion that social media companies should be charged with Aiding and Abetting with regards to terrorist propaganda online, if they allow it to be spread on their platforms.

Essentially, this means that, in addition to the Communications Decency Act, social media companies could be held responsible for assisting terrorist groups to spread violent messages if companies are found to be aiding this behavior, including through intentional negligence. While it could be difficult to prove that companies knew about certain content, it stiffens the penalty that companies could incur, which would provide a stronger incentive to police content on their platforms.

*“Imposing responsibility on social media companies punishes their hesitation to self-censor and the facilitation of terrorist activity which follows. Aiding and abetting provides the best conduit for implementing liability against social media companies because it focuses on the “facilitation” role their lack of self-censorship plays in the promotion of (terrorist content)...In essence, holding social media companies responsible through aiding and abetting would copy the changes made in the U.S. for the Communications Decency Act.” [13]*

## Conclusion

The danger posed by terrorists using social media to augment their capabilities is clear. While the United States and other Western nations have been somewhat successful in combating the spread of dangerous online content, there is still much work to be done. As laid out in this brief, the solution to this problem must be nuanced enough to remove dangerous

content while respecting the civil liberties that have become core to Western identity. This solution likely has elements of increased regulation and accountability for the providers of these novel digital services. Additionally, a solution also involves elements of increased use of these same technologies against terrorist groups. In successfully implementing improved policy to match the dangers posed by social media there are clear benefits to a nation's security, society, and economy, making this implementation imperative.

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