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Social Media and Terrorism

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Abstract: This paper examines the exploitation of the power of social media by terrorists in disseminating propaganda and recruitment, and explores the implications of the possibility of keeping the terrorists out of social media through the lens of the law and ethic.

Introduction

In October 2009, Colleen LaRose, also known as Jihad Jane, was arrested in Philadelphia International Airport after she returned from Europe allegedly trying to conspire with others to assassinate Lars Viks, the Swedish cartoonist who outraged Muslims around the world for drawing a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad.[i] What is unique about this case is, before leaving the country, LaRose had converted from a typical hometown American woman into a Muslim Extremist without any direct contact with Islam or other Muslim extremists other than watching the propaganda videos posted on YouTube.[ii]

There lies the power of the social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, which have become the most popular vehicles for terrorists to "blast" its messages to the world's audience, be it for recruitments or propaganda.[iii] Most recently, ISIS, by far one of the most violent terrorist organizations in the world, has been leveraging social media to display its blatant brutality by posting videos purporting beheadings of its hostages to make demands or threats against other nations and its adversaries. As of November 16, 2014, there have now been five recorded executions of Westerners.[iv] ISIS recently even used social media to "debut" its Hollywood style propaganda video called "Flames of War" that "must have been a very compelling teaser for any young Muslim men looking for excitement and adventure."[v] The immediate reaction for most would be "There has got to be a way to stop this!" This reaction is rational as all of us would be happy to see an end to this so that innocent people, such as LaRose, would not become radicalized and turn against their own country under deceived and misguided circumstance. However, keeping the terrorists from social media in this Internet age proves to be easier said than done. In this paper, I will explore the implications of the possibility of keeping the terrorists out of social media through the lens of the law and ethic.

The Power of Social Media

Social media has seen its phenomenal growth in popularity in recent years. YouTube boasts one billion

users in 2014 with 100 hours of video uploaded per minute and over four billion views per day![vi] What is powerful about YouTube is not just a site for storing videos, but the social networking capability that comes with it. Terrorists could monitor conversations of their videos after posting them, could reach out and recruit those who sympathize their cause. With a click of a button, they could monitor the number of times the videos have been viewed, when they are viewed, from which countries, whether they become a subscriber or not, and even the gender of the viewers. The same analytics that give advertisers the ability to gauge the effectiveness of their marketing campaigns benefit the terrorists in the same manner.

Facebook, another hugely successful social media site, has 1.3 billion monthly active users with 640 million minutes spent each month and more than 54 million of Facebook pages, as of June 2014.[vii] Similar to YouTube, Facebook provides analytics for pages such as visit count, number of Page Likes, time when a page is viewed, detailed demographic information of the viewers including gender, age, country and language.

Anyone could open an account with YouTube and Facebook with an email address and be able to start publishing contents right away at no cost. It is fast and easy; it is free; and best of all, the users behind the contents can remain anonymous. Indeed, 90 percent of terrorist online activity takes place using social media tools.[viii] Social media has become the fertile ground for Islamic extremists and their success has caught many people off-guard including the U.S. government.[ix] In a 2008 intelligence report released by the U.S. Army's 304th Military Intelligence Battalion, a chapter titled "Potential for Terrorist Use of Twitter," claimed that Twitter, another social media tool, has been used for both pro and anti-Hezbollah and terrorists could use Twitter to plan and coordinate attacks.[x]

Law

Let us first examine the terrorist use of social media from the law's perspectives. Is posting extremism or violence-promotional videos considered freedom of speech? The First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects freedom of speech.[xi] Further, the right to freedom of expression is recognized as a human right under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly.[xii] However, freedom of speech does not bestow the right for libel, slander, hate, and incitement among others that are typically determined by using John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle, which is widely, adopted as the "litmus test" for free speech.[xiii] So the answer is it depends if the posted videos "prevent harm to others" as stated in the Harm Principle. For the videos that incite violence, clearly this is not free speech. In fact, most social media sites have rules against posting such messages, but the effort large depends on end users to take action first by flagging the videos.[xiv] For those that pass the Harm Principle, social media sites are likely to keep them online since they violate no rules or laws. Indeed, Google fought to defend them even when under pressure from U.S. lawmakers. In 2008, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut tried to pressure YouTube to remove videos from what he labeled as "Islamist terrorist organizations and their supporters." YouTube removed the ones that promoted hate speech and graphic violence and leave those that meet its guidelines intact. This resulted in an angry letter sent from the Senator to the CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, demanding the rest of the videos be removed immediately. Nevertheless, the deputy general counsel of Google, Nicole Wong and her colleagues responded by saying, "YouTube encourages free speech and defends everyone's right to

express unpopular points of view."[xv]

What about passing a law to ban any publication from known terrorist groups regardless of contents? Clearly, this option could potentially save lives. Incidentally, the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs led by Senator Lieberman issued the Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat in 2008 concluding that "…no cohesive and comprehensive outreach and communications strategy in place to confront this threat…that there is no plan to harness all possible resources including adopting new laws…" Even if a law was crafted, I am doubtful that it would pass constitutionality.[xvi]

Ethic

From the ethical perspectives, do social media companies have the responsibility to do the right things? While companies removed the contents that are not free speech fairly quickly, should they just shut down all accounts that liken to terrorists and extremists regardless of whether or not their contents violate the Harm Principle? Would this be more proactive in preventing harm to others? What about the media that in some way help amplify the terrorist messages by reporting and rebroadcasting them? When I went to YouTube looking for the ISIS beheading videos, I was not able to find the original, but the edited versions (beheading frames removed) by the media abound.

Most ethical rules call for enhancement of human dignity, peace, happiness, and well-being.[xvii] Kantianism, a form of deontological ethics, calls for universalizing a maxim that is based on rationality as the ultimate dutifulness. Humanity should be treated not as a means to an end, but always as an end (Baase, 2013, p. 29). Social media sites are for-profit companies and they need user-generated contents in order to attract other users to come to the sites. One may think that selectively removing contents associated with terrorists and extremists is considered a means to an end. That is to remove non-free speech contents while keeping free speech online so that other people can read them and thus generating more profits for the company through advertising (more people, more money). However, shutting down accounts indiscriminately without consideration of contents could also go against Kantianism because people deserve a universal right to speak up for their concerns. By establishing the "rule of engagement", that is what can and cannot be published, social media companies level the playing field so that everyone has a single set of rules to follow and no one should have special treatments. This places the social media companies in a neutral position, away from political, religious, and other bigotries that for-profit companies would rather eschew.

Consider this hypothetical example of a social media site created by an Islamic minority group in Syria with the goals of exposing the inhumane and brutal treatments of minority by the Bashar al-Assad regime and seeking help for humanitarian aids for their destitute livelihood. They call ISIS and other Islamic militant groups their "brothers" because they share a common enemy, but at no time condone or incite violence as a means to achieve their goals. Should the social media company take down their site? Kantianism would say no because humanity should be well treated universally and rational being would argue that mistreating other people based on their ethnicity is evil. Therefore, providing them a place to voice their plights is ethically acceptable. From this angle, Google had it right when they pushed back on Senator Lieberman's request to remove the contents he did not like.

In contrast with deontology, Utilitarianism is a type of ethics that consider utility, which is the gain or loss of affected parties' values because of the consequences.[xviii] The principle of utility is that an action is good to the extent that it increases the happiness of the parties in aggregate. Would taking down terrorist and extremist social media sites regardless of contents increase utility, meaning the benefit gained outweighs the drawback? To answer the question, we will need to examine the intents of the contents. For those violent contents that incite fear and promote brutality, they clearly increase the publishers' utility but not the readers. In the context of social media, we can safely assume that the audience is worldwide and thus the utility gained by the publishers would be one-sided.

Let us also look at the same hypothetical example cited above. Taking down such a site would definitely reduce the utility of this Islamic minority group, but it does not necessarily increase or decrease the utility of everyone else. For this reason, Utilitarianism would argue that it is unethical to take this site down because utility is decreased.

What about ethical responsibility of the media? Should they "advertise" the violent videos such as those published by ISIS and help them disseminate their propaganda in the course of reporting the news? It would be irrational to deny the benefits of the media in their societal role to bring about information, facts and stories that are informative and beneficial to readers. After all, the framers of the U.S. Constitution recognized the importance that they put the freedom of the press in the constitution to protect it. However, media could opt for self-censorship by refusing to rebroadcast certain contents such as those posted by ISIS. Recently, Al Jazeera, a Doha based 24-hour news channel, decided not to show any images of ISIS video and suggested other media to do that same, even created a hashtag #ISISmediaBlackout.[xix]

A 1994 survey taken by *Times*/Mirror Center for the People and the Press (now the Pew Center) shows 82 percent French, 71 percent British, 68 percent Canadian and 60 percent Americans supported censorship to discourage terrorism.[xx] However, as with the First Amendment argument, Terrorists win if we give up our right and freedom. As the late Professor Paul Wilkinson, a world authority in in International Relations and a pioneer of the study of terrorism, said "It is widely recognized that it is important to avoid the mass media being hijacked and manipulated by terrorists, but if the freedom of the media is sacrificed in the name of combating terrorism one has allowed small groups of terrorists to destroy one of the key foundations of a democratic society."[xxi]

Conclusion

Social media is the cheapest, easiest, yet extremely effective way for terrorist to flaunt their propaganda and will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future. Attempts to quash freedom of speech and freedom of the press in an effort to suppress the terrorist's communication are counterproductive, unjustifiable, and counter to the values of the framers of the U.S. Constitution. If we give up our right, the terrorists win. Cutting off our freedom is never a right answer.

The presence of violent extremists and their propaganda on the Internet actually does provide law enforcement agencies the ability to monitor their online communications to gain intelligence and gather evidence. Homeland Security Project by the Bipartisan Policy Center issued a report in 2012 titled "Countering Online Radicalization in America" shedding light on the importance of monitoring terrorist online communication that "…trying to understand the conversations that happen online and who is

involved may be just as important as spying on the terrorist group's leadership…" (Homeland Security Project, 2012). Recognizing the importance of monitoring extremists' online communication, the White House also issued the "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States" calling for investment in intelligence to understand this threat including "closely monitor[ing] the important role the Internet and social networking sites play in advancing violent extremist narratives."[xxii]

Government should promote awareness to the public, especially young people, to challenge extremist narratives right in the hotbed of social media and minimize the potentials for radicalization. Although the onslaughts of social media propaganda caught authority by surprise, they are slowly responding to the challenge. Recently, the Department of State created the "Think Again Turn Away" Facebook site[xxiii] and the Twitter account[xxiv] to expose ISIS' crime and urge sympathizers and followers to reject ISIS.

The Homeland Security Project's "Countering Online Radicalization in America" is another example of the government's balanced approach in dealing with this "new frontier" by reducing the supply and demand, and exploiting cyberspace.[xxv] To reduce supply, the report recommended that government should refrain from engaging wholesale censorship while retaining the capability to aggressively take down websites only if they are foreign-based and when absolutely essential to stop an attack to prevent the loss of life. On reducing demand, the government should invest in partnership with educators, parents, and communities to create awareness about online radicalization and to become more effective and creditable messengers. Finally, exploiting cyberspace requires the increase in cyberspace training for law enforcement agencies so that they are better equipped and ready to respond to online threats. Further, the clarification of legal framework in terms of when and how government is permitted to monitor and collect online communications is needed in addition to periodic review of scope and appropriateness of such actions.

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