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DIGITAL TERRORISM: CHOREOGRAPHING THE TERROR

Kriti Singh

Associate Fellow , CAPS

Approximately forty percent of the total world population is connected with the Internet in some or the other way. In the span of more than a decade since beginning of 21st century, it is estimated that the number of people connected to Internet has increased ten times. The mark of one billion Internet users was crossed in 2005 and with five more years the number crossed the mark of two billion. And by the end of 2014 it crossed the mark of 3 billion users. According to the statistics by the Internet Live Stats, in 2014, the highest Internet users were from China, Unted States and India respectively. China registered 641,601,070 Internet users with 4% annual growth rate, followed by US with 279,834,232 Internet users with 4% annual growth rate. India registered 243,198,922 Internet users with 14% annual growth rate.[i] Around 19.19 % of Indian population has access to Internet.

However, the Internet is a dual use tool. On one hand, it helps transform societies into smart information societies. On the other hand, it also can become a breeding ground for societal evils to flourish, to communicate, to collaborate, to manage perceptions and distort political discourses and manipulate public opinions across the globe.

With the boom of Internet users in the 21st century, one of the alarming trends is the emergence of 'digital terrorism.' As the societies get more and more electronically connected, the more they become vulnerable to the digital terrorism. The reach and impact of the digital terrorism is also extensive. It ranges from spreading hatred and extremist propaganda through social networks to malicious defacing of websites to organized theft of sensitive information to bringing down servers and networks.[ii] Internet comprises of both information warfare and cyber

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terrorism, digital terrorism presents frightening possibilities for crippling vital economic, social, governmental, and other infrastructure.[iii]

Due to the advancement in the information and communication technologies and with the world turning into the 'global village,' the spaces between the world populations has started to blur. The negative sides of these advancements are that the terrorist networks can coordinate their activities from any corner of the world by using the same platforms, which can result into a coordinated attack on the 'target' with utmost precision. The 2011 Mumbai attacks is one such example where the terrorists were in continuous communication with their masters across the border. In 2008 Mumbai attacks, the Lashkar-e-Taiba, extensively used Google Earth to plan their attacks. Through the use of digital technologies, international terrorists have an unprecedented capability to obtain, process and protect information from law enforcement investigations. They can use the interactive capabilities of advanced computers ad telecommunications system to plot terrorist strategies against their 'targets' all over the globe, to find the most efficient routes and methods for financial transactions, and to create international virtual networks and counterintelligence purposes.[iv]

With shrinking spaces, mushrooming of infinite common digital interactive platforms where one can share the information or ideas across globe in nano seconds, the digital terrorists are transforming the Internet into a lethal weapon. According to a study conducted by RAND on the use of the internet in terrorism and extremism, ,' the internet may enhance opportunities to become radicalised, it may act as an 'echo chamber' for extremist beliefs; in other words, the internet may provide a greater opportunity than offline interactions to confirm existing beliefs, it appears to facilitate this process of radicalisation, it appears to facilitate this process of radicalisation and it increases opportunities for self-radicalisation.[v] The social media use by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Al-Qaida's shift in its propaganda apparatus from old video / audio cassettes to online platforms a decade back and the Taliban use of internet through websites are few examples.

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One of the key efforts of the terrorist organisations is to produce the "shock and awe" effect on masses. To achieve this aim, the digital platforms provides them the cheapest, easiest and fastest ground to choreograph their acts of terrorism. By doing so, the brutal acts of terror acts are glorified and spread on the digital platforms, like ISIS videos on social media, thus in a way accomplishing the terror group's desired objective. The use of digital platforms has emerged as a complex propaganda tools in virtual world by the terrorists groups and has facilitated in the shaping the perceptions of people both at home and outside. Underlying the effect of digital terrorism in Afghanistan, the international Crisis Group report revealed, "The result is weakening public support for nation-building, even though few actively support the Taliban."

These examples display that digital terrorism is here to stay and won't just confine itself to propaganda, but also will breed and pollinate new ideas and innovations. The deployment of sophisticated digital terrorism as a strategy has redefined the parameters of propaganda. Terrorists aim can be nullified if a certain mechanism can be built to blackout these choreographed digital terrorist acts. A counter digital terrorism strategy is need of the hour where the enemy propaganda can be countered with positive propaganda. In addition we have to equip Internet users to differentiate between the noises and voices on these platforms and to make them aware how an ordinary user can fall in the trap of digital terrorism. We have to make Internet users understand the impact of share and report abuse buttons since with one share button any user can indirectly become part of circulating the propaganda choreographed by terrorist networks.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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[i] The Official World Wide Web Anniversary Site

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ii DARNAY, KEITH. "Terrorism Is Going Digital." Bismarck Tribune. June 13, 2011. Accessed February 14, 2015. http://bismarcktribune.com/news/columnists/keith-darnay/terrorism-is-going-digital/article_e5ddc9ae-938a-11e0-bded-001cc4c03286.html.

iii Mahan, Sue, and Pamala L. Griset. "The Internet and Terrorism." In *Terrorism in Perspective*, 282. California: SAGE Publications, 2013.

iv Fischer, Robert. "Terrorism as Tool of Destruction." In *Introduction to Security*, 376. 7th ed. Burlington: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2004.

v Von Behr, Ines, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, and Luke Gribbon. "Radicalisation in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism." 2013, 15. Accessed February 14, 2015. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf.