

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE WORK OF TERRORIST GROUPS. THE CASE OF ISIS AND AL-QAEDA

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ABSTRACT:

ONLINE MEDIUM HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT IN EVERYONE'S LIFE, WHETHER IT IS FOR PERSONAL, BUSINESS OR JUST FOR FUN. THE NUMBER OF INFORMATION CIRCULATING ON THE INTERNET IS HUGE, WHICH INCREASES FROM DAY TO DAY. AS A CONSEQUENCE THE NUMBER OF SITES HAS INCREASED AND THE NEED FOR EASIER COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PEOPLE ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD, TOOK BIRTH AND SOCIAL NETWORKS, ONLINE PLATFORMS THAT HAVE EMERGED PRECISELY FROM A DESIRE TO SHARE INFORMATION, COMMUNICATION AND SOCIALIZATION AMONG VARIOUS USERS. THEIR POPULARITY GREW IMMEDIATELY AND SITES LIKE FACEBOOK, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM, GOOGLE+, YOUTUBE HAVE INCREASED THE NUMBER OF USERS FROM DAY TO DAY.

DUE TO THE ADVANTAGES OF THE ONLINE, SUCH AS ANONYMITY AND DISSEMINATE INFORMATION IN A SHORT TIME AND ON A GLOBAL SCALE, MEMBERS OF TERRORIST GROUPS HAVE TURNED TO VIRTUAL, ONE NOT DEFINED BY PHYSICAL BORDERS AND OFFER THEM NOTORIETY THEY NEED. TERRORISTS HAVE CHOSEN SOCIAL NETWORKS IN PARTICULAR DUE TO THE NUMBER OF USERS, ENSURING THAT THE INFORMATION, NEWS, MOVIE OR ANY MEDIA CONTENT DISTRIBUTED BY THEM, WILL REACH A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE.

KEY WORDS: TERRORISM, SOCIAL NETWORKS, ISIS, AL-QAEDA

Social Media is a complex term that encompasses many meanings, depending on the perspective from which it is viewed.

As part of social media and social networks, we have Google+, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and Pinterest and this are just some of the most known and used social networks. Within a few years, they have collected numerous of users all over the world, facilitating communication between them and distributing informations, news etc. in a more easier and faster way.

Facebook is that social media boom, that quickly spread globally and was the base of many books, films, documentaries, various articles and studies.

The social network Twitter is among the most popular networks worldwide use.

Horea Mihai Bădău, in his article about social media communication techniques, has identify 14 types of tweets:

- Useful (like important events, tips);
- Example (news, cases, personal experiences);

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- Ad
- Comment
- Title
- Photo
- Video
- Live
- Reportage
- Figures (like)
- Backstage (unofficial informations)
- Type interview
- Quote

• Tweet used as a tool of opinion. In addition, the author talks of the importance of a retweet, that any information posted on Twitter can be taken and passed on, to other people for watch². Using the technological resources, social media intelligence aims to obtain useful information from the social media, to develop the ability to make better decisions, provide appropriate solutions for architectural models and existing applications or those occurring now. Social media intelligence has great potential with important practical relevance such as the emergence of a new and rich field of research. However, to investigate social media intelligence, it requires a multidisciplinary research³. Among the disciplines that are involved for the study of social media intelligence media, we can mention social psychology, political science, international studies and security etc.

SOCMINT or Social Media Intelligence shows the great potential that it has for the use of national security and intelligence activities.

With the help of modern technology and social media, ISIS is trying to achieve their goals and to promote their own ideology.

Latest developments on the question of Islamic fundamentalists demonstrates the the Global Jihadist Movement, initiated by Al-Qaeda, quickly spread on the Internet.

A study that spanned a period of six years brings confirm the assertion that terrorist organizations and their supporters use and have used many ways that the Internet offers for various purposes, such as recruiting new members, to launch a "campaign of fear" in the world and to obtain funds. The site opened for this movement, between December 1996 and May 1999 has been viewed over 200,000 times⁴. Considering the years in which the site was visited, the number of visitors is relatively high. The number of internet users from then was lower compared to the number of users from now or even in the last 5 years.

Jihadist organizations use the Internet for many reasons, including:

- Fundraising by financial institutions, ONG`s and charitable organizations;
- Propaganda and formulation of requests.
- Training. This is because many websites provide user guides and guides on various topics such as explosive material, poisons etc .;
- Recruitment and mobilization.
- Coordination and communication between members and supporters and operative planning terrorist attacks.

² Horea Mihai Bădău apud. Sălcudean, Minodora, *New media, social media și jurnalismul actual*, (Editura Tritonic, 2015), 172-173.

³ Zeng, Daniel, *Social Media Analytics and Intelligence*, noiembrie/decembrie 2010, <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?arnumber=5678581>, 15.

⁴ Andreescu, Anghel; Radu, Nicolae, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, (Editura Rao, București, 2015), 265.

- Misinformation. This is based on issuing threats or images that inspire feelings of horror, fear and lack of defense.
- Assuming attacks committed;
- Gather information⁵.

Two days before the start of Ramadan, the Holy Month, in June 2014, ISIS has sent a statement announcing the foundation of the Caliphate. The next day, ISIS has uploaded a video on the Internet that show Abu Safiyya, a fighter came from Chile, which present a point at the border between Iraq and Syria, that was recently demolished⁶. The video is entitled "End of Sykes-Picot agreement" and announced that the Islamic State is prepared to annihilate the two political entities that were created by the French and British in 1916, namely Iraq and Syria. So ISIS makes its "debut" on the international stage via a video clip with a tough message, meant to draw attention to the global community and making them to understand that they will not abandon their cause and are determined to achieve their goals with any price.

The Caliphate of ISIS is more violent than the activities of other armed organizations. All that makes it different is the way they use online media to promote actions. For example, in 1990, in Kosovo, there have been a numerous of inhuman acts such as the beheading of childrens and after they played football with their heads in front of their parents⁷. ISIS, in the eve of the 2014 World Cup, have group members distributed on Twitter pictures from a match where they played football with severed heads that came from their opponents⁸. They put the descriptions "This is our ball and is made of leather ...". These images have shocked the world and caused chain reactions and retweet numerous sites among users of Twitter. The impact was greater because it was right before the World Cup and have even used the hashtag World Cup and related sites to ensure the spreading in a more alert way. Also, militants have used the hashtag # WC2014 sites like # Brazil2014 to promote a video clip where Australian and British jihadists were trying to convince more Muslims from the West to join them. They were convinced that, on the eve of the World Cup, the users will search these hashtags and their message will reach the population immediately.

ISIS has among its members specialists in internet who know how to talk to young people using their language. Being technically savvy and socially, they try to use videos and images to get in a person's psyche. They use messages like: "You hate the way your life has come? Come with us and you can became something more. "ISIS entices recruits with gifts such as houses with free electricity, rent-free or a chance to have something "better" in after afterlife. Abu Bara al-Hindi, a British member from ISIS said "No Life Without Jihad" and "Living in the West, I know how you feel - in your heart you feel depressed". The film was released by Al Hayat Media Center (own media center). He also adds that "The cure for depression is jihad"⁹. In addition to these statements, other members of the group distributes shocking clips and images. To show that they are not bad, they distributed a short movie showing how ISIS share militants candy to childrens. The clip is meant to demonstrate to the others that childrens seem very happy with the presence of the militants.

⁵ Andreescu; Radu, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, 266-268.

⁶ Napoleoni, Loretta, *ISIS-Califatul terorii*, (Editura Corint, București, 2015), 61.

⁷ Loretta, *ISIS-Califatul terorii*, 65.

⁸ *ISIS Insurgents Tweet Picture Of Beheaded Man And Boast: 'This Is Our Ball. It's Made Of Skin #Worldcup'*, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/06/14/isis-behead-policeman-picture-graphic_n_5494958.html

⁹ Hahn, Jason, Duain, How the most dangerous group uses social media, <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2015/04/isis-social-media-methods>.

The Islamic State makes full use of electronic resources to promote a message as widely as possible. Members of the group used ad hoc applications and the best example is the Twitter app launched by ISIS, which is called "Annunciation Dawn" or "Dawn", which aims to keep sympathizers with the latest news about the group. The application was downloaded by many users. Important to mention that, when discharged, the application asks permission to get access to the user's personal information, such as media content on the user's device, network wi-fi etc¹⁰. In this way, the ISIS militants can find even the location, its interests, close friends, family and so on. They can see in the privacy of the user and can use the information about him.

Atlantic Magazine conducted an analysis on the subject of the strategies used by the Islamic State through social media and found that it received around 72 replies to each messages sent using a Twitter account in Arabic, Why advertise some of the most popular hashtag sites by offering their content on the Internet¹¹. This is important for security and intelligence analysts because it can help making an analysis on the Islamic state. Hashtag sites have become increasingly popular among the group because of the popularity it enjoys among users.

Other videos that marked the society promoted by ISIS, where the one where they made a boy killing their prisoners. The psychological impact and the media was huge. The fact that this boy is the one who kills the prisoners is unusual and cruel. And precisely this is the reason they used a boy: for the impact.

A forum in Arabic, with the base in London, called Al-Tajdid, encompasses numerous messages focused on jihad against the forces of "infidels". On 7-8 July 2006 the users already existing but also new ones, were organized into thematic groups for discussion. The main topics of discussion were the news about jihad and jihadist movements leaders. For this period, the news forum included a bulletin about the activities of jihadists, about events in Iraq, a statement from the Brigades of Al-Quds, a collection of statements by Iraqi Mujahideen Shura Council of the news about the shooting down of a US helicopter and the presence of "death squads" in Iraq. Also for increasing the visibility of the media group, Ansar al-Islam has set up its own media center which was named Al-Ansar. The creation of this center was considered *"a response to changes in the conduct of the war, thanks to the new strategies addressed by the << enemy >>, focused on the media, to compensate for failures on the battlefield"*¹². Publicity through the media is important for terrorism. Even Margaret Thatcher said that "advertising is the oxygen of terrorism".

Another reason for terrorist groups resort to the online environment is the fundraising.

Al-Qaeda organization has heavily depended on the donations they receive and they also had obtained the funds through non-governmental organizations, extensive networks of charities, they used websites and online discussion on various forums. Even Chechen fighters have used the Internet to raise resources. They published their internet banking accounts, where those who sympathize them can contribute with different amounts. The US government in 2001 confiscated a charitable organization that was based in Texas, because of the links which it maintained through the internet with Hamas. In addition to fundraising, the online environment is used by terrorist organizations both for communication between group members, communicate with their supporters, but also communication between different terrorist groups. Dozens of sites that promote terrorism for jihad terrorists helps remote areas,

¹⁰ Berger, J.M., *How ISIS games Twitter*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

¹¹ Loretta, *ISIS-Califatul terorii*,,, 82.

¹² Andreescu; Radu, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, 268.

such as Malaysia and Chechnya, to exchange ideas and practical information, ways of attacks, details on various routes¹³.

Uploading, downloading and viewing video clips have become very popular. YouTube was founded in February 2005 as an online repository that facilitates the sharing of video content. YouTube claims to be "The most popular online video community in the world". CNN Money reported that in January 2008, nearly 79 million users worldwide have seen more than three billion videos on YouTube. Terrorist groups have realized the great potential such a site has. In 2008, jihadists have suggested an "invasion" of Youtube to help support all media forums affiliated jihadists and al-Fajir¹⁴. Being more popular now, in 2015, Youtube seems the best way of containing the spread of jihadist videos. Now all smartphones have the Youtube app or installed immediately, which ensures a better spread of clips, a growing number of users, since most people have at least one smartphone, which is exactly what is based terrorists.

Al Qaeda leaders have tried to make an on-line library and have access to any new recruit Qalah discussion forum, here finding the latest information on hacking into a discussion area called electronic jihad. Donald Rumsfeld, secretary of the US Department of Defense said they recovered a training manual organization Al-Qaeda, where the urging supporters to use public sources of information, but without resorting to illegal methods, enabling them to gather at least 80% of the information they need about opponents¹⁵. Al-Qaeda has become a global brand. It holds advanced technical means and is constantly in touch with their followers and supporters from both the Arab world and in the US, Europe, Canada and Asia.

As-Sahab Media Foundation brand represents its production media Al-Qaeda. As-Sahab appeared in 2000, and to disseminate its video recordings and television depended on Al-Jazeera. Originally posted on the Internet just short clips, but evoluân, as-Sahab work has become increasingly sophisticated. As a comparison, in 2007 broadcast 97 video and audio messages, and in 2002 only six, and the translation is done in several languages. All through their media center, Al-Qaeda has sent messages from Osama bin Laden. One of the first audio message was on 16 May 2008, "The causes of conflict in the 60th Anniversary of the Establishment of the occupation by Israel" and the second was on 18 May 2008. "Message to the Muslim nation ". In the first message, the leader Osama bin Laden presented the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians as a primary cause of war between Western countries and the Muslim world and even warned that jihad will continue until the liberation of Palestinian territory. In the second message, the terrorist leader spoke of the devastating effects of the blockade of Gaza, but he also criticized the treacherous Arab regimes, referring to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. It also accused the Lebanese Hezbollah organization have abandoned the struggle against Israel¹⁶.

Al-Qaeda popularized in 2012 on one of its forums, Shumukh al-Islam, an announcement seeking people willing to carry out suicide attacks. The same forum was used

¹³ Andreescu; Radu, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, 269.

¹⁴ "Jihadist Forum Suggests YouTube Invasion", The Telegraph, 4 Decembrie , 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/3547072/Jihadist-forum-calls-for-YouTube-Invasion.html>.

¹⁵ Andreescu; Radu, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, 270.

¹⁶ Andreescu; Radu, *Jihadul islamic-de la "Înfrângerea terorii" și "Războiul Sfânt" la "Speranța libertății"*, 284-285.

by group subsidiaries and to assume certain attacks¹⁷. These sites can be used by intelligence agencies to gather information on members, potential new members, the methods used by them and possibly even to identify some possible attacks.

Although ISIS is based more on social networks, Al-Qaeda uses these networks, but use more forums. However, even manage to gather many users forums and sympathizers that the ordinary citizens can become members of the group. However, such a paradox is created. Forums are really dangerous terrorists and terrorist organizations may thus can communicate easier, to spread fear, to get the right resources and to gather new members. But on the other hand, these forums and social networking can help intelligence agencies to gather valuable information on the activities of terrorists and what they plan future attacks.

¹⁷ Kjuca, Deana, Digital Jihad; Inside Al-Qaeda's Social Networks, martie 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/03/digital-jihad-inside-al-qaedas-social-networks/273761/>.

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