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extremism.net

A young lawyer has become the first person to be detained under the Internal Security Act for wanting to pursue terrorist aims as a result of what he read on the Internet. In the first of a two-part series, Aaron Low looks at the dark alleys of the Internet to report on how hate websites influence young minds and the individuals most susceptible to such propaganda

TERRORISTS have found a powerful new weapon in the Internet.

So crucial has it become to their struggles that today's extremists liken the computer to the machine guns an earlier generation of guerillas fought with. A new slogan is 'keyboards equals Kalashnikovs'.

One expert puts the number of terrorist websites at around 5,500, the majority of which are radical Islamist sites.

Among the thousands of young people who visit these sites, a few will become radicalised enough to want to translate their violent thoughts into deeds, shifting their engagement from cyberspace to the real world.

This was the path trod by Singaporean polytechnic lecturer and former lawyer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, 28, according to the Government. He planned to travel to Pakistan to train for militant jihad or holy war, but was arrested in February before he could do so.

The question on many lips when his case was made public last week: If a lawyer could fall for online propaganda, what more others less schooled?

How powerful is the Internet as a tool of radicalisation? How do extremist websites psych certain individuals to turn them into would-be terrorists? How grave a threat do they pose to society?

Online terror

CLICK on a link to an extremist website and you enter a parallel universe in which commonly accepted notions of right and wrong are turned upside down.

At these sites, hate language is celebrated, not condemned.

Members of online forums relish videos and images depicting violence and bloodshed, such as those showing US military vehicles being blown up.

They hail suicide bombers as martyrs.

The effect is an 'echo chamber' and the message reverberating is that extremist views against a particular racial or religious group are perfectly acceptable.

Dr John Harrison, head of terrorism research at Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, describes the impact on individuals who spend long hours at these sites.

'Ideas and beliefs are constantly reinforced. When one sees the sheer number of people online, all affirming and justifying the same idea, it's difficult to not be persuaded, especially if one is already open to the ideas,' he says.

Some sites enjoy high traffic. For example, the counter at one terrorist site, set up just last year, logged 10,000 members, 31,000 topics of discussion and four million visitors.

It is among the list of 'militant jihad' websites being monitored daily by the Rajaratnam School's International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research.

The school has four analysts who spend most of their time scouring dozens of primary sites which generate original content that is then copied by thousands of others.

Typically, these sites are in Arabic, with unrestricted access, and have Web forums.

Ms Rebecca Givner-Forbes, one of the analysts, believes these sites are most likely run by volunteers, who are fed information by terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda.

'The actual members and leaders of the groups don't risk unnecessary exposure but give these volunteers speeches and videos to put up, which are then replicated by the others,' she says.

Many of these videos and audio clips eventually find their way to mainstream websites like YouTube.

It is no surprise then that 'militant jihad is becoming cool' among more young people, according to Mr Ned Moran, a senior intelligence analyst with the Terrorism Research Centre in the United States.

But it is in the chatroom that conversion to radicalism often takes place. The Internet's influence can reach deeper into the psyche of individuals in the chatroom, because that is where young people with a certain outlook interact and network with others of the same world view.

Such exchanges have the potential to kickstart a psychological process that terrorism analysts have dubbed 'self-radicalisation'.

By this, they refer to a metamorphosis of individuals who internalise the revolutionary sub-culture purveyed online and undergo personality changes.

Dr Kumar Ramakrishnan, acting head of the Centre of Excellence for National Security here, writes in a paper on self-radicalisation: 'The individual virtually sheds his old personality and learns drastically new ways of thinking, feeling and acting.'

A report published last month by terrorism researchers from George Washington University and the University of Virginia said online chatrooms are 'interactive venues where aberrant attitudes and beliefs may be exchanged, reinforced... This mutual affirmation in turn gives rise to a sense of community and belonging - a virtual ummah', that is, a cyberspace version of a worldwide Muslim community.

If everyone who visited a terrorist website is susceptible, then the real world would be a very unsafe place.

Obviously this is not the case. Dr Harrison says that of the thousands who go to these sites, only a small fraction become militant jihadists.

'But it is unclear what the tipping point is, from being a passive reader and participant of these electronic forums to a full-fledged terrorist,' he says.

State of mind

SO WHAT accounts for the small number of these chatroom participants morphing into soldiers willing to lay down their lives for the cause of global jihad, while most others either remain content to cheer them on from afar or are unmoved by it all?

Psychologists believe it all stems from the state of mind of the individual even before he enters cyberspace.

In the case of Abdul Basheer, Dr Ramakrishnan says it was likely that an episode in his life caused him to 'lose faith in the innate rightness of the status quo'.

The kind of events which cause an individual to switch sides in such dramatic fashion may well vary from person to person.

But Mr Steven Emerson, executive director of The Investigative Project, a research centre on Islamist groups, says one big factor that sets these individuals down the path of radicalisation is the feeling of victimisation.

'One of the biggest factors that propel them along is this feeling of impotence and anger about what they perceive as this vast conspiracy to victimise Islam and Muslims around the world,' says Mr Emerson

This is especially the case for Muslims in non-Muslim countries, who lack a strong identity and may turn to a strict form of Islam in this case, he adds.

Such an individual's state of mind may be compared to that of someone struck with a terminal illness, who - unable to come to terms with his situation - embarks on a desperate search online for a cure.

National Institute of Education social psychologist Angeline Khoo says such individuals are likely to suffer from what is known as a 'self-confirmation bias'.

'You are not actually looking for information in a critical way, you are looking for hope. So you become less critical, your filters go down and you may end up doing what the website tells you to because you want to believe,' she says.

National University of Singapore (NUS) communications and new media lecturer Byungho Park says how a person processes information depends on many things, but 'one of the major factors is a person's predisposition'.

Some experts believe that younger people, who grew up with the Internet, are the most vulnerable to being swayed by ideas received online because they believe they can 'Google' their way to solutions for most of life's problems.

Professor Jerrold Post, a former CIA profiler who directs the political psychology programme at George Washington University, says their failure to approach online information in a critical way is 'especially troubling' because it coincides with that period in their young lives when they want to rebel against authority.

Countering it

BANNING terrorist websites seems the most obvious way to tackle the threat of self-radicalisation, but new media experts doubt it will prove effective.

The Media Development Authority has drawn up a list of 100 sites, including pornographic and extremist sites, that it requires the three Internet service providers to block access to.

NUS new media lecturer Lim Sun Sun says whatever filtering or blocking devices used 'will invariably be outpaced by the ferocious rate at which content is created' and innovations dreamed up to circumvent censorship.

Counter-terrorism groups are experimenting with other methods, including setting up counter-ideology sites and entering chatrooms to rebut radical ideas.

Beyond such external checks, the challenge before society today is how best to educate the young about the pros and cons of the Internet in a way that inoculates them against the new disease of self-radicalisation.

Work on such media literacy programmes is still in the early stages but has the potential to make a significant difference in the battle for hearts and minds.

Says Dr Park: 'It boils down to the person's predisposition. For those without a certain inclination, media literacy will provide them with the tools to protect themselves from accepting whatever is out there online.'

And the battle in winning over those already predisposed? It might be better tackled the old-fashioned way: intelligence from others around them to spot the tell-tale signs and counselling them before it is too late.

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SMS or e-mail us your views

DO YOU worry about the youth picking up extremist ideas online? What are some of the things you are doing to keep young people you know safe from radical ideas online? E-mail 75557@stomp.com.sg or SMS to 75557. For SMS messages, type Insight followed by a space, your name and then your message.

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