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EXTREMISTS' NEW WEB OUTLETS

Beware YouTube and Friendster

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RECENT developments on South-east Asian websites have caused quite a stir among researchers of extremism. Some of the websites are manned by radical groups. Monitoring these websites can reveal patterns of group development, group tradecraft and extremist propaganda.

Interestingly, the groups use the Web to highlight real-world activities, like seminars and the launch of magazines and books. The South-east Asian groups have learnt from their Arab brothers to make their websites subtle, so as to lessen the possibility of attracting government attention.

The extremists entice their audience by using seemingly moderate scholars espousing innocent religious doctrines. The true intent of these sites becomes apparent when the sites say such things as: "Muslims are being attacked. Thus, Muslims have to fight back." Vivid and graphic videos from Iraq and Afghanistan help reinforce their violent objectives.

The effect of these extremist websites has been further aggravated by the development of forums. Usually password-protected and containing reminders to maintain vigilance, these forums allow only those who share the same ideology to participate.

Thus, their "free" discussions are restricted to a narrow interpretation of the world, creating an echo chamber effect for impressionable minds. The forums are interactive, producing a virtual ummah (Muslim community) where participants can confide in one another.

The echo chamber effect appears to drive the process of radicalisation, proceeding from news-sharing to more aggressive activities. In the last one year, South-east Asian forums have regularly exchanged tradecraft materials, from manuals on hacking to tips on bomb-making. An almost predictable pattern has emerged: First passive Internet use, then active Internet activity and, finally, an intention to become active mujahideen. The Internet may not have created the conditions for extremism, but it has accelerated its spread.

Notwithstanding their enabling effect, however, there are limits to the impact of these websites, particularly in South-east Asia.

First, extremist websites may not pose a direct threat to security. It takes more

than just reading tradecraft manuals to launch an actual terrorist attack.

Second, South-east Asian websites do not produce their own original material. The main radical activities still take place on Arabic websites. Because the main language used on South-east Asian extremist websites is Bahasa Indonesia, there is a time lag in the transmission of radical ideas.

Third, these extremist websites are generally inaccessible. One would usually need to know of their existence before one is able to find them. The forums are usually password-protected; one would have to register and follow several instructions before being given full access, a process that could take a few days.

Also, the forums or websites are sometimes down. Increasing official scrutiny, as evidenced by the number of password-protected sites, makes them potentially vulnerable to being disrupted or contaminated.

We should not, however, miss an emerging threat - the use of YouTube and social networking platforms.

The ability to watch TV programmes on the Web and contact long-lost friends through Facebook and related platforms has enabled extremists to overcome some of their limitations. While links to video and audio downloads on extremist websites are sometimes inaccessible and difficult to download, the videos on YouTube are usually easy to access. There are many extremist videos on YouTube, from videos showing mujahideen attacks on Western targets to broadcasts of speeches advocating violence and hatred.

Friendster allows a neater and more structured network than forums. Friendster accounts are built on general contacts rather than a self-selecting group as in forums. Hence, a wider range of people can gather on Friendster, opening a wider pool for potential recruitment.

Extremists on Friendster appear to be bolder than in forums: They reveal themselves holding air rifles and in settings that appear to be training camps. This may be an attempt to make the life of a jihadi appear glamorous and thus attract more followers.

Such materials are available in many languages and locations. While there is a need to continue monitoring and countering extremist websites and forums, emerging technologies like YouTube and social network platforms should not be ignored.

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