



# The Internet as a Terrorist Tool for Recruitment and Radicalization of Youth

White Paper

24 April 2009



*Prepared for*  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security,  
Science and Technology Directorate

**Homeland Security Institute**

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## **Homeland Security Institute**

The Homeland Security Institute (HSI) is a federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) established by the Secretary of Homeland Security under Section 312 of the Homeland Security Act of 2002. Analytic Services Inc. operates HSI under contract number W81XWH-04-D-0011.

HSI's mission is to assist the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Under Secretary for Science and Technology, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) operating elements in addressing national policy and security issues where scientific, technical, and analytical expertise is required. HSI also consults with other government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, institutions of higher education, and nonprofit organizations.

HSI delivers independent and objective analyses and advice to support policy development, decision making, alternative approaches, and new ideas on significant issues.

HSI's research is undertaken by mutual consent with DHS and is organized by Tasks in the annual HSI Research Plan. This report presents the results of research and analysis conducted under

### **Core Task 08-03.02.17, The Internet as a Terrorist Tool to Reach Out to Youth**

of HSI's Fiscal Year 2008 Research Plan. The purpose of the task is to see how the Internet is being used by terrorist groups to recruit and radicalize youth and determine if there are lessons learned from the private sector that could inform approaches for countering online radicalization.

The results presented in this report do not necessarily reflect official DHS opinion or policy.



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## BACKGROUND

Terrorists are adaptive adversaries who use a variety of tools and tactics to reach potential recruits and supporters. Unfortunately, there is increasing evidence that youth are being drawn into the ranks of terrorist organizations operating around the world. Terrorist groups are systematically preying upon the vulnerabilities of young persons in various contexts offering a range of incentives – from financial assistance, to familial-like bonds, to the promise of something exciting to do – that are intended to make membership in the group attractive.

The demographics of the young persons becoming involved in terrorist groups appear to be changing. In many cases the persons implicated are younger than reported in the past; there appear to be more female youth joining the ranks of terrorist organizations; and young supporters are coming from Western countries that are further removed from actual conflict areas. For example:

- The Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas have recruited children as young as thirteen to be suicide bombers and children as young as eleven to smuggle explosives and weapons.<sup>1</sup>
- During 2003, thirteen-year-old twin sisters who had been recruited by Al-Qaeda-linked groups were caught in the process of trying to suicide-bomb Western businesses and local government buildings in Morocco.<sup>2</sup>
- Videos have been found in which young persons in the United Kingdom filmed themselves reenacting beheadings. The youth were copying videos of beheadings that had been posted online by terrorist groups or their supporters.<sup>3</sup>

The Internet has become an important resource for disseminating terrorist propaganda and instructions to young persons that might not otherwise have direct contact with group recruiters or supporters. The Internet is accessible, cheap, and anonymous. It offers terrorists a variety of mediums to disseminate messages and provides connections to recruiters and recruits that might not otherwise be possible. Some groups have established websites designed specifically for youth audiences, disseminating propaganda through colorful cartoons and games. These sites – many of which are available in English – help to get the groups’ message out to a worldwide audience, including any young person that has access to an Internet connection. In recent years, there have been reports of a growing trend by which young persons have the potential to self-radicalize through the use of the Internet.

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<sup>1</sup> Singer, P.W., “The New Children of Terror.” *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes*, vol. 1. James J.F. Frost (ed.) Praeger, November 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Jessica Stern, “Jihad – a global fad”, *The Boston Globe*, August 1, 2006; retrieved on-line December 9, 2008 from:  
[www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/08/01/jihad\\_a\\_global\\_fad](http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2006/08/01/jihad_a_global_fad)

- In 1998 there were a total of 12 terrorist related websites active. By 2003 there were approximately 2630 sites, and by January 2009 a total of 6940 active terrorist-related websites.<sup>4</sup>
- A website sponsored by Hamas, al-Fateh (“The Conqueror”) is updated every week and is designed for children, with a cartoon-style design and colorful children’s stories.<sup>5</sup>
- Irfan Raja was a 19-year old British student whose “entire radicalisation occurred online, with hours spent online downloading extremist videos, posting messages, and chatting with other radicals.”<sup>6</sup> In 2007, Raja made contact with an extremist recruiter online and, along with four other young British persons he had never met, prepared to travel to a training camp overseas.
- In response to inquiries about missing Somali-American youth, intelligence officials at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) indicated recent statements on Somalia by some al-Qaeda leaders have revealed an emphasis on communicating to international and, notably, English-speaking audiences online.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, the concern that youth are increasingly being radicalized and manipulated by terrorist organizations was expressed in the U.S. Department of State’s 2007 Country Report on Terrorism (released April 2008):

Radicalization of immigrant populations, youth and alienated minorities in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa continued. But it became increasingly clear that radicalization to violent extremism does not occur by accident, or because such populations are innately prone to extremism. Rather, we saw increasing evidence of terrorists and extremists manipulating the grievances of alienated youth or immigrant populations, and then cynically exploiting those grievances to subvert legitimate authority and create unrest. We also note a “self-radicalization” process of youth reaching out to extremists in order to become involved in the broader al-Qaeda fight.<sup>8</sup>

The State Department asserts that radicalization of youth does not occur accidentally and that terrorist groups are manipulating the grievances of alienated youth. They also point

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<sup>4</sup> Cited from Dr. Gabriel Weimann’s presentation given at the Youth Recruitment & Radicalization Roundtable, March 19, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Weimann, Gabriel. *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges*, pg. 91. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> King’s College London. “Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe,” p. 89. December 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Statement by Andrew Liepman, Deputy Director of Intelligence for the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC), Directorate of Intelligence. Hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. 11 March 2009.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. "Chapter 1, Strategic Assessment." *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*. Washington, DC, April 2008.

to the growing trend of self-radicalization, whereby young persons are using the Internet to acquaint themselves with terrorist group's ideologies. It is necessary to get a better understanding of how both of these processes are occurring in order to identify potential approaches for countering youth radicalization.

## **Youth Internet Usage**

Youth Internet usage has risen dramatically worldwide over the past decade.<sup>9</sup> In the last four to five years, Internet usage has evolved from a passive, individually-directed, information-seeking process (termed "Web 1.0") to an active, socially-connected, user-involved environment where youth interact, discuss, create, and pass on content (called "Web 2.0").

This shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 environments is exemplified by the dramatic growth and popularity among youth of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, as well as interactive video streaming websites such as YouTube. Facebook, for example, grew its global footprint by 168% in 2008, and now reaches an audience of 108.3 million users.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, 80% of youth worldwide visit sites such as YouTube.<sup>11</sup>

Young persons use the Internet to communicate with others, especially peers. Worldwide, youth are increasingly well-connected to their peers through communication platforms such as instant messaging (IM) programs and social networking websites.<sup>12</sup> A recent effort was conducted by Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions and MTV Networks to understand what currently drives youth Internet usage and how youth are using various digital media platforms. The study, "Circuits of Cool," highlighted the following:<sup>13</sup>

- Instant messaging programs (such as MSN Messenger) and the immediacy of social networking sites allow youth constant connectivity and communication.
- Video sharing sites such as YouTube are dominant sources of entertainment for young persons.

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<sup>9</sup> By 2008, 93% of teens in the U.S. (about 22.4 million between ages 12 and 17) actively used the Internet. Jones, Sydney and Susannah Fox. "Pew Internet Project Data Memo," p. 2. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. 28 January, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> The Nielsen Company. "Global Faces and Networked Places: A Nielsen Report on Social Networking's New Global Footprint," p. 8. March 2009. Among youth, 70% of 14-24 year olds use social networking sites regularly. See: Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions. "Circuits of Cool: Key Themes and Findings," p. 4. July 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> For example, a study by Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions states that, "Globally, the average person connected to digital technology has 94 phone numbers in his or her mobile, 78 people on a Messenger buddy list and 86 people in their social networking community." Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Microsoft Digital Advertising Solutions, pp. 1-8.

- Youth's navigation to online video clips is primarily facilitated by links passed on by peers (51% of the time).
- Personal photos are the most popular content that is viewed and shared on social networking sites. Other users' comments on photos can often spark discussions.
- Online gaming is an influential venue for youth (especially males) to communicate with each other inside an entertainment venue.

While youth do search for news and current events stories online, they have been found to be more interested in entertainment related content. The Pew Internet and American Life Project noted that while 76% of youth searched for news and current events topics, an even larger segment (84%) sought entertainment information on music, movies, television, and sports.<sup>14</sup> According to a Canadian study, youth consider their highly-connected peer networks to be sources of credible information when communicating online.<sup>15</sup>

## **Terrorist Internet Usage**

Many terrorist groups have adopted the Internet as a tool for recruiting youth to support or join their ranks. Some groups are tailoring their online platforms specifically to attract young persons, by producing content that is appealing to their interests and using the same Internet platforms that are popular among youth to disseminate this content.

Whereas terrorists' indoctrination, recruitment, and training previously relied primarily on physical meetings between recruits and recruiters (which often required time, coordination, and travel), the Internet can now provide these connections quickly, easily, remotely, and anonymously. Groups are using this to their advantage and are employing a wide array of online platforms to disseminate a variety of content.

Terrorist groups are using the Internet to reach a much larger and more global audience than was possible just a decade ago. Some groups have rather sophisticated online presences, employing complex structures and hosting mechanisms, an array of multimedia platforms, and the use of logos and branding. Some groups are adapting to the Web 2.0 evolution, by utilizing online platforms that are more interactive.

Additionally, some terrorist groups have adopted the marketing strategy of "narrowcasting" their content to specific audiences.<sup>16</sup> With youth, they target different

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<sup>14</sup> 26% of youth also searched for religious or spiritual information online. See: Lenhart, Amanda, et al. "Teens and Technology: Youth Are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation," p. vi. *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. 27 July, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Cavoukian, Ann. "Online Privacy: Make Youth Awareness and Education a Priority," p.5. Ontario: Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario. March 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Weimann, Gabriel. "Online Terrorists Prey on the Vulnerable." *YaleGlobal Online*, 5 March 2008.

age groups and focus the platforms, content, messaging, and appeal depending on age. For example:

- The Palestinian group Hamas specifically targets young children with its youth website, al-Fateh (“The Conqueror”), which features cartoons, Disney-like cartoon characters, and colorful children’s stories. These characters are used to perpetuate messages of violence, promote hatred of Israel, and praise jihad and martyrdom.<sup>17</sup>
- Some groups have released video games appealing to kids and adolescents. Hizballah developed a series of games called *Special Force and Special Force 2*, which are first-person-shooter games that simulate military missions against Israeli soldiers. According to one Hizballah member: "In this game you can be a partner in the victory. Fight, resist and destroy your enemy's Merkava tank in the game of force and victory...*Special Force 2* also offers mental and personal training for those who play."<sup>18</sup> *Special Force 2* is available in Arabic, Farsi, and English. Another online game is *Night of Bush Capturing*, which was released by the Global Islamic Media Front in 2006. The goal of the game is for players to hunt and kill former President George W. Bush.<sup>19</sup> An advertisement for the game indicated it was being distributed for “terrorist children.”<sup>20</sup>
- Web forums and chat rooms appear to be used to reach older teens. These mediums are where peer-to-peer interactions take place and where youth can move from passively gathering radical information to actively participating in discussion of radical topics.
- Special attention appears to focus on reaching out to young women over the Internet. For example, young Muslim women may face traditional restrictions that can be overcome online. They may communicate anonymously with other Muslim women, and even men, via the Internet in ways that may not be socially acceptable in person. The activeness of Dutch Muslim women online has not been lost on Muslim terrorist groups. These women have been recruited as translators, developers of Dutch language jihadi literature and developers of Dutch jihadi websites and software.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. See: <http://www.al-fateh.net/> for the Hamas-run website.

<sup>18</sup> Peckham, Matt. “War by Proxy? Hezbollah’s Anti-Israel Game..” PC World. 16 August 2007.

<sup>19</sup> United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat.” Majority and Minority Staff Report, 8 May 2008, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Islamic Radicals Release "Night of Bush Capturing" Game, September 18, 2006. <http://www.gamepolitics.com/2006/09/18/islamic-radicals-release-night-of-bush-capturing-game>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (NCTb). “Jihadis and the Internet,” pp. 65-66.

The various platforms and messages used by terrorist groups online are intended to incite negative sentiment toward enemies (or perceived enemies), to immunize young persons to violence, glorify martyrs, and create bonds.

## **The Internet as a ‘Radicalization Accelerant’**

The United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs noted the Internet “becomes a virtual ‘echo chamber’ – acting as a radicalization accelerant.”<sup>22</sup> Youth are generally drawn into radical Internet web spaces for three main reasons: they may run across radical content while exploring the Internet for entertainment (such as video sites); they may be curiously seeking information on ideologies, traditions, or heritage-related matter associated with the radical group; or, they may be looking for a community with which they can self-identify.<sup>23</sup>

The Internet plays a vital role in creating social bonds that are necessary for radicalization and recruitment, as well as providing a venue for perpetuating radicalization among groups of recruits. If youth have begun to explore these areas and have formed bonds with other like-minded individuals (whether they are peers in similar situations or recruiters, online or offline), their radicalization may then progress inside these groups. Researchers have commented that the Internet “can intensify a sense of identity” through the phenomenon of “group polarization,” in which members of a specific radicalizing group perpetuate their own radicalization through continued discussion, perhaps with the facilitation of a terrorist recruiter.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Self-Radicalization***

There have been instances of young persons utilizing the Internet to self-radicalize into terrorist group supporters or members. A notable example of self-radicalization is that of Aabid Hussein Khan, a 22-year-old British Muslim who, with two others, founded a terrorist cell in the UK: “In 1997, at only 12 years old, Khan quickly became an avid fan of anything he could find on the Internet relating to jihad and the mujahideen...and he began to ‘use newsgroups and discussion forums to join with people in discussing these

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<sup>22</sup> United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Home Grown Terrorist Threat” Majority & Minority Staff Report, 8 May 2008, p.11.

<sup>23</sup> Von Knop, Katharina. “Countering Web-based Islamist Narratives: Conceptualizing an Information War and a Counter-propaganda Campaign.” In *Hypermedia Seduction for Terrorist Recruiting*, B. Ganor et al. (Eds.), 2007, p. 246. This curiosity is very broad, and could range from simple intrigue with a particular group or ideology, to doing research on one’s own religious or ethnic heritage in order to have a better concept of self-identity. See also: Cilluffo, Frank, et al. “NETworked Radicalization: A Counter-Strategy.” Special Report by The George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute and The University of Virginia Critical Incident Analysis Group, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Madden, Christina L. “Typing TERROR in a Crowded Chat.” *Policy Innovations*, 5 February 2008.

issues...”<sup>25</sup> Even at such a young age, and in the public Internet’s earlier years, Khan fervently pursued an “e-war” strategy over the Internet, and managed to create an underground, online network of supporters in Europe, Canada, and the United States. “These young men and women – most of whom had never met each other in person – evolved into a tightly-knit circle who shared a common, all-consuming interest in computers and global mujahideen movements.”<sup>26</sup> Their cell was finally broken by British officials in June 2006.

## **Countering Youth Radicalization**

Efforts to counter the online radicalization have thus far lagged behind terrorists’ abilities to promote their messages. In the fall of 2007, Defense Secretary Robert Gates commented that, “It is just plain embarrassing that Al Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America.”<sup>27</sup> A Senate report that followed in May 2008 concluded that further research was needed to address how a counter-message strategy should be fashioned, what roles the government and religious leaders should have, and how any existing outreach efforts could be improved.<sup>28</sup>

In countering radicalization messages to youth, many governments have sought out moderate Muslim officials and influential religious figures to address head-on the fallacies and distortions of Islamic teachings that terrorist groups often propagate. Singapore, in particular, has partnered with moderate imams to great effect. For example, Singapore’s Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) has developed websites for youth, to include a site that responds to religious queries and a site devoted to rebutting extremist ideologies. MUIS also hosts a web portal where moderate religious officials develop content specifically aimed at youth audiences.<sup>29</sup> As well, Singapore’s government-funded Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) produces a website featuring responses to misinterpretations of Islam, articles about radicalism and moderate Islam, and a multimedia section.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kohlmann, Evan F. “Anatomy of a Modern Homegrown Terror Cell: Aabid Khan et al.” *The NEFA Foundation*, September 2008, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. “New Report Cites Growing Threat of Homegrown Terror.” 8 May, 2008. [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressReleases.Detail&Affiliation=C&PressRelease\\_id=05ba1a5e-94ee-411c-8340-59ca8f237094&Month=5&Year=2008](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=PressReleases.Detail&Affiliation=C&PressRelease_id=05ba1a5e-94ee-411c-8340-59ca8f237094&Month=5&Year=2008) (accessed 8 April 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See: Singaporean Muslims Against Terrorism. “U-Start @ Muhammad Haniff’s Site.” Counterideology. <http://counterideology.multiply.com> (accessed 13 April 2009) and WordPress Weblog. “The Lecturer.” <http://2jay.wordpress.com/avata/>. (accessed 13 April 2009). Also see: Hassan, Muhammad Haniff. “Singapore’s Muslim Community-Based Initiatives against JI,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* vol. 1, Issue 5, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See: The Religious Rehabilitation Group. <http://www.rrg.sg/>. (Accessed 13 April 2009).

For other young persons, however, for whom the terrorist appeal is “belonging” and “social bonding,” other approaches must be sought. The first critical step in countering youth radicalization should be to develop a better understanding, within the United States, of who our “at risk” youth populations are and how they become susceptible to terrorist recruitment. Once a more complete understanding of youth radicalization is gained, this knowledge should be shared with community members who come in contact with young persons on a regular basis, including educators, parents, and religious leaders. Educating these individuals will enable them to better address the needs of young persons as well as identify and prevent potential problems.

It is necessary to promote awareness that any young person with an Internet connection can access websites that promote terrorist groups or provide graphic depictions of acts of terrorism, which are commonly portrayed as acts of heroism. While there are discreet examples of young persons that have become radicalized online, the magnitude to which this is occurring is not known.

Efforts need to be undertaken to counter radicalization and recruitment where they occur, online. We need to increase our understanding of the tools, techniques, and messages that terrorists are using. We need to gain a better understanding of the tools, techniques, and messages that youth respond to and address the underlying needs that may make young persons susceptible to terrorist appeals.

## **Lessons Learned from the Private Sector**

As part of this study, HSI identified private sector entities that have devoted considerable resources to understanding youth, their changing interests, behaviors, preferences, and needs. Particularly, we sought to identify entities that have developed effective approaches to reaching out to young persons using various online platforms. Our interest was in uncovering any best practices that could enable the U.S. government to increase the effectiveness of its approaches to countering youth recruitment and radicalization on the Internet.

On 19 February, 2009, HSI held a roundtable in Los Angeles, California with representatives from a strategic communications firm, Outside Eyes Inc., as well as the management and marketers of an internationally-renowned teen music group that has achieved its multi-billion dollar popularity almost solely through the Internet.<sup>31</sup> The intention was to gain a better understanding of how they approached the youth market, what methods they utilized to evolve with young persons’ changing needs and preferences, what messages had particular resonance, and whether they had recommendations on how to test the effectiveness of their messages. The following approaches were discussed:

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<sup>31</sup> Outside Eyes Inc. provides media strategy, brand development, and crisis management. Representatives from the group we interviewed asked that their names not be disclosed; for the purpose of this study, they will be referred to herein as “the group” or “the band.”

### ***Reach out to youth where they are online***

The group recognizes that to effectively reach youth audiences they need to utilize the same platforms that are popular among young persons. Youth go to social networking sites and interactive video streaming sites to connect with each other and to share information and content such as videos, photos, and links to other web pages. As a result, the group also uses these platforms to reach their counterparts by posting their own videos, photos, and links, and communicating directly with their fans. By directly engaging youth on these platforms, the band's management is able to take advantage of hundreds of thousands of pre-made social networks, which become channels for their messages.

### ***Take advantage of the viral nature of online content***

The band's takes advantage of the Internet's interconnectivity, and owes a great deal of its success and reach to "viral" marketing. Viral marketing refers to a technique that facilitates and encourages people to pass along a marketing message.<sup>32</sup> The group uses interactive sites like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube to post materials (such as videos, photos, and music clips) that can be picked up and further propagated by their audience, who serve as messengers that keep the materials disseminating among their own networks. The group has found that youth are more likely to share content that is entertaining and appealing, and develop their messages and materials with this in mind.

### ***Authenticity is crucial***

The group has found that it is important not to underestimate young persons' ability to determine the authenticity of messages and messengers. The band believes they will quickly lose credibility, interest, and impact with their young audience if they put out a message that seems contrived. Messages and messengers must be authentic and credible in order to resonate with youth audiences.

The band establishes their authentic character by releasing impromptu, behind-the-scenes videos in addition to their performances. It is vital that "who they are" remains genuine and consistent with each release. However, while their messages remain authentic, the band also tailors how they interact with certain audience segments in order to reach and appeal to them more effectively (for example, a young female crowd versus an older, mixed crowd). They have found this to be especially important when reaching out to international audiences, which may require designing messages to address specific cultural norms.

### ***Develop and utilize feedback mechanisms***

The band takes advantage of the Internet's immediacy by reviewing and responding to audiences' reactions to their messages and postings. When the band posts a video on YouTube or Facebook, for example, other users may immediately post text or video

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<sup>32</sup> Definition from [http://www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/viral\\_marketing/](http://www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/viral_marketing/)

responses. The immediacy of this feedback allows the group to track the effects of their messages in near-real-time. The band continuously scans responses to their posted content, gauging how positively or negatively the message is received as well as the how often the posting is viewed. Sometimes they will select specific user-generated videos or comments and reply directly to them with other posted videos. In doing so, the group establishes a direct connection with their audience, bolsters their image as an authentic group, and directly addresses comments or questions at hand.

### ***Respond positively and fluidly***

The band considers how their messages are received online and what the messages are motivating fans to do, in order to craft their next response more effectively. If audiences' behaviors are positive, the musicians attempt to perpetuate them with similar responses. In the event that the group has to address any issues in their public, private, or online lives, they solve it by using "positive redirection." This entails redirecting the online discussion by reflecting and reinforcing the positive characteristics of the group, with the intention of guiding the discussion to a positive outcome. The group attempts to "take the positive and make it an enemy of the negative."

## **Summary & Implications**

The private sector representatives we spoke to have effectively reached youth audiences online by utilizing popular interactive platforms. They use these Internet platforms to disseminate their messages, gauge the responses, and adapt their messaging strategies as necessary.

Admittedly, the U.S. government would not be able to adopt all of these methods for use in countering youth radicalization. Indeed, government efforts to counter online radicalization may be limited by legislation. For example, the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948, popularly referred to as the Smith-Mundt Act, requires that information produced for overseas audiences by the State Department not be "disseminated" within the United States.<sup>33</sup> The advent of the Internet, which blurs the line between domestic and international audiences, raises new issues that need to be addressed. The lack of a consistent interpretation of what Smith-Mundt allows and what it prohibits in today's environment may seriously constrain U.S. government efforts to counter extremist messages online.

However, certain core elements of what the private sector groups we spoke to recommended are valid for countering radicalization efforts. These include:

- Know who your target audience is, including what their interests are and what appeals to them
- Shape messages that address the needs of the target audience

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<sup>33</sup> Armstrong, Matt. "Rethinking Smith-Mundt." *Small Wars Journal* 28 July 2008. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2008/07/rethinking-smithmundt/>.

- Identify a messenger(s) that resonates with the target audience
- Utilize the viral nature of the Internet by having your audience perpetuate the message
- Utilize platforms that are popular with the target audience to disseminate the message(s)
- Measure and monitor the effectiveness of the message(s)
- Develop a process to continually tailor and shape messages to address the changing needs of the target audience

The Internet is now a prominent staple in providing youth with entertainment, connectivity, and interaction. Youth's Internet usage thrives on the ability to be involved with online content and communicate their opinions with the creators as well as with each other. Terrorist groups have recognized this dynamic, and have begun to reach out to youth using the same platforms and modes in an attempt to indoctrinate youth with radical messages. Although the full extent of their success cannot yet be measured, the Internet increasingly risks becoming a tool for recruitment and radicalization of young persons.

Current government countermeasures have begun to address and undermine some aspects of terrorists' online messages (namely, religious or ideological tenets), but could reach much wider swaths of youth on more engaging platforms. By only using religious figures as messengers, these efforts shortsightedly discount all the other online influences that impress and inform youths' lives and shape their perceptions. The private sector presents a host of best practices for effectively reaching youth online, five of which have been outlined here. By applying the same lessons that the private sector's marketing and entertainment experts have used to successfully understand, reach, and influence millions of young people online, Internet counter-radicalization efforts may be significantly enhanced.



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