LIVE TERROR A NEW WAY/MODEL OF ONLINE RADICALIZATION?

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Abstract:

With the exponential development of the virtual environment and social networks, radical elements have managed to promote and disseminate their radical ideas, in less time, to a wider and more diversified audience than in the past. This aspect has caused a shift of radicalization processes from the offline environment to the online environment, turning online radicalization into one of the biggest security challenges. This paper aims to (1) provide an insight into the hypothesis according to which the live-streaming of terrorist attacks in recent years could become a new radicalization mechanism, perhaps generating a new trend and (2) identify the elements and dynamics that determine attackers to use live-stream platforms at the time of the terrorist attack. The article proposes an analysis of the current theoretical framework that combines the brief analysis of the main models of online radicalization, highlighting the elements that could underlie a new radicalization model focused on live-stream/copycat terrorist attacks. In this article we aim to answer the following research question: can live-streaming represent a new mechanism of radicalization?

Keywords: *radicalization, live-streaming, propaganda, violent extremism.*

Introduction

We are almost constantly connected to a virtual reality, which is increasingly gaining ground at the expense of everyday reality. The facilities offered by the online environment together with the live-streaming services of well-known platforms such as Facebook Live, Periscope, Twitch, Instagram favoured the significant and varied absorption of virtual content by Internet users.

The past era when the messages of terrorist organizations hardly managed to penetrate the borders of Western states is totally in contrast

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with the current capabilities of terrorist organizations that, with the help of digital technology, have revolutionized the concepts of propaganda and radicalization, managing to be one click away from the users of the virtual environment. Thus, with the development and benefits brought by the online environment, terrorist elements have transformed the virtual environment into a key tool in propaganda and radicalization actions. Moreover, with the advent of live-streaming platforms, the radicalization process and modern propaganda mechanisms have been resized.

Although scientific evidence proving the hypothesis that the Internet plays a direct role in the radicalisation process continues to be limited, and existing studies of online radicalisation have focused predominantly on media content that disseminates opinions, the online environment remains an important factor of radicalisation processes, insufficiently studied in relation to the influence it can have on individuals by promoting attitudes and behaviours that generate violence.

With the exponential development of the virtual environment and social networks, radical elements have managed to promote and disseminate their radical ideas, faster, to a larger and more diversified audience than in the past. This aspect has led to a reorientation of radicalization processes carried out in an offline environment to an online environment, turning online radicalization into one of the biggest security challenges.

This paper aims to (1) provide a perspective on the hypothesis according to which the live-streaming of terrorist attacks in recent years could become a new radicalization mechanism, generating a new trend and (2) identify the elements and dynamics that determine the attackers to use live-stream platforms when committing terrorist attacks.

This article proposes an analysis of the current theoretical framework that combines the brief analysis of two main models of online radicalization, highlighting the elements that could underlie a new

radicalization model focused on live-stream[1]/ copycat[2] terrorist attacks. In this context, one of the key questions we will try to answer is: what motivates attackers to transmit a terrorist attack in real time, through live-stream platforms?

Theorizing Online Radicalization

Existing scientific research on the role that virtual environment plays in the radicalization processes and on how the interaction between individuals and online extremist content influences radicalization are most often theoretical, descriptive and insufficient (von Behr et al., 2013; Bastug, Douai & Akca, 2018, Mølmen & Ravndal, 2021; Gill & Corner, 2017). Empirical research in online radicalisation highlights that the path to violent, terrorist actions is complex and relies on both offline and online triggers that play an interconnected role (Gill et al., 2019, 2017; Koehler, 2014; von Behr et al., 2013), the online environment representing only one dimension in the process whose effect needs to be analysed and understood in a larger context (Ines von Behr, 2013).

In order to understand online radicalization and beyond, we need to understand both the needs, impulses, forms of manifestation that led to and determined an individual to radicalize and commit a terrorist attack, as well as the mechanisms and virtual support that facilitated and accelerated the radicalization process. Like the concept of classical radicalisation, online radicalisation is not explicitly defined, there is no agreement on what it is and how it takes place, which gives rise to interpretations (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017; Gill, 2015; Herath & Whittaker, 2023) addressing issues such as: where does radicalization actually occur, what is the interplay of the offline and online environment, etc.?

The current research starts from current descriptions and models of radicalization that also focus on the role of online environment plays in initiating, sustaining and carrying out the process of radicalization.

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[1] Streaming is a technological phenomenon, made up of platforms that pump non-stop information to devices connected to the internet, so users have real-time access to content without having to download the desired material.
[2] Someone who is influenced by someone else and does or says exactly the same as them.

Individuals interact with and are exposed to different types of content in the virtual environment, adopt beliefs that legitimize violence, and shape these beliefs to the point where they are translated into violent actions.

Current models of online radicalisation

In the literature, there are various models of online radicalisation, among them is that of Bastug, Douai and Akca. This model presents a mechanism that can lead a person to commit a terrorist act in four steps, targeting the accessibility and duplication of radical content in the online environment, and the susceptibility and predisposition of some people to resonate with radical content. Another model is the radicalisation factor model (RFM) of Babak Akhgar and Douglas Wells (2019) which aims to integrate into a common framework the causal factors of online radicalisation process and the mechanisms by which an individual gets in contact with extremist ideas and can reproduce them. A third model was proposed by Guri Nordtorp Mølmen and Jacob Aasland Ravndal (2023) which emphasizes the causal mechanisms and modalities that fuel and connect radical ideas online with violent actions, highlighting six mechanisms, namely compensation, isolation, facilitation, acceleration, echo effect and triggering violent action.

Given that the objective of the research is to identify how the live-stream contributes to the radicalization process, I will analyse the models of radicalization highlighted by G. Weimann and Von Knop (2008) and Loo Seng Neo (2019). These two models of radicalization emphasize both online radicalization mechanisms and their interpenetration with radicalization factors, aspects that can be a key element in shaping a radicalization model related to live-stream terrorist attacks and copycat effect.

The model of G. Weimann and Von Knop

The online radicalization model of G. Weimann and Von Knop (2008) is based on the search stage, in which individuals try to fulfil their own needs, motivations (spiritual, psychological, social, belonging, recognition) by searching and identifying answers in the online environment that resonate with them and their needs. This phase is

followed by the stage of seduction or persuasion, considered to be the most important, because, within it, users are no longer passive but become active in the online environment, being attracted by the radical ideologies. Once seduced, individuals enter the captivity stage where they begin to access forums, blogs, chat rooms, echo-chambers, being attracted by seductive propaganda, becoming part of the online radical communities. Most elements in the process of online radicalization stop at this stage and do not move to the last phase, meaning the operative/ actional one, which involves familiarizing users with various activities prior to terrorist action.

The Model Reflection, Exploration, Connection, Resolution, Operational ("RECRO")

Loo Seng Neo's "RECRO" model (2019) is a five-step model of how the person and the characteristics of online platforms complement and influence each other during the radicalisation process. The five stages of the model are: reflection phase (details the triggers, needs and vulnerabilities of an individual, developing interest and receptivity to alternative systems to meet their needs); the exploration phase (represents the period when the individual begins to make sense of online information presented by violent extremists); the connection phase (refers to the interaction, the influence of like-minded individuals and the online community regarding the new worldview perceived by the individual); the resolution phase (refers to the individual's impulse to translate their radical beliefs into action); the operational phase (is the period during which the individual can commit acts of violence to achieve the intended goals).

The chance that a person will become receptive to radical narratives depends on how these online narratives relate to their life experiences (Weimann and von Knop, 2008). Also, the developed receptivity to alternative belief systems depends on the triggers, needs, and vulnerabilities of the reflection phase. Thus, the first two phases take place in a parallel rather than sequential manner, and cannot be separated in reality (Borum, 2011). Following the exploration phase, the radicalized individuals initiate connections with elements that share their visions, creating online communities in echo chambers, based on

similar interests and ideas that allow the individuals to find support and strengthen their new worldview (Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Thomas, Mcgarty & Louis, 2014). Following the resolution phase, the need to act violently may lead the individual to dedicate more time and resources to contribute to the cause. Wilner and Dubouloz (2011) highlight that violent behaviour is a product of individuals' newly acquired value system, in which revenge is not only justified, but expected.

Apparently these radicalization models are different, but in essence they are complementary, having a series of common aspects: (1) the motivational element composed of both pull (feeling of dissatisfaction, unfulfillment, etc.) and push factors that can serve as incentives (acquired status, importance within the group, hero image, etc.); (2) the need to identify responses or meet social needs; (3) the individuals' gradual decision to engage in terrorist actions, (4) the seduction mechanism offered by the virtual environment; (5) a high degree of similarity, at least in terms of the trigger elements of radicalization, namely a feeling, an experience considered unfair, unjust by the individual and transformed into hatred towards a real or fancied culprit is found in the models of Babak Akhgar and Douglas Wells, Loo Seng Neo.

Although in the last years there has been an increase in online radicalization associated with extremist/radical propaganda created by individuals who broadcast their own terrorist attacks live, current models of online radicalization tend to focus mostly, if not exclusively, on the individual consuming virtual radical propaganda and less or not at all on his role as a prosumer, both producer and consumer of radical materials and on the fact that this dual role can constitute a mechanism of online radicalization.

Given the fact that the live-streaming of terrorist actions allows: (1) users to access real time extremist videos content, that is engaging, captivating; (2) connection to real emotions, feelings from the moment of the action carried out; (3) a much faster identification with similar visions and behaviour; (4) a spread of responsibility to duplicate the same type, kind of behaviour and action in the name of an ideology (be it right-wing or Islamist); (5) the considerable narrowing of the distance between the viewer/consumer/spectator and the victim, bringing him/her to the forefront, correlated with the fact that at least the far-right

perpetrators in the last six years have inspired each other in the process of radicalization and committing terrorist actions, we can hypothesize that live-streaming can represent a mechanism for accelerating the radicalisation processes. To verify this hypothesis, I will analyse a series of attacks that have been live-streamed and identify the ways in which the perpetrators have influenced each other.

Terrorists' live-streaming attacks

In September 1972, television broadcasts from around the world, present at the Olympic Games in Munich/ Germany, captured live the terrorist attack committed by members of the Palestinian group "Black September". Then, in September 2001, TVs broadcast live the moment when the second plane hijacked by members of the terrorist organization Al Qaeda hit World Trade Centre. In retrospect, it is undeniable that the two terrorist organizations relied on the media impact, but at that time these two attacks could not be considered "live-stream attack" type of action.

Technology, the latest high-tech capabilities and online services have become essential for the survival of any extremist/terrorist organization. Thus, in the last decade we notice that terrorist organizations have created their own press agencies, online publications, radio stations, social media channels, vital tools for propaganda and recruitment activities, trying to keep pace with the restrictive measures implemented at the level of Western states to prevent and combat extremist propaganda and radicalization.

In addition to all these elements, in recent years a new propaganda method has been developed. It is much more brutal, more direct, more personal, and assigns the bomber a triple role: that of main actor focusing on the live transmission of the terrorist attack, producer of terrorist propaganda and model of inspiration for future attackers. Both far-right and Islamist terrorist elements have made steady strides in using body-worn video (BWV) cameras and stream channels for live, real-time transmission of terrorist attacks and elements inside the attack.

The pioneers of these methods of propaganda and radicalization are Al Shabaab, the ISIS-affiliated terrorist group that transmitted in real time, on Twitter, information, images, details from the attack on

September 21, 2013 at the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya. Subsequently, Mohammed Merah, the perpetrator of the March 2012 terrorist attacks in Montauban and Toulouse, France, used a GoPro camera attached to his body to film and promote the attack, the video being sent to the Al Jazeera news agency, which decided not to make it public.

The one who managed to broadcast live the attack is Larossi Abballa, the author of the attack in Magnanville/France. On the evening of June 13, 2016, he stabbed to death a policeman, breaking into his house and killing his wife with the same weapon. The bomber used the Facebook app to live-stream a 13-minute clip from the scene of the attack and declare his loyalty to ISIS. Following the attack, ISIS news agency uploaded an edited version of the live-streamed video to YouTube, which garnered more than 9.000 views.

Another promoter of Islamist ideology is Abdoulakh Anzorov, the author of the October 16, 2020 attack in Paris, France. He beheaded history teacher Samuel Paty, filmed the attack, and the images became viral, being shared on Telegram.

Among the Islamist bombers who intended to broadcast live the terrorist attacks committed, but for various reasons (mainly technical) failed to complete their approach are: Mehdi Nemmouche, the bomber at the Jewish Museum in Brussels/Belgium, on May 24, 2014, who was carrying a portable video camera with which he intended to broadcast the attack live. After the attack, a video was found in which Mehdi Nemmouche expressed regret for not being able to successfully transmit the attack. Amedy Coulibaly, the perpetrator of the January 2015 attack on a Jewish hypermarket in Paris, also used a BWV camera during the siege. Although there is no clear information on whether the images went viral on jihadist platforms, according to witnesses, Amedy Coulibaly downloaded the images from the siege from the camera's memory card to a laptop.

Also, in December 2023, a 22-year-old British man was convicted of planning to commit a gun attack on a Christian preacher at Hyde Park's Speakers' Corner, a venue famous in London for attracting propagandists and influential religious leaders. The possible perpetrator downloaded al-Qaeda publications and other extremist material, saying he intended to carry a video camera to live-stream the attack.

Another example is that of US citizen Munir Abdulkader who aimed to kill military personnel and execute/behead them live, the materials being intended for ISIS propaganda. Unlike terrorist attacks committed by followers of Islamist ideology about which we cannot highlight whether they clearly and directly caused other individuals to commit terrorist actions, live-stream terrorist attacks committed by radical elements, promoters of right-wing ideology inspired and determined other radical followers to commit terrorist actions.

One of the far-right bombers who live-streamed a terrorist attack, becoming an inspiration for his successors is Brenton Tarrant, the perpetrator of the attack on mosques in Christchurch/ New Zealand, on March 15, 2019. He live-streamed the attack on various online platforms, including Facebook, for 17 minutes. Within 24 hours of the attack, Facebook removed 1.5 million videos of the massacre at the two mosques in Christchurch and blocked 1.2 million clips from uploading, with 300.000 videos existing on Facebook at any given time. Prior to the attack, Brenton Tarrant promoted a 74-page manifesto online titled "The Great Replacement" that drew similarities to the manifesto posted by Anders Behring Breivik, the 2011 bomber. Breivik did not live-stream on purpose, the television stations broadcast the events on the island of Utøya (Norway), which led to his followers having access to these videos.

In October 2019, Stephan Balliet live-streamed on Twitch, 35 minutes of the attack committed at a synagogue in Halle/Germany, as part of the Balliet video promoting anti-Semitic ideas. Brenton Tarrant was the artisan who inspired Hugo Jackson, the perpetrator of the attack on the Källeberg School in Eslov/Sweden on August 19, 2021. Jackson live-streamed the attack on Twitch for over 9 minutes, using his phone as a makeshift BWV device mounted on his helmet. When starting the live-stream, the 15-year-old quoted Brenton Tarrant as urging followers to subscribe to the PewDiePie YouTube channel.

Also, 18-year-old Payton Gendron, the Buffalo/New York bomber on May 14, 2022 live-streamed part of the attack on video streaming platform Twitch. Inspired by Brenton Tarrant, Payton Gendron posted an online diary of over 700 pages and a manifesto containing 180 pages, part of which was quoted, plagiarized from the one promoted by Brenton Tarrant, in which he explains his motives and beliefs for committing a terrorist attack. Although the live-stream was watched by only

22 people, being removed by Twitch within two minutes of its launch, the copies made were widely posted online (Twitter, Instagram, Reddit), attracting millions of views on Facebook and other platforms in just a few hours. Thus, a copy uploaded to an alternative streaming site was viewed more than three million times before its removal. Also, the existing link on Facebook was deleted after more than ten hours, during which it was shared more than 46,000 times within the platform. 30 minutes before live-streaming began, Payton issued a series of invitations to Discord users, containing access to the chat room where his logs were posted and a series of online messages containing the Twitch live-stream link he used to broadcast the attack. Chat logs indicated that the attack was originally planned to take place on March 15 so that the perpetrator could commemorate the anniversary of the Christchurch mosque shootings, having been postponed because the bomber was diagnosed with COVID-19.

From Zero to Hero: Explore the Role Live-streaming Play in Radicalization Process

The online environment/social networks play an active role in disseminating their own radical experiences and their increasing consumption by users, which creates a loop effect, respectively the individual initially consuming online propaganda becomes its producer inspiring other consumers who will later become those who produce extremist materials. D. Koehler (2014) argues that the benefits offered by the virtual environment, such as anonymity, space without constraints, efficient communication, unlimited access to information, visibility, determine vulnerable elements, in the process of radicalization, to want to shape and promote a new version of themselves (a better me but in a wrong and negative way).

According to the online radicalization models of L. S. Neo and G. Weimann and Von Knop, vulnerable people, with background elements that make them prone to radicalization, initially go through a stage called reflection or search, in which they aim to identify an alternative to meet certain needs such as validation, integration, recognition at community level, etc. Analysing the background elements and the journey of both Tarrant Brenton and Payton Gendron until the terrorist attacks were

committed, it indicates that the online environment represented an alternative, a solution to the experiences and social life experienced by the two people.

Tarrant Brenton grew up in a single-parent family, as his parents divorced when he was young. According to his mother, Shaton Tarrant, he was traumatized by the divorce, the loss of home in a fire and the death of his father. Following his parents' separation, Brenton Tarrant was characterized as a person suffering from social anxiety, being bullied by both his stepfather and schoolmates. Tarrant Brenton became attracted to video games at the age of seven, during the period when he and his mother were exposed to verbal and physical violence. He was mainly involved in first-person shooter games and massive multiplayer online role-playing games, and at 14 he began using the platform "4chan3", later accessed by Gendron Payton as well.

In 2007, when Tarrant Brenton was 17 years old, his father was diagnosed with lung cancer, and in 2010, he committed suicide, Tarrant Brenton being the one who discovered it. The diagnosis and subsequent death of his father exacerbated his social anxiety and stress (according to the report published by the Royal Commission of inquiry into the terrorist attack on Christchurch Mosque), and he was further drawn to ultra-nationalist messages and hatred of Muslim immigrants in Western countries.

Along the same line, Gendron Payton, according to his classmates' description, was a socially awkward, withdrawn boy. According to the self-description in his manifesto, Gendron Payton was a pure, white man whose experiences and personal life were worthless, and he was looking for a way to protect and serve his community, culture, and race. Mostly connected to the reality of online streaming games, Gendron Payton was interested in and fascinated by anything that could attract the attention of his colleagues and of the people around him, such as firearms.

The stage of seduction, persuasion or exploration in the case of the two attackers is highlighted by the ideological stages taken, especially

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[3] Anonymous English-language website known as an online subculture hub with an influential community in promoting movements such as Anonymous and alt-right but also in creating and publicizing memes such as lolcats, Rickrolling, rage comics, wojaks, Pepe the Frog.

by Gendron Payton who initially identified himself as a promoter of left-wing ideology, later promoting anti-Semitic, neo-Nazi and far-right ideas. Payton said he adopted these ideological positions after visiting a number of websites and discussion forums, including 4chan.

The phases of captivity, resolution and connection are highlighted in Gendron Payton's case by the support he expressed in his diary to his predecessors Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant, constantly mentioning that he was inspired by the latter. This is also apparent from the fact that 57% of his manifesto is copied from the one promoted by Brenton Tarrant. Gendron Payton's desire to put his visions and ideas into practice is also evidenced by planning the attack months in advance, posting in his diary that he entered the store where he committed the attack several times, and came to know its daily operations. Both Brenton Tarrant and Gendron Payton have reached the final stage of online radicalization, respectively operational, committing terrorist attacks.

P. Neuman (2013), M. Sageman (2009), T. Psyszczynski (2009), J. Whittaker (2019) highlight the fact that online radicalization is based on a series of dynamics that involve creating a sense of importance of one's own death, self-sacrifice, learning and normalizing deviant behaviours (with the help of echo chambers), creating the effect of online disinhibition and hyperbolized virtual image. The idealized and zealous individuals online are actually idealized versions of the real persons.

Far-right attackers and not only, in recent years, invoke the online environment as the starting point in their journeys towards radicalization, and the combination of online diaries and live transmission of terrorist attacks they commit represent not only a window into the radicalization process undergone, but also a mechanism to inspire and disseminate to a wider audience the attacker's view.

Analysing the typology of attackers who have committed live terrorist attacks in recent years, it is evident that their profile is predominantly that of vulnerable, socially isolated people who feel uncomfortable in society (as Payton Gendron said about himself in the journals promoted online), looking for a validation from society and the community to which they belong (e.g. Payton Gendron mentioning that the live broadcast of the attack will make those who watch him to applaud him), who were radicalized by consuming propaganda online.

The option of committing a terrorist attack live brings the attacker to the forefront, giving him the opportunity to get out of anonymity, to differentiate himself from others, to give birth to a trend, to become a model, an influencer for other people.

Also, live-stream attacks place the attackers in the foreground, in the role of hero in the vision of other followers of the promoted ideology, but also of propaganda creator, giving them the possibility to personalize and brutalize the attack and create a dynamic propaganda.

Conclusions

Attempts in recent years to broadcast a terrorist attack live highlight the possibility of developing a new way of acting and a new method of radicalisation and propaganda. The authenticity of the live content broadcast at the time of the terrorist attack generates maximum impact on the audience, but also a serial action, an act of violence inspiring the next act of violence as Payton Gendron was inspired by Brenton Tarrant and Tarrant by Anders Breivik.

Personal, planned live-streams with a well-defined purpose or just driven by the current trend of going viral could represent a mutation in the modus operandi of extremist/ jihadist elements.

If when we refer to the live-stream attacks committed in recent years by the promoters of radical right-wing ideology we can conclude that this way of promotion was a method of inspiration for other people who committed terrorist attacks. As far as the Islamist bombers who broadcast the attacks live are concerned, there are currently no studies to attest, to validate that their actions have inspired, radicalized and led other individuals to commit terrorist attacks, perpetuating this course of action.

The purpose of this article, to provide insight into the hypothesis according to which the live transmission of terrorist attacks in recent years could become a new mechanism of radicalization, has been partially achieved. The lack of clear studies and data meant to help shape a response to how the live-stream of Islamist terrorist attacks and the copycat effect inspired or no other followers in carrying out terrorist actions makes this working hypothesis a subject of open study.

However, given the fact that terrorist attacks committed live by elements promoting radical right-wing ideology have managed to inspire and determine followers to continue this mode of action, it is not excluded that in the future live-streaming terrorist attacks will become a trend, the visibility, dynamics, projection of an image of power and control of the bomber, the reduced distance between the attackers and the victim representing primary elements in choosing this mode of action.

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