

Radicalisation in the Digital Age: An Analysis

Fakhar Hussain*

Abstract

The internet has emerged as a catalyst of radicalisation, aiming to accelerate the easiest, wide-ranging connectivity and the utilization of cellular devices, social media platforms, chat rooms, virtual spheres, and online video sharing networks in the emergent era of digitalisation. Researchers have identified a symbiotic relationship between social media and radicalisation, making it an essential medium for shaping public opinion through the dissemination of propaganda and radical messaging. Through these platforms, extremist organisations endeavour to attract individuals by promoting extreme ideologies, frequently attempting to persuade them that violence is a justified or essential method for attaining their objectives. This qualitative study aims to make a comprehensive analysis of the existing secondary data on radicalisation through social media. It aims to discuss how social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are linked to violent extremism and online radicalisation. Through a systematic review, it seeks to identify the core themes, trends, and limitations, thereby highlighting the research gaps for future investigation. This research is based on the existing literature from journal articles, books, working papers, and strategic analysis from leading think tanks, and graphics from terrorists' virtual propaganda contents.

Keywords: Online Radicalisation, Violent Extremism, Digital Propaganda, Social Media

Introduction

The internet and social media platforms have emerged as powerful drivers of digital transformation by enabling immediate, unrestricted communication and information dissemination worldwide, thereby shifting the digital ecosystem from a one-way, "read-only" model of traditional media to an interactive "read-write" model. The advent of Web 2.0 has given rise to messaging platforms, forums, blogs, and collaborative systems comprising Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and Myspace, which are linked to each other in novel ways, creating new-fangled digital landscape.¹ The emergent revolution altered the "read-only" paradigm of traditional media (Web 1.0), prevalent during the 1990s. Primarily, it comprised the static websites with no way to communicate with users other than through standard page navigation, search, and email

* Fakhar Hussain (diplomat786@gmail.com) is currently a Lecturer in Civics at Government Imamia Associate College, Sahiwal, Pakistan. He is an independent researcher in international relations. Most of his research examines geopolitics, energy security, Belt and Road Initiative, Digital Silk Road, migration, democracy, climate change, international relations, China-Pakistan relations, Gwadar port, Central Asia, Europe. His work has been published in journals including Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, The Korean Journal of International Studies, Asia-Pacific Social Science Review, ASR Chiang Mai University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities.

¹ John Curtis Amble, "Combating Terrorism in the New Media Environment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 5 (2012): 339–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2012.666819>.

options. It revolutionized the communications, facilitating a timely exchange of information globally.² The exploitation of internet and social media platforms by the terrorist groups for disinformation campaigns and operational coordination became apparent to academics in 1999.³ Weimann noted that all active terrorist organisations had established websites and social media accounts by the middle of the 2000s. It was identified that terrorist groups used the internet for propaganda and publicity, financing, psychological warfare, data mining, mobilisation and recruitment, networking, information sharing, coordination and planning.⁴ Terrorists and violent radicals took advantage of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, leading to the rise of user-generated content and social media. Content promoting violent extremism and radicalisation began to propagate on mainstream media platforms, video-sharing sites, blogs, and instant messaging apps. The extremist propaganda might inadvertently be discovered on Twitter (now X), Facebook, YouTube, WordPress and Paltalk platforms, making it possible for terrorists to reach a broader audience and interact with new demographic groups, particularly women.⁵

The term 'online radicalisation' gained popularity in policy and academic circles in the late 2000s.⁶ For the first time, data concerning the use of Internet by terrorist organizations was issued by the official sources in the US in July 2004, leading towards an abrupt increase of radicalized activities through the Internet.⁷ An estimated 12 websites of terrorist groups were identified on the internet in 1998, increasing to approximately 2,650 in 2003 and 9,800 by 2014.⁸ Sixteen million people were using the internet in 1995. At the beginning of 2019, the penetration of internet globally surpassed to 57%, equating to 4.4 billion people using the web, whereas currently, there are more than 5 billion active internet users, accounting for 63% of the world's population. Globally, over 85 per cent of the youth population use social

² Ettore Saladini, "Terror on the Internet: A Study on Online Jihadi Radicalization" (master's thesis, LUISS Guido Carli University, 2024), accessed December 2, 2025, <https://tesi.luiss.it/37508/>.

³ Joe Whittaker, "Online Radicalization: What We Know," *Home Affairs, European Union* (2023), accessed December 2, 2025, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/RAN-online-radicalisation_en.pdf.

⁴ Gabriel Weimann, "How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet" (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2004), accessed December 25, 2025, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr116.pdf>.

⁵ Peter R. Neumann, "Countering Online Radicalization in America" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016), accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/countering-online-radicalization-america>.

⁶ Mark Sedgwick, "The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 479–494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009>.

⁷ Ettore Saladini, "Terror on the Internet: A Study on Online Jihadi Radicalization" (master's thesis, LUISS Guido Carli University, 2024), accessed December 2, 2025, <https://tesi.luiss.it/37508/>.

⁸ Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2010).

media platforms such as X, YouTube, and Facebook daily.⁹ The contemporary approach to radicalising the young minds through social media platforms seems to be successful.¹⁰ Social media platforms play a significant role in providing youth with information about radical ideologies.¹¹ Young individuals aged 15 to 24 exhibit significant susceptibility to radicalisation due to their increased exposure to extremist and hateful content on the internet. Most of the radical and terrorist groups are recruiting the young through the internet.¹² At the peak of Da'esh's operations in Syria and Iraq, the organisation leveraged social media platforms to recruit over 40,000 individuals from 110 distinct nations. More than 50,000 people were incited by the Islamic State (IS) to join the group. Additionally, it remained active on social media, with estimates indicating at least 46,000 pro-IS accounts on X. Thousands of IS fighters transmitted real-time updates of their activities to loved ones around the globe via the internet, with the assistance of virtual supporters who disseminated the content to large audiences.¹³¹⁴ People lacking physical access may easily join the terrorist networks online within the violent extremist environment.¹⁵ The internet facilitates the propagation of radical ideologies and the spread of indoctrination online. Internet users are the primary targets of modern online radicalisation, regardless of gender, educational background, or financial status.¹⁶ The evolving social networking platforms are inexpensive and user-friendly, as compared to the earlier websites, which required radical groups to keep waiting for the people in order to approach them. The social media platforms assist the terrorist groups in accessing their intended targets.¹⁷ It is now much easier for radical

⁹ Amit Sajid, Lumbini Barua, and Abdulla Al Kafy, "Countering Violent Extremism Using Social Media and Preventing Implementable Strategies for Bangladesh," *Heliyon* 7, no. 5 (2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07121>.

¹⁰ Hidayatul Ummah Athik, "Digital Media and Counter-Narrative of Radicalism," *Jurnal THEOLOGIA* 31, no. 2 (2020): 233–256, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2020.31.2.6762>.

¹¹ Winarni Leni, "Media Massa dan Isu Radikalisme Islam," *Jurnal Komunikasi Massa* 7, no. 2 (2014): 159–166.

¹² Hidayatul Ummah Athik, "Digital Media and Counter-Narrative of Radicalism," *Jurnal THEOLOGIA* 31, no. 2 (2020): 233–256, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2020.31.2.6762>.

¹³ Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1–22.

¹⁴ Carter Joseph, Shiraz Maher, and Peter Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks" (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2014), accessed November 25, 2025, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>.

¹⁵ Peter R. Neumann, "Countering Online Radicalization in America" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016), accessed December 12, 2025, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/countering-online-radicalization-america>.

¹⁶ Hidayatul Ummah Athik, "Digital Media and Counter-Narrative of Radicalism," *Jurnal THEOLOGIA* 31, no. 2 (2020): 233–256, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2020.31.2.6762>.

¹⁷ Gabriel Weimann, "New Terrorism and New Media" (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, May 13, 2014), accessed December 2, 2025,