

VISUAL PROPAGANDA AND EXTREMISM IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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The number of extremist groups using the web is large and growing, and the groups run the gamut from those merely espousing extremist ideologies to those actively engaged in terrorist activities. Along with thousands of dedicated sites, these groups make aggressive use of general interest sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook to radicalize, recruit, and fundraise. They do so because the web offers a way to easily reach a wide—even global—audience with little fear of government control and few barriers to participation.

An enormous amount of the material that extremists post is largely visual in nature. Technological advances have made it very easy to film, edit, and upload videos with little formal training, without a great deal of specialized equipment, and with substantially reduced production and post-production costs. Hosting platforms are also readily available. Today, more content is uploaded every month to YouTube alone than the “Big 3” television networks produced during their first 60 years of existence; it gets more than a trillion views a month, and 70 percent of its audience comes from outside the United States.

As the amount of material has grown, so has its sophistication and probable impact. While extremist videos may be insufficient to radicalize on their own, it is difficult to ignore the fact that, in more than half of the federal court cases prosecuting individuals for terrorism-related offenses since 2001, authorities report finding such videos in the defendants’ possession when they were arrested.

There is little doubt as to the power of visual images to influence target audiences. Scholars from communication studies, mass communication and journalism, advertising and public relations, film studies, and psychology all have produced research findings that visual images are often more powerful than words. The way humans process images is biologically based, a function of the way the brain and eye work together, and thus is universal. We process images more rapidly than words, giving them visceral emotional power. Visual stimuli heighten viewer attention, improve message recall, and, in certain contexts, change audience opinion. Visual images can also expand an audience base, since they can move the very young and the illiterate—both demographics that are of interest to many extremist and terrorist groups.

This collection of essays brings together a number of the top experts working on extremist groups’ visual material on the web. Their insights challenge existing notions of how leaders should apologize for offending images, re-think counternarratives and branding strategies, provide important understandings of the visual strategies of extremist groups at home and abroad, re-envision audiences in the online environment, and develop retrieval methods for online images that will permit the creation of better techniques for those charged with countering enemy propaganda, especially in the information operations (IO) and military information support operations (MISO) communities.

The core and consensus assumptions of this work, where applicable to force readiness, need to be integrated at all levels of training. Such training should expand beyond those in the Public Affairs (PA), MISO, and IO communities; it should also reach those in command positions to support thinking about visual images as a strategic asset or liability. A successful IO campaign begins with training. Such training should not only focus on the actions of the force that function as source material for enemy propaganda, but also on the use of visual images as potentially offensive or defensive weapons in the commander's campaign plan.

A 21st century commander should not be merely technically and tactically proficient. He or she must be media proficient and able to anticipate how audiences at home and abroad might interpret force actions. A PA officer may not be able to save a commander who is not media savvy, one who ignores the distinctive power of images, or one who belies the necessity for training in this new environment. We must train a new type of service member (officer and enlisted) who is able to anticipate and understand the power that images can have in both the online and offline environment.

The reports in this volume are relevant to the Army today and for the foreseeable future. The digital age is as much a condition of the environment as the weather or geography. The Army must invest, even when resources are tight, in digital platforms and prepare to use them in a way that work to the benefit of the force and specific mission goals. Such investment is, and will continue to be, a force multiplier. Commanders must consider that images reach multiple audiences in new contexts and across a variety of platforms. Even in forums presumed private, whatever was videotaped last night will often end up on YouTube and Twitter by morning. Commanders must finally recognize that the meaning of an image is not intrinsic and is never permanent. Whether the enemy places an image in new contexts or an audience's perceptions of an image change over time, its meaning can be fluid.

Despite the end of America's ongoing participation in combat operations and the Army's return to a garrison force, the issues discussed in this volume

remain relevant to the Army. Radicalization efforts continue—new leaders of extremist groups emerge, while many of the highest profile enemy leaders killed over the last few years live on in propaganda videos. The threat posed by al-Qaeda's affiliates is not going away. Testimonies from the intelligence community at the most recent Worldwide Threat Assessment hearings made clear, after all, that the environment today may be more challenging for the United States than at any point since September 11, 2001. Tomorrow's enemy will use the online environment, no matter their ideology. In the context of the deep cuts in force structure and end strength the Army is currently facing, efficiency in operations will be more essential than ever. Understanding the enemy's use of the online environment to generate and magnify threats, and determining ways to counter those strategies effectively will be critical in the years to come.

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