The Challenge of Identifying Radicalized Networks
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Identifying networks of radicalized individuals is no easy task, particularly in the contemporary Western environment. There are now an array of individuals, loosely formed groupings and composite networks who advocate both extreme interpretations of Salafism along with anywhere from a passive sympathy, if not vocal support for, offensive militancy in the name of their religious beliefs. In most cases, these actors do not necessarily want to make themselves or the members who comprise them, known. Therefore, they disguise their true objectives and rhetoric, making it difficult to distinguish them from other, less virulent groups.

Researchers seeking to map such radicalized networks that masquerade as more mainstream networks and organizations by mitigating their language and adopting similar rhetorical positions as more accepted networks, face a series of challenges. The most obvious one is in data collection. Simply identifying the real identities of these individuals is not easy. Second, is perception. Making distinctions among individuals who may behave in similar ways or advocate seemingly similar positions is difficult. But suggesting that an individual who portends to be mainstream in their rhetoric is actually better situated within a radicalized network can put a researcher in problematic position. Charges of being anti-Islamic, or arbitrary in their analysis are not uncommon when seeking to map the internal composition of a radicalized network.

Much of the contemporary hardline, pro-militant Islamist movement emerged in the United Kingdom during the 1990s. After the 9/11 attacks, as security pressure began to mount, the networks began to emerge. More importantly, they became less apparent, going underground or morphing their public characteristics to seem more innocuous or mainstream in nature.

An array of actors are now competing for influence over this community. Some of them are fly-by-night Islamic activists with periodically-updated blogs accounts. Others are self-styled preachers with PalTalk rooms or even slam poets their mad rhymes at local talent shows. Some compete for the ability to steer and guide the mindset and discursive boundaries of their target audience through amply funded, highly coordinated initiatives and events. Others fail to realize that they are part of a grass-roots phenomena, where a Facebook post here and a Youtube comment there helps to reinforce or challenge certain norms and discursive structures. Whatever their level of formality, institutionalization or religious bent, each actor trying to influence this community exhibits different capabilities, skill-sets and resources in their efforts.

Mapping a coherent, internal architecture of such fluid, organic, ad hoc networks can be deceptively difficult. Whereas some actors were highly cognizant of their membership within an organization or a network, exhibiting a variety of external attributes or behaviorally signaling that fact, others may move seamlessly in and out of networks without even realizing. Therefore, researchers must ask whether any attempt to map such a structure is not running the risk of superimposing a false coherence to what is otherwise a grouping of individuals.

The beauty of the Internet however for grassroots movements is that even micro-level actions can trigger macro-level reactions. Whether or not this online action can lead to the kinds of physical world behavioral changes is beyond the scope of this study. What can be stated, however, from this cursory look at the question of how one might map fluid networks is that the subjects of the study

are, themelves, highly communicative of their own thoughts about positionality and affiliation within social contexts.

Hard-liners have permeated the British Salafi world for decades in any number of flavors. Old-school names such as Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza al-Masri, Omar Bakri Muhammad, Abu Musab al-Suri, Hani al-Sibai laid the groundwork of this community throughout the 1990s. Through jihadi journals, preaching, mentoring and more, these individuals helped to empower and resource British Salafis with hardline tools and skill-sets. This period of time offered an ideal way for researchers and investigators to map networks because there were physical locations wherein individuals congregated. Each of the above figures led by a cult-of-personality. They each had their own followings. In some cases, individuals might frequent multiple of these sheikhs but more often then not, an individual developed a particular affinity for one or a few sheikhs and remained in that network. One need only track their physical activities to understand quickly which network someone was participating within.

The early 2000's saw the rise of more populist, accessible preachers like Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdullah Faisal and Abu Izzadeen. While they lacked the credibility that many in the first category had gained in the Afghan jihad, these figures spoke a language that was more inclusive, more relevant and more amenable to a post-9/11 context. The difference for this next wave of individuals is that they began aggressively moving their activities to the Internet. No longer could one simply sit outside a community center or mosque to identify the participants within a given network. Rather, because much of the participation on radicalized Internet sites is anonymous, a researcher would have to obtain some level of identifying information in order to accurately map an online network back upon physical-world individuals.

As radicalized participants within this world gained the technological empowerment, deeper ideological knowledge and minimum level of inspiration, a wave of fresh faces emerged who are tied together in their shared interest in producing content, not necessarily consuming it. The most problematic issue that individuals who fall within radicalized networks face is that the logical extension of their argument is illegal.

In other words, they are starting with a criminal premise: that anti-government action is necessary on some level in order to stop the systemic assault on Islam. Because hard-liners cannot actually live up to their own rhetoric, or at least the implications of their rhetoric, they are already at a structural disadvantage in their attempts to message. To speak about it, they must do so in a sub-criminal way, one that keeps them under the radar of investigators but allows them to distinguish themelsevs to their core constituency and potential future recruits from more mainstream networks.

This balancing act is one that, thankfully for researchers seeking to map those radicalized networks, they tend to be ineffective at managing, at least over the long-term. The need for credibility and recognition within their own constituencies invariably causes them to make the necessary distinctions between them and less hardline, virulent groups. The implications of this reality for researchers seeking to map these networks is that it takes a great deal of time and painstaking nuance to parse what appears, at least on the surface, to be a mass of similarly positioned individuals. Things become more complicated when the bulk of the network that researchers are seeking to map is occurring on the Internet because tying online identities with physical world identities is often difficult if not impossible for open source researchers.