How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence

Ali Fisher

Abstract

Jihadist groups have used the opportunity created by the proliferation of social media platforms to create a persistent as well as ideologically cohesive presence for jihadist propaganda online which is intended to attract fighters and fundraisers to the cause. This article uses a range of big data techniques including network analysis, combined with examples of Jihadist communication strategy to identify the elements which have allowed groups to maintain a permanent presence for their content online, despite the efforts of western Governments working with social media platform providers.

The article examines the activity of the ‘media mujahedeen’ – the supporters of jihadist groups who disseminate propaganda content online. It shows that the media mujahedeen group operates through a dispersed network of accounts which constantly reconfigures much like the way a swarm of bees or flock of birds constantly reorganizes in mid-flight. Drawing on the metaphor of a swarm this article introduces the netwar inspired concept of the user curated Swarmcast and demonstrates the role of the Swarmcast in maintaining the persistent presence of Jihadist content online.

The article concludes that future policy to counter the dissemination of Jihadist content must challenge the Swarmcast on a strategic level. To be successful, strategies will need to take account of all three components of the Swarmcast when employing take downs or other counter measures. This will mean focusing on strategic approaches to disrupting the system wide emergent structures and collective behaviours rather than the tactical removal of individual accounts.

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