

## Chapter XII

# Weaponizing the Internet and the YouTube War

### INTRODUCTION

*In the war against terrorist enemies, the United States currently is using a traditional defensive approach: engaging in formal military ground battles with adversaries such as al-Qaeda. By conducting a formal military operation, powerful military forces ideally should defeat terrorists, break up terrorist cells, remove their home bases, disperse leaders, and severely degrade the terrorist groups' ability to wage attacks against the United States.*

*A traditional military war normally involves two parties with known geographical locations and concentrated battle areas. A victory occurs when an enemy is defeated. However, the war on terrorism represents an opposite situation: without geographic concentration. Modern terrorists operate across national borders and have access to funding and advanced technology with global reach. Terrorists such as al-Qaeda lack geographic homes, which mean the battlefield is geographically dispersed. Furthermore, in addition to using conventional weapons, they increasingly use modern information technology, particularly the Internet, to wage their battles. They ride the back of the Web and use advanced communications to distribute their thoughts or views, gather support, recruit new members, and move immense financial funds from one place to another. According to Weimann (2006), many terrorist groups have their own Web sites on the Internet, which they use to teach their members to prepare computer viruses, worms, Trojan horses, sniffers, and other malicious programs that multiply and cause potentially severe damages. They thus consider the capabilities of the Web as offensive mass weapons that can undermine worldwide actions.*

*The modern Internet penetrates all levels of society, such that information flows continuously and seamlessly across political, ethnic, and religious divides. Because of the global nature of cyberspace, it provides a new platform on which terrorists can wage battles. In this chapter, we examine the role of the Internet as a battlefield and analyze the course of war in cyberspace. We model the Internet structure and determine that the Internet needs a self-immunization mechanism that can self-detect illegal or criminal activities online.*

## **A NEW BATTLEFIELD**

Manpower and weaponry are two necessary and critical components in any type of war. In a traditional ground battle, the more troops and the better equipment, the greater the chances of winning the battle. However, if the Internet serves as a staging ground for a war, the number of soldiers and the status of their weaponry may not be decisive factors for winning the war. Using an inexpensive computing device, one person can access hundreds of thousands of people indirectly and anonymously through the mass connection of the Internet. Thus, war on the Internet appears relatively safe and of little risk compared with traditional ground battles. Little input may lead to great expectations, and the advantages of the Internet thus undoubtedly attract terrorist organizations.

To battle against terrorists (e.g., al Qaeda) who lack a geographical base but use the global Internet, we need to understand the role of the Internet as a battlefield.

### **Internet as Propaganda Medium**

The Internet plays a key role for the strategy of terrorism. When the Internet is in place, reaching target audiences and broadcasting messages that the terrorist organization wants to transmit becomes easier than ever before. Conventional print and broadcast media suffer constraints with regard to who selects the message, such that a person or organization cannot directly control the dissemination of messages. With the Internet, not only can someone freely disseminate his or her message directly to many readers, but that person also completely controls the content of the message. With little or no regulation or censorship, or other forms of government control, the Internet allows terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda to concentrate their propaganda efforts. They develop Web sites to post their news, thoughts, views, and announcements. From these sites, visitors can download products in different data formats, such as films, video, audio clips, photographs, and books. Furthermore, they can use different data formats and languages to target different audiences for different purposes.

To potential supporters, they transmit messages of power to raise the morale of the target audience, despite their technological inferiority, limited membership, and lack of resources. These Web sites distribute education and training materials and provide step-by-step instructions for communicating with cell members. On Web forums, they discuss topics of interest and tactics.

A completely opposite message gets distributed to another target audience—the enemy or public who fights against them. Terrorists use Web sites to highlight their success and attempt to cause their enemy public to feel vulnerable, anywhere and anytime. For example, al-Qaeda consistently claims on its Web sites that the destruction of the World Trade Center caused concrete damages to the U.S. economy. Moreover, since September 11, 2001, their Web sites have frequently posted announcements of impending attack on U.S. targets. These warnings receive considerable media coverage, which helps generate a widespread sense of fear and insecurity among the target population (Talbot, 2005).

To those who are not directly involved in the conflict and observe events from the sidelines, terrorist Web sites offer information in different languages and aim to gain sympathy for their causes.

### **Internet as a Recruiting and Fund-Raising Tool**

The Internet offers a great opportunity and platform to build social networks among anonymous people anywhere and everywhere, even if they never see each other physically. Social networks have become

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