

# Chapter 10

## Al-Qaeda on Web 2.0: Radicalization and Recruitment Strategies

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter investigates al-Qaeda's use of Web 2.0 as a tool for radicalization and recruitment. The media network of al-Qaeda is described in order to demonstrate the impact of their well structured media strategy for harnessing the power of the Web. They use a strategy that makes them stand out from other extremist groups, who in most cases lack an overall approach towards branding and Web communication. It is shown why this strategy works and enables al-Qaeda to set the agenda for online global jihadism and cultivate virtual communities of engaged jibobbyists. Finally, a virtue ethical perspective demonstrates the shortcomings of the al-Qaeda Web 2.0 strategies, by which it is suggested that their Achilles' heel is exactly the ideas inherent to Web 2.0, which are reflected in a bottom up participatory perspective. Thus, the Al-Qaeda online social movement does allow for engaged user participation, but without providing opportunities for free spirited critical reflection and self articulation of goals.*

### INTRODUCTION

In what follows, the main focus will be on al-Qaeda's use of the Web as a base for recruitment and as an effective tool of radicalization, and to a minor degree, as a base of operations. In the first part, I outline the professionalism which

surrounds the al-Qaeda media machine, followed by an analysis of al-Qaeda's media strategy, emphasizing how effective use of persuasive online strategies (Fogg, 2003, Fogg, 2008) has enabled them to cultivate online communities of practices for scaffolding the Al-Qaeda identity. Here, with reference to virtue ethics, Benkler and Nissenbaum report findings from successful online collaboration among large groups of volunteers (Benkler

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-132-0.ch010

& Nissenbaum, 2006). Following this line, I elaborate on their findings and seek to understand the motivation of extremist online activities from a virtue ethical perspective, in which I nevertheless takes the position that it is a contradiction in terms to speak about a virtuous terrorist. As such, virtue ethic (MacIntyre, 1999, 2000; Foot, 1978) is introduced to illustrate the shortcomings of the al-Qaeda strategy wherein self-selection of goals is only acceptable as long as participants do not question the religious interpretation contained in global jihadism. This is probably going to be the main reason for the future break down of al-Qaeda; the fact that no movement, so far, has in the long run been able to maintain a practice which suppresses critical reflection. Hence, I will elaborate on the notion of critical reflection with reference to Hannah Arendt's phenomenological investigation of the importance of a thinking experience, and whether this faculty prevents us from acting morally wrong (1964, 1971, and 1973).

## **BACKGROUND**

The wave of uprisings in the Middle East underlines the fact that al-Qaeda's overall impact has been rather small. Young Arabs like everybody else want to live in free societies. Thus, al-Qaeda has not been able to convert the public at large. Nevertheless, the global online jihad movement will still be able to initiate self-radicalization among young people with extremist attitudes.

According to the recognized specialist on al-Qaeda strategy, ideology and media, Dr. Jarret Brachman, al-Qaeda - the most famous practitioners of jihadist ideology - nowadays conceptualizes itself as a media group who uses terrorism, rather than a terrorist group that uses the media.

Today's global jihadist movement cannot be classified with reference to a single al-Qaeda, since Al-Qaeda consists of interrelated networks (MI5 Security Service, 2010). Hence, there is the al-Qaeda high command (founded by late Osama

bin Laden), al-Qaeda affiliate groups, individuals, and groups and cells, which are supported by Al-Qaeda (London 7/7 bombers, Istanbul bombers), as well as groups and cells inspired by Al-Qaeda. Against all odds, the movement is still going strong, and Brachman points to three reasons for this (Brachman, 2008, pp. 10-21): First, global jihadism implies a religious ideology which finds resonance among radical groups of Muslims who felt a global lack of justice. Secondly, al-Qaeda is a social online movement, where everybody sympathetic to their case can participate. Consequently, as will be illustrated in more detail later, the significance of the movement is reflected in its Web activities, which are characterized by lively, dynamic many-to-many communication and production of user generated content among eager participants. As such, the global jihadist movement has become a Web directed phenomenon, which develops through strategic use of online communication, global social networking platforms, discussion boards and online learning initiatives. Thirdly, Brachman points to the fact that al-Qaeda uses war zones as real life training settings for experimenting with attack strategies, which afterwards can be transferred to civilian areas. These arguments are also supported in findings by Weinberg and Perliger in an investigation of the history of 430 terror groups (Weinberg & Perliger, 2010). In a comparison of ways in which al-Qaeda differs from previous terror organizations, they too point to three similar reasons, and elaborate on the religious component by directing attention to the fact that a movement driven by religion is often stronger than a purely political movement, since the last mentioned is rationally structured and therefore to a lesser degree capable of taking advantage of the power to stir emotions. They conclude that most terror groups have life cycles of five to ten years and the use of terrorism has not proved to be a successful enterprise in order to obtain long term goals. All though Al-Qaeda is more than twenty years old by now, Weinberg and Perliger argue that there is reason

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