

ZOFIA SAWICKA
ALDONA PIWKO

ISLAM, NEW MEDIA AND YOUNG MUSLIMS RADICALIZATION

Zofia Sawicka

University of Rzeszów, Poland.

Email: zsawicka@ur.edu.pl

Aldona Piwko

Vistula University in Warsaw, Poland.

Email: aldonapiwko@tlen.pl

Abstract: The aim of the article is to present the phenomenon of radicalization of young Muslims from both Muslim countries and Western Europe, which takes place using new media. The paper uses the method of critical analysis of sources because it allows the interpretation of facts and relating them to the motives of conduct and the increase in popularity of radical religious movements. Referring to the theory of mediation and mediatization of religion, the article analyzes the impact of new media on Islam and presents some of their effects, which contribute to the creation of a radical version of this religion. The radicalization of religious views among young Muslims takes place on three levels: religious-cultural, social and political. All of these fields are dominated by social media. Ease of access to them gives a sense of belonging to the global Islamic community, which results in the belief in the unique strength and unlimited possibilities of the entire community. In their analysis, the authors showed the relationship between the characteristics of new media users and their low resistance to the propaganda of radical Islamist movements and terrorist groups used against them, as well as the opportunities that new media provide to terrorist groups in using Islam to build and strengthen their structures.

Key words: Islam, new media, cool jihad, ISIS, terrorism.

1. Introduction

Religion's online presence is growing around the world. Scholars interested in the issue of the relationship between religion and the media examine, on the one hand, how religious organizations use the media in their activities (Hoover 1988; Peck 1993; Echchaibi 2011), and on the other, how religion is presented by the media (Cohen 2018; Hoover 1998; Silk 1998). Both mediation and mediatization theories try to explain the mutual relations between the media and religion. Mediation emphasizes the role of media in religious practice and the potential of media to help people experience religious transcendence, while mediatization examines how people increasingly acquire religious knowledge through the media and how the media takes over social roles that previously concerned religion, such as like the ability to gather people around common values (Hjarvard 2011; Sierocki 2018).

This process is extremely important among young Muslims who are looking for their religious identity via social media, becoming an easy target for terrorist groups that instill in them a distorted image of Islam, leading to their extreme radicalization. (Sawicka 2017)

The literature analyzing the media activities of terrorist groups is extensive because the problem of various forms of terrorism is current and dynamic. It does not disappear, but on the contrary, it is constantly transforming, adopting newer forms of its impact. Currently, in international research on the media of terrorist groups, the dominant method is a comprehensive study of these media, taking into account the perspective of global jihad, Salafi ideology, and therefore an extremely radical perception of the principles of religion and various political circumstances, including those occurring in the world of Islam. Carol Winkler believes that "the medium is terrorism" (Winkler et al 2019, 14-15).

Among the rich literature analyzing the role of the media in the activities of terrorist groups, the works of Jamileh Kadivar (2020), Miron Lakomy (2015), and Dylan Gerstel (2016) deserve attention. The Europol Online Jihadist Propaganda (2022) report is also an important voice in the discussion. However, this work focuses on the use of religion in the digital age in the context of spreading terrorist activities through a distorted, radical image of religion.

The method of critical analysis of sources was used in this work. In the first part of our work, the main problems regarding the functioning of Islam in the digital era and their impact on potential recipients were identified. In the second part of the article, current research topics are identified. These are the development of terrorist media activities in the

Internet space, consisting in the construction of huge media concerns and the use of these media to recruit, indoctrinate and radicalize new members of terrorist groups. When analyzing the importance of religion in the digital age, it is necessary to emphasize the close links between ISIS and Islam. ISIS leaders make sure that the media message they create provides religious legitimization for the functioning of ISIS. The primary element is to maintain the caliphate, i.e. an administrative body of a state-religious nature, and to encourage Muslims to come to its areas to fight (Gambhir 2014).

2. New media

Regardless of the definition of religion adopted, its functioning is based on spreading its message among believers. Undoubtedly, various types of communication systems serve this purpose, the purpose of which is to maintain a specific religious worldview. It is for this reason that religion and media are viewed as internally related (Hoover 2006). Throughout history, religion has used a variety of media to communicate its core values, including: these were sacred texts, oral speeches or printed books (Horsfield 2015). At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the rapid development of media technologies and the media themselves, including the diffusion of mass media – such as newspapers, radio and television – created a new framework for the functioning of religion and the media.

New media have undoubtedly changed the current communication paradigm. As Manuel Castells noted, in a relatively short time a radical change in communication culture took place on a global scale. New media provide new communication patterns that are able to change the social structures in which they function, because “users and creators can become the same.” (Castells 2007) The communication abilities/properties of new media undoubtedly have a strong impact on social structures, in which they operate. As McLuhan wrote: “electric media introduce a widespread and almost immediate transformation of culture, values and attitudes” (McLuhan 2001). Initially, it was assumed that the Internet would destroy social relationships, lead to alienation and atomization of society, but communication mediated by new media increased the communication possibilities of users, adding a “one-to-many” model to the “one-to-one” model. One of the first sociologists to question the thesis about the alienation of individuals via the Internet was Barry Wellman. Starting in his research from the progressive individualization of individuals, he proposed a new concept of “network individualism”. For Wellman, the individualism of an individual means that he decides more and more about himself, while the influence of social structures is decreasing. Social ties become reflective – family, class and neighborhood no longer dictate who a person maintains relationships with. The

individual creates them on his own, building a network of connections of varying strength and depth, which means that he begins to manage his life through the network, and not through place and time. The rapid development of computer communication networks means that people no longer function as part of a group, but in a network that becomes a source of social life, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity, including religious (Wellman and Raine 2014).

Thanks to the Internet, the difference between practicing religion online and offline is becoming increasingly blurred, as digital communication seems to be an integral part of everyday life. For example, religious experiences such as pilgrimages or rituals are often mediated by new technologies (Sousa and Rosa 2020). For Heidi Campbell (2012), these phenomena fall under her coined term “digital religion.” At the core of this approach is the belief that there is no longer a difference in how religion is represented in the media and how organizations integrate media into their practices, as the production and consumption of online religious narratives tend to converge. Examples of digital religion can be found in the way people discuss and practice religion on online forums, blogs, and social media.

When writing about young Muslims in Europe or in Muslim countries, we must not forget that, like their peers around the world, they also belong to the “millennial generation”, which some researchers also describe as the network generation or the Me generation. These “digital natives” treat the Internet as a natural space for activity, as important as real life. Moreover, according to Marc Prensky, new technologies have not only changed the way this generation communicates, but above all, they have changed their way of thinking and the ability to process information. This generation uses pictures and graphics efficiently, but written text is difficult for most to understand. Raised on computer games, they are accustomed to quick achievements and immediate gratification. According to Prensky, in order to reach representatives of this generation, one should use a specific language and way of thinking about the world that will reflect the principles of operation of computer games or social media (Prensky 2001), which is effectively used by radical Islamist organizations and terrorist groups.

2.1. Islam and new media

As in other regions of the world, Muslim-majority countries have recently seen the rapid spread and adoption of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. A significant increase in the popularity of the Internet is also noticeable in the Arab world - the cradle of radical Islamist movements. According to estimates, 268 million Arabs currently use the Internet, which constitutes over 76.9% of the total population. In 2010, there were only 56 million of them, which shows how

rapidly cyberspace is developing in this region of the world. (Internet World Stats 2022). Among social media, the dominance of Facebook, Whatsapp, TikTok, You Tube and Instagram is clearly visible. Young Muslims in Europe also frequently and willingly use social media (Radcliffe and Abuhmaid 2023).

Social media has given young Muslims the opportunity to connect with their faith and peers in ways their parents could never have imagined. Where once the umma was a purely spiritual concept and Muslim communities were separated by language and geography, today social media has enabled young Muslims to connect no matter where they are. Together they can discuss what it means to be a Muslim in the 21st century, which is especially important for Muslims living in Western Europe (Ibahrine 2014).

This possibility of discussion undermines the existing paradigm of religious authorities in Islam. For centuries, interpretation of the Quran was the domain of a small minority of ulama. Social networking sites have become channels for disseminating interpretations of the Holy Book, sometimes challenging traditional religious authorities. As a result, religious authority has become a contested domain rather than a universally accepted reality for some young Muslims. The phenomenon of “privatization” and “individualization” of Islam is particularly visible among the younger generation of Muslims, who conduct searches on the Internet to familiarize themselves with different views and opinions. They discuss them online and then choose the option that best fits their views. The same selective approach is often applied to the interpretation of the holy scriptures Quran and Sunnah.

Young Muslims in Europe are looking for an original, “true” Islam that they can distinguish from the Islam of their parents, which they perceive as influenced by local customs of their parents’ country of origin (Šisler 2006).

It should be remembered that generations of young Muslims in Europe function in suspension between the culture of their parents’ country of origin and the European culture of the country in which they live. This phenomenon brings certain consequences, e.g. the problem of identity of subsequent generations of Muslim immigrants, which was the result of the lack of knowledge of their own roots and social obstacles, e.g. problems at school, lack of social acceptance, lack of work. Most Muslims in Western Europe belong to the lowest social classes, blaming the countries in which they live for this situation. Driven by frustration and a sense of injustice, they demand more and more rights for themselves. While the second and third generations of Muslims adopted the patterns of Western consumer culture, Islam became a determinant of identity for them (Górak-Sosnowska 2011). This attitude often leads to radicalization.

2.2. Cool jihad

One of the most conservative versions of Islam present in Western Europe is that preached by Salafis. Salafis call for the revival of Islam by “returning to its origins”, which in practice means striving to introduce an Islamic religious state, ruled on the basis of sharia, i.e. Islamic religious law, also regulating the everyday life of Muslims permanently residing in Western countries. This places the Salafist movement in the position of a fierce enemy of Western democracies and the Western way of life.

Since around 2011, a radical Salafi youth subculture has been developing in Western Europe, the main feature of which is grassroots activity without mentors and sheikhs who would lead the movement. Its message is radical, but the way it is conveyed is consistent with the principles of pop culture. Short video clips with fashionable rap music, computer game aesthetics, or apocalyptic films aimed directly at young people are shared via social media. The strength of pop jihad is its offer to young people. Pop jihad offers a celebrity adventure instead of boring, unproductive life (Sawicka 2017). Moreover, in his message he clearly condemns those responsible for the disappointments and feelings of exclusion, often pointing to school, family or the socio-political situation. A significant role in pop jihad is played by the so-called nasheeds, i.e. traditional Islamic hymns, which in the pop jihad version gain connections with rap and hip-hop and a new text layer. Thanks to this music, the movement expresses its rebellion and anger, as well as its sense of hopelessness and exclusion. Reduced to simple messages through the form of nasheeds, the ideology of jihad becomes attractive to teenagers who are no longer devout Muslims or devout Salafis, but have their own concept of jihad previously created through the consumption of new media. These youth are no longer interested in long sermons in the mosque or attending seminars on Salafism (Dantschke 2013). As “digital natives”, they are unable to absorb this form of communication. Pop jihad has become a lifestyle that looks and sounds attractive and for which you don’t have to leave the Internet.

3. New media and terrorism

The saying, common in contemporary politics, “whoever has the media, has the power” (Kapuściński 2008, 82), which is a paraphrase of the statement of the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński, also fits perfectly into the activities of terrorist organizations. It is no exaggeration to say that terrorists have always been heavily dependent on the media. Only in this way could their activities gain publicity, and thus gain supporters and enlarge the group of fighters. However, previously terrorist groups had no influence on media coverage of their own activities. The published content

was beyond the influence of the event participants themselves and was strongly dependent on the adopted policy towards terrorist activities, both on the level of journalism and international public opinion. With the development of new media, and especially social networking sites, the way of informing about the activities of terrorist organizations has changed. The leaders of these formations have their own media structures, responsible for shaping the message, image and recruiting new members. In today's highly mediatized world, building your own information propaganda is crucial to maintaining a dominant position. This task also applies to terrorist groups. When building their organization, the leaders of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) knew perfectly well that gaining and maintaining popularity among supporters of violent solutions to current problems of Muslim communities would only be possible through direct communication. Therefore, a Media Department was created within the ISIS structure, responsible for the production, distribution and management of the terrorist group's propaganda content. Its main goal was to construct and spread the ISIS ideology in such a way that the content conveyed was controversial and at the same time precisely met the expectations of a specific group of recipients. The Media Department was also responsible for recruiting new members and maintaining the attention of existing supporters. Various media were used for this purpose. Initially, these were information brochures and videos containing charismatic speeches by the group's leaders, calling for resistance to the opponents of Islam. To strengthen the message of the validity of the actions taken, brutal videos of hostage executions were also published. Terrorist attacks were often encouraged and openly encouraged. As ISIS's reach expanded, online magazines, press releases and other materials were also created. However, the most appropriate form of communication has become publications on social media.

Islamic terrorist groups have very well taken advantage of the breakthrough moment of the modern world, which was the entry of the digital age into religion. Almost unlimited, and at the same time relatively cheap access to various communication tools has revolutionized Islamic terrorist activities. This breakthrough is clearly visible in the example of the media activities of the currently most important terrorist group in the world, which is the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, or Daesh. ISIS's use of the media in terrorist activities is a perfect example of parallel war. The fighters attack simultaneously militarily and with information, thus creating a reality consistent with their own scenario. The media war for ISIS is a special area of activity because the group's leaders believe that the anti-ISIS media have a negative impact on the ummah, and therefore the entire Muslim community, and with their influence they can distort the religious beliefs and values of Muslims. For this reason, ISIS has built powerful media companies to counter the propaganda of its enemies.

PR specialists in ISIS structures made every effort to ensure that jihad carried out in the media was as important an element of the religious fight as the military fight. Propagandists have created the image of Media Man being a Mujahid (Media Man 2015), whose dedication to the fight is as important as that of a fighter fighting with a weapon in his hand. It should be clearly emphasized that the ISIS Media Department has made excellent use of all the possibilities of the 2.0 network. No other political movement operating in the West has achieved this to such an extent as the terrorists.

People responsible for building the media image of terrorist organizations are very eager to use global digital communication tools, and the PR department employees have a perfect understanding of the modern market in this area and actively use it to spread their own ideology and propaganda. Of course, international platforms were used for this purpose, including: YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Telegram. These media also serve as a tool for terrorist organizations to recruit new members and supporters. The mechanism of disseminating one's ideology on these portals is very simple. The task of the administrator or moderator is to create friendly groups in which general information about Islam, its religion, philosophy, culture is initially provided, and then, as it gains members and observers, it begins to disseminate an extreme doctrine, usually the Salafi-Jihadi message (Al-Shishani 2010). Such activities significantly contribute to the recruitment of potential members of terrorist groups. Terrorist groups recklessly use the latest technologies to achieve their goals. It is worth noting that they use advanced encryption programs that make it impossible to track terrorist activities by services responsible for traditional, direct security, as well as in cyberspace. Terrorism in the digital age also uses computer games as simulators for learning how to carry out terrorist attacks. It should be mentioned here that the attackers who carried out terrorist attacks on the Zaventem airport and the Maelbeek/Maalbeek metro station, both in Brussels, communicated using chats in a computer game while preparing the action (Piwko 2020).

Of course, in addition to recruiting new jihad members, online media are used to organize money collections for the purpose of fighting infidels and intimidating enemies. Instructional videos discussing how to use weapons are also popular (Jenkins 2011).

The Islamic State has built a powerful media concern that has undoubtedly contributed to spreading the propaganda of its ideology. ISIS's main media agency was the Al-Furqan Media Foundation. It produced CDs and DVDs, and also published propaganda posters and brochures containing official statements of the group's leaders. Al-Furqan Media Foundation developed its activities, adapting them to the requirements of the market and its recipients. One such example is a specially dedicated Ajnad application developed and made available to users, which can be downloaded to an Android phone, enabling recipients

to listen to the Ajand Foundation's songs on their mobile phones. Of course, the music offered is performed by specially selected performers, including Abu Yasir and Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir. In addition to entertainment, Al-Furqan Media Foundation provides its recipients with contact with the word of God contained in the Quran. For this purpose, a special cell of the Al-I'tisam Media Foundation was created (Stern and Berger 2015), which provides Quranic recitation to ISIS supporters. These are the lexical and phonetic forms allowed when reciting the Quran. This application allows people who do not know Arabic, as well as neophytes, to learn how to pronounce the holy text correctly. Another tool facilitating the indoctrination of ISIS supporters is nasheed, i.e. verbal and musical works popular in the Islamic world. Their content refers to the beliefs, history and religion of Islam, but also to current events.

Amaq News Agency was also responsible for media coverage of ISIS terrorist activities (Callimachi 2016). Her tasks included publishing messages related to the group's activities and providing information related to the attacks. Typically, these were statements of admission of carrying out a specific terrorist attack (Milton 2018). Amaq News Agency emphasizes the close links with the religious tradition of Islam. The name itself refers to the Amik Valley in the Turkish province of Hatay, referred to in the hadith as a place of apocalyptic victory over unbelievers (Sahih Muslim no. 6924). Emphasizing the connection between the media and religion is a deliberate, two-pronged action. First, the task of terrorist media is to attract audiences with radical religious views and maintain their attention. The second is the intensive influence of information messages on a moderate recipient, so that he becomes radicalized under their influence. An important element of this type of manipulation techniques is the close connection with Islam. For indoctrination to achieve its goals, potential recipients must have easy access to the content being conveyed. For this reason, PR specialists are constantly expanding their range of services. Amaq has an official mobile application dedicated to its users. Additionally, he uses the social media platforms Telegram and Facebook.

ISIS tried to ensure that its media message was consistent. It should be noted, however, that individual ISIS media cells were supposed to take care of a specific target group of recipients. Undoubtedly, such a media agency is Al-Hayat Media Center. It was established in 2014, during the period of the Islamic State proclamation (Piwko 2016). She was not only responsible for the production of video content and online publications promoting the group's ideology, but above all, she took care of international information transmission. This news agency includes the main magazines *Islamic State Report*, *Dabiq Magazine*, published in English, as well as *Dar al-Islam* in French, *Al-Manaba Magazine* in Russian, *Al-Qustantiniya* magazine in Turkish and *Rumiyah* published in various languages (Piwko 2021). Al-Hayat had an intensive influence on audiences

from Western Europe, calling for jihad. This was facilitated by numerous video productions: *For Sake of Allah*, *Inside the khilafah*, *Flames of War* (Kadivar 2021).

A special example of ISIS following the spirit of the digital age is the development of the Al-Naba newsletter. This Arabic-language newsletter is published regularly, every Thursday by the Diwan of Media. Its message revolves around current news regarding ISIS activities, but religious content is an important part of its impact on recipients. It is not without reason that the new issue is published on Thursday, i.e. the day before Friday, when pious Muslims gather for prayer in the mosque, during which the holiday sermon is delivered. In addition, Al-Naba Newsletter also publishes fatwas, i.e. theological and legal decisions issued by Muslim scholars. Fatwas clarify current controversies surrounding the application of Islamic law. An important element of a fatwa is that it can only be issued in writing.

The Media Point, also known as Kiosk, is an opportunity used by terrorist groups to take advantage of the opportunities of the digital age. ISIS established a network of Neghat Al-A'alamieh kiosks in Iraq and Syria, aimed at reaching audiences of all ages and nations. The materials available at Kiosks are published in the following languages: English, French, Kurdish, Turkish and Farsi. Media points were set up in many different places, from mosques, through streets, to hospitals. This media expansion allowed ISIS fighters to introduce an easily accessible, own narrative, thanks to which they gained a significant advantage over satellite television, and often also online reports. This activity contributed to the intensive indoctrination of the society living in areas dominated by ISIS, primarily because the people living in the Caliphate often did not have access to other information sources consistent with ISIS principles.

The information provided by terrorist groups is highly polarized, which is why these media have a large group of supporters. The media portrays the rule of Islam as positive and dominant, referred to as Dar al-Islam, and presents the enemies and opponents of this rule in a negative light, defining them as Dar Al-Kufr. They are responsible for humiliating the followers of Islam and their marginalization in the world. Highlighting the oppression of Muslims and their faith intensifies the anger and frustration directed at the world beyond ISIS. Such propaganda efforts are an ally of PR specialists, because they turn the media run by terrorists into defenders of Muslims and their religious identity. This is achieved through specially produced films whose aim is to create one's own vision of reality. An example of this procedure is the following film: Viewers watch on the screen a civilian, a farmer and his family, engaged in sheep breeding. The farm is bombed by troops fighting ISIS. The narrator of the film asks: who is a terrorist? Sheep breeder? His family? To answer the questions in a moment. "They attack us and our people. They are sending fire at us. The world condemns us for the death of Muath al-Kasasbeh - Jordanian fighter

pilot, captured in 2015 by ISIS fighters and burned alive, but no one condemns the criminals who destroy us, our homes and our youth” (Kadivar 2021). At the same time, media messages create their own image of the opponents of the Islamic world, using a negative narrative. It preaches the need to eliminate all opponents and enemies of jihad. For this purpose, broadcasts of executions and reports of corporal punishment were used. These actions were a form of intimidation and terror, addressed not only to representatives of the Western world, but also to their own supporters. They were a warning to possible oppositionists (Farwell 2014).

4. Conclusions

The Internet affects not only what we believe, but also how we believe. We are moving from analog to digital not only in our ways of communicating, but also in our concepts of what faith is and how it works. It is impossible to stop the modern, intensive development of the digital world. However, it is important to take actions so that this development serves the good of humans. Undoubtedly, the challenge facing the modern digital age is to counteract the intensification of fake news, with particular emphasis on aspects related to all fundamentalism, radicalism and religious extremism, not only Islamic ones.

This threat is particularly strong in the context of Islam, which assumes that there are no intermediaries between God and man and each believer can interpret the provisions of the Qur'an at his own discretion, which often leads to abuse and distortion of the principles of this religion. The Internet is changing the way we process information and trust the sources it comes from. To cope with the abundance of information in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish false from true, people often build a mechanism of trust in which atheism and fundamentalism can develop, but other forms of religious beliefs are difficult to maintain. The most affected by these changes are representatives of Generation Z, i.e. the smartphone generation. The surprising paradox of new media is the fact that, on the one hand, they provide access to almost unlimited information, but on the other hand, they limit it extremely much. A modern media user, often without realizing it, “uses” only the information offered to them by specially selected Internet algorithms. In this way, the so-called “information/filtering bubble” condemns one to the only vision of reality - and, given the impossibility of checking their observations, which results from the way new media operate, - in their opinion, the only true one. This phenomenon is dangerous in the context of religion because it often leads to its radicalization.

Another important problem that the developing digital age must also face is ensuring the safety of the youngest users, i.e. children and teenagers, online. This community constitutes a powerful group of Inter-

net users, using it not only to learn and discover the world, but also to establish interpersonal contacts. Thus, children and adolescents are exposed to enormous risk and danger of being infected with radical content or distorted religious principles that are transmitted to them by home-grown preachers, imams or other self-proclaimed “prophets”.

To sum up, it should be said that the digital age is intensively used for terrorist activities and radicalization of young Muslims. The possibilities offered by digitalization and the ubiquitous Internet provide almost unlimited possibilities for spreading all kinds of radicalism, extremism and, finally, terrorism around the world. The greatest danger of these ideologies is the promotion of armed men of jihad as a fashionable lifestyle that more and more young Muslims want to emulate. Trivializing evil and violence leads to a situation in which participation in armed jihad is treated as participation in an attractive computer game whose effects, thanks to the possibilities offered by new media, can be “bragged” to the whole world. Recruiting new members of criminal groups using traditional indoctrination methods took many months. Currently, thanks to the availability of online resources and almost immediate response to current events, the radicalization process has been significantly shortened, to several weeks and sometimes even to several days. In this process, religion is treated instrumentally and its message is treated as a call to use violence against anyone who thinks differently.

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