

***Is the Internet a Factor in Radicalization?  
Jihadist propaganda is targeting youngsters.***

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## **Is the Internet a Factor in Radicalization? Jihadist propaganda is targeting youngsters.**

### **Abstract**

The following overview shows how jihadists on the internet lure young people and attempt to draw them into their own sphere of influence.

For jihadist propaganda the significance of relatively static websites and forums has waned, while social networks such as video platforms have made tremendous gains. Whereas Facebook, YouTube and Twitter had, in past years, been used most heavily for jihadist propaganda, recently a new tendency is to be observed: shifting onto platforms such as the messenger service Telegram.

Jihadist online propaganda is extremely diverse and tailored to particular target groups, e.g. a female audience or young kids. There is a broad “portfolio” of materials available for recruiting efforts and propagating the extremist ideology. Professional-quality videos, memes and images, often combined with set pieces from the pop culture, and music also play an important role in disseminating the ideology.

In conclusion: the jihadist online propaganda can play a role in the radicalization process of minors that should not be underestimated. Therefore, the aim is to minimize the risk that children and adolescents will be confronted with material of this kind on the internet. But a major portion of the propaganda posted by jihadists does not constitute an offense against the criminal code or laws governing the protection of minors. It follows that media education efforts are called for, inside and outside of schools. Young people should be sensitized to these issues and supported in developing a critical posture in their media use.

## Introduction

Events in recent years have lent increasing urgency to the question of why and how individuals become radicals, commit terrorist acts, or join jihadist groups such as Al Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (IS). The internet is frequently cited as a factor contributing to radicalization. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how exposure to jihadist online propaganda actually influences the individual process of radicalization which can lead to violent acts. The present text will also not be able to offer final clarification on this point.

It can, however, be asserted with relative certainty that the internet serves as a core medium for the dissemination of jihadist propaganda and that it plays an important role in addressing and recruiting young people. For the young, video platforms, social media, and messenger services are an essential element in everyday life. Practically every young person now has daily access to the net, whether via smartphone, tablet, laptop, or PC.<sup>1</sup> With their web postings, jihadists explicitly target young people whose view of the world is still forming and who seek explanations for political events and societal conflicts or answers to questions about their own identity. Via YouTube, Facebook, and similar channels, these adolescents are being enticed to adopt jihadist ideology, to join terrorist groups, and ultimately to engage in acts of violence.

The following overview shows how jihadists on the internet lure young people and attempt to draw them into their own sphere of influence. It discusses the development that has taken place with regard to jihadist online propaganda and that continues today, shows where and how core messages are brought across, and why young people may be attracted to them. Finally, the phenomenon is assessed with regard to the protection of minors in the media. The examples cited were retrieved from German-language sites, and the legal framework referred to is that of the Federal Republic of Germany.

## Jihadist web content in times of digital transformation

Jihadist propaganda on the net is highly dynamic, adaptable, and professional. In the past years, its quantity and quality have been steadily on the rise, with increasingly diverse internet material glorifying the militant fight and vilifying certain groups of people, such as non-Mus-

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<sup>1</sup> For statistics on young German users (longitudinal study) cf. Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, JIM-Studie 2016. Jugend, Information, (Multi)-Media, Stuttgart 2016.

lims, Jews, Shias, and others. The zenith of this development, to date, has been the propaganda machine of the terror organization “IS”, not only setting new standards with its video-clip productions and well-orchestrated online campaigns, but also propagating a disdain for humanity that can hardly be surpassed.

This professionalization is also evidenced by the global scale of outreach to particular target groups: the message is tailored to either a male or a female audience and delivered in a variety of languages. The postings are designed to cater to the visual habits and media usage of the target audience, while also playing on their everyday experience and topics of current socio-political debate. To ensure that adolescents as the prime target will in fact encounter the propaganda, it is positioned in their media environment: in the *social web*. That is to say that the distribution routes for jihadist propaganda have been adapted in recent years to the overall development of technology and processes of digitalization, but also to changing habits of media usage. The significance of relatively static websites and forums has waned, while social networks such as Facebook or Twitter and video platforms such as YouTube have made tremendous gains. Requiring very little effort on the part of the user, these services provide access to a very wide audience – beyond the range of specifically extremist circles – and they present various options for attracting attention.

On Twitter, one can use hashtags (#) to highlight buzzwords within the short messages. If enough users take up a hashtag, it can become a trend. Twitter gives every user a current list of the most frequently cited hashtags. Jihadists take advantage of this by keywording their extremist postings in accord with these trending buzzwords, in this way ensuring that they will be read by as many people as possible. For example, under the hashtag #GNTM (that stands for the TV show *Germany's Next Topmodel*) jihadists sprinkled in *memes* (combinations of image and text) that looked appealing to young people but contained Islamic messages or links to propaganda videos. Since many teenagers were following that hashtag on a regular basis, this was a strategy to arouse their interest in the extremist ideology.

On YouTube, similar strategies have been observed. For instance, jihadist videos were given titles that were actually the names of rappers popular in Germany who currently had a new record in the charts. When teenagers started a search for a video clip by entering the rapper's name, the hit list also presented clips propagating militant jihad. These videos are usually no more than five minutes long; the

protagonists often speak in teenage slang. An example: one German jihadist directed his three-minute video message, which was a call for others to join the jihad in Syria, to the rappers Farid Bang and Massiv. Of course the actual addressees were not the rappers, but rather their fan base. Using the rappers' names in the video title was merely a ploy in order to access their audience. Videos of this type normally have relatively high click rates, in some cases up to 20,000 viewings.

Facebook, on the other hand, generally serves as an instrument for socializing – also for jihadists. As more and more German-speaking people traveled to Syria or Iraq, some of them kept up their Facebook profiles, using them to report on their new life of jihad, and advertising for it. The profile of one young fellow who had joined “IS” included more than 1,800 Facebook friends – quite a few of them boys and girls his own age. He posted purportedly authentic news about fighting against the soldiers of the Assad regime, “cool” photos of himself and other jihadists wearing camouflage and toting assault rifles, and pictures that made life in the territory of the terror organization look desirable. Above all, he communicated directly with his “friends” and *followers* (those who regularly read his Facebook postings and subscribed to his updates). He replied to questions and tried to persuade other young people to follow his example and emigrate. Whether or not he succeeded is unknown. What is clear is that, through his own propaganda, he as a multiplier reached out to a great number of young people.

There have been several Facebook profiles directed specifically towards girls and young women. The persons working these profiles – whether they were in fact women cannot be verified – claimed to have emigrated and then married a jihadist. Their romantically idealized depiction of a carefree family life under jihad was meant to animate other young women to emigrate as well.

Whereas Facebook, YouTube and Twitter had, in past years, been used most heavily for jihadist propaganda, recently a new tendency is to be observed: shifting onto platforms such as the messenger service Telegram. This is consistent with the overall trend in communication, as these services are optimized for use on mobile devices (e.g., smartphones) and are particularly popular among young people.

As a means of advertising, links are placed on Facebook pages that attract adolescents due to content or styling that corresponds to their everyday living experience, and where the extremist background is cloaked and not to be detected on first sight. These links lead to so-

called broadcasting channels on Telegram, involving a tool that enables simultaneous posting of messages to a large number of recipients. When users click these links to a Telegram channel a cascade effect sets in, with one link leading to another on a different Islamic channel, luring users further and further into the misanthropic ideology. In this way, adolescents can quickly end up on jihadist websites.

Research undertaken by jugendschutz.net<sup>2</sup> shows that there are well over 100 Islamistic channels on Telegram in German, and more than two thirds of these can be reckoned to the jihadist spectrum – one channel run by an “IS” sympathizer had over 3,000 members for a time. Moreover, the channels with the most drastic content are the ones publishing the highest number of postings: execution videos, calls to support the militant fight, images of battles at the front, and recruitment ads for terrorist groups.

User are thus exposed to a steady influx of information with a signal on their smartphone every time a new posting comes up (a *push* notification), either a vibration, a ring tone, or a visual cue. This caters to adolescents’ curiosity and their need to be ‘on top of things’. Information that appears authentic – say, on battles taking place in Syria – pops right up on their smartphones.

In addition, Telegram offers the option of creating one’s own *emojis* (also called *emoticons*: symbols used predominantly in written chats as substitutes for words and to express moods and feelings, e.g. a *smiley*) and making them available to all users of the service. Emojis are extremely popular among young people and are assumed to make communication more fun. On Telegram they are called *stickers*. Countless stickers already in circulation employ jihadist iconography glorifying terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and the “IS” or portraying events like the attacks of September 11, 2001 in a positive, comic-book style. Osama Bin Laden or the infamous terrorist “Jihadi John” who murdered the American journalist James Foley in the name of the “IS” are presented as heroes in stylized illustrations. Jihadist iconography thus finds entry into the everyday communication of adolescents and transports – along the way – the inhumane ideology it stands for.

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<sup>2</sup> As a competence center mutually maintained by Germany and its federal states to protect minors on the internet, jugendschutz.net conducts research on dangers and risks that young people are exposed to in their habitual digital environments. The agency urges providers to handle their content and services in a manner that is not damaging to young people. Over its hotline, it registers complaints from users who encounter online violations of youth protection laws, and it takes action to have offensive content removed quickly. Special attention is paid to risky contacts, self-harmful behavior, political extremism, and sexual exploitation of children. The department dealing with “Political Extremism” is financed by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth within the framework of the federal program “Living Democracy!”.

Seen overall, jihadist online propaganda is extremely diverse. There is a broad “portfolio” of materials available for recruiting efforts and propagating the extremist ideology. Professional-quality videos with *special effects* and animations tailored to the visual perception habits of young people are an important medium. Particularly the “IS” video productions, as viciously misanthropic as they may be, are seldom boring; instead, they follow the dramaturgical patterns established by professional film-industry productions.

Elements extracted from the ideology are also transported in memes and images, often combined with set pieces from the pop culture adolescents are exposed to daily. Symbols such as the Nike swoosh and the Adidas logo, removed from their original context, become advertising vehicles for the militant fight; characters from film, TV, or comics re-appear as transmitters of jihadist messages. Young people recognize the pop-culture element and associate it with positive things – fun or “coolness”. Exploiting such images serves the jihadists as an ideal door-opener for ideological influence.

Music also plays an important role in disseminating the ideology. The form used is the so-called battle *nasheed*, a jihadist variation on traditional Islamic a cappella singing (which even strict religious interpretation permits). ‘Bites’ from jihadist ideology are coupled with catchy tunes in order to subtly influence young people on an emotional level. This type of music is distributed over various services on the net including YouTube, Facebook, Messenger, or MP3 file-hosting platforms (websites that make audio files available for downloading).

Meanwhile, the “IS” has created its own apps for mobile use on smartphones and tablets. Some of them are directed explicitly towards younger children – with simple language, colorful design, and lots of pictures. The aim is to acquaint children as early as possible with the extremist ideology and to instill in them a positive image of jihad. In a playful context they are to learn Arabic letters, numbers, and prayers of supplication. The imagery within the app takes frequent reference to violent jihad. For instance, to learn arithmetic one can count weapons – Kalashnikovs and machetes; and problem-solving involves finding the bomb in an animated children’s bedroom before it explodes. The kids are supposedly having fun but in fact are being subtly indoctrinated.

## Jihadist narratives convey a misanthropic world view

The core narrative of jihadist propaganda is a purported conspiracy of the “infidels” aimed at destroying Islam and the Muslims. Everywhere – whether in Arab countries or in Western societies – Muslims and their religion are said to be existentially threatened by an environment hostile to them. As proof of this threat scenario videos and images are disseminated that show horrible scenes of violence or its aftermath – with the supposition that members of the *in-group* (Muslims) are the victims of an external enemy, the *out-group*. The logic here is that users who see these shocking depictions will identify with the victims and be moved to solidarity. The strong emotions that this can release – anxiety, anger – are channeled to stoke hate for the enemy and desire for revenge. Jihad is presented as a “just war” of defense by force against this threat; avenging and protecting one’s brothers and sisters in faith is billed as the “duty” of all „good Muslims“.

The *social web* has made it possible to link individual biographies more closely to the narrative of a purported war against Islam and the Muslims. The online propaganda interprets personal crises and failures, actual or imagined instances of discrimination as the consequence of a fundamental anti-Islamic bias among the societal majority, and it depicts the immediate living environment of Muslim women and men in non-Muslim countries as hostile and threatening. Mention of socio-political conflict topics, such as wearing the niqab or building minarets in inner-city environments, serves to exacerbate a sense of alienation and portray society as divided along confessional lines. The pattern for explaining all this is a polarized world view in which good and evil are facing off as irreconcilable antipodes. In contrast to the postulated “decadence” of Western societies and their plurality of life styles jihadist propaganda is projecting a community that provides orientation, a sense of belonging, an allegedly clear identity, and a substitute family – also online. The degradation of anyone and everyone who does not fit into this world view has the simultaneous effect of valorizing one’s own group and all the individuals belonging to it. For young persons who do not feel socially secure or may even feel socially rejected this can appear to be an attractive escape route out of their subjective experience of lacking perspectives or opportunities in life.

On the internet, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda and the “IS” present themselves as vigilant and protective, a supposed “vanguard” fighting back against (perceived) injustice towards Muslims and struggling not just with enemy groups but also against a decadent so-



ciety that ignores divine law and morals. Anyone can join the “holy cause”: women and men, girls and boys, independent of race or origin. Girls and young women are urged by the “IS” to marry a warrior and help secure the future of the “caliphate”. Their special task is to be submissive wives and raise their children to be “lions”, future fighters for the “IS”. Propaganda directed towards male internet users projects a romanticized image of war, suggesting that the young men will experience heroism and adventure, brotherhood and camaraderie. Together with friends and kindred spirits, they are told, they can become part of an epic struggle between good and evil, faith and godlessness. Adolescents are usually familiar with this rhetoric since it is also common in advertising for computer and video games. Indeed, many propaganda videos rely on stylistic techniques that are reminiscent of popular *ego-shooter* games systematically tapping into the media habits of the young generation.

The glorification of “martyrs” is another core motif in jihadist online propaganda. Most prominently, suicide attackers are idealized as pop-stars and idols in the videos, images, and online magazines of the “IS” and Al Qaeda (for the “IS”, the magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, and for Al Qaeda, *Inspire*). This star cult is accompanied by the promise of salvation for martyrs – that their sins will be forgiven and they will enter directly into paradise. The underlying rationale is: jihad is regarded as the utmost duty of religious practice, and those who die while fulfilling it are said to be rewarded specially by God. Armed struggle along with the killing it involves and the murder of “infidels” is thus elevated by the propaganda to the status of a spiritual path to God.

Particularly the “IS” often publishes gruesome videos of executions, in which the act of killing is idealized as a sacramental moment shared with the community of the “faithful” via internet. These videos usually include a justification for the murders: the victims are said to be enemy fighters, spies, traitors, heretics, homosexuals, or “infidels” who therefore must die.

The argumentation is couched in the above-mentioned larger narrative on the purported world-wide battle of the “infidels” against “true Islam” and “true Muslims”. Endowing such acts with a significance that simultaneously serves as a matrix for justifying violence is a type of rhetoric that surely has the potential for negative influence on young people still in a phase of orientation.

## Web content can radicalize young people and endanger their development

Research on processes of radicalization has not univocally answered the question of how great the influence of the internet need be in order to induce an individual to join a terrorist group and commit acts of violence. Studies have shown that several factors have to converge, for example the influence of friends or relatives, a radical milieu such as the Salafist scene, experiences of discrimination, or a socially disadvantaged environment.

An analysis of the biographies of more than 780 persons from Germany who traveled to Syria or Iraq to join jihadist groups points toward the potential significance of the internet. It observes that “above all, two factors that complement and overlap one another appear to be of greater importance for the radicalization of minors than for older emigrants: friends and internet”.<sup>3</sup> This statement pertains to the onset of radicalization. The authors conclude that the significance of the internet decreases noticeably in the course of radicalization. This suggests that in the case of children and adolescents growing up as internet users the influence of media on the process of radicalization should not be underestimated.

When assessing web material in legal terms, the decisive issue under German child protection laws is whether the content can endanger the development of children and adolescents as self-determined and socially competent personalities. This applies, for example, whenever websites incite violence and racial hate, or if they promote vigilantism (taking the law into one’s own hands). Such websites can be indexed by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons meaning that they may not be made accessible to minors. There is an overall ban on the dissemination of content glorifying war and on drastic depictions of violence as well as content containing race-baiting statements or inciting others to criminal acts. jugendschutz.net pursues constant efforts to see that impermissible content is deleted and its dissemination curbed. The aim is to minimize the risk that children and adolescents will be confronted with material of this kind.

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<sup>3</sup> Bundeskriminalamt/Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz/Hessisches Informations- und Kompetenzzentrum gegen Extremismus: Analyse der Radikalisierungshintergründe und -verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischer Motivation aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien oder Irak ausgereist sind. Fortschreibung 016, 14.10.2016, p. 49, [https://www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/Publikationsreihen/Forschungsergebnisse/2016AnalyseRadikalisierungsgruendeSyrienIrakAusreisende.pdf?\\_\\_blob=publicationFile&v=6](https://www.bka.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/Publikationsreihen/Forschungsergebnisse/2016AnalyseRadikalisierungsgruendeSyrienIrakAusreisende.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=6) (last retrieved on July 27, 2017).

Providers are required to remove such content or make it inaccessible as soon as it comes to their attention. However, most content of this type soon re-appears on other websites or is uploaded again and further distributed by other users. Nevertheless, responding promptly remains important so that further endangerment of children and adolescents can be prevented. Formal indexing can help to force platform administrators to remove content on the basis of binding decisions taken by the relevant authorities.

Unfortunately, a major portion of the propaganda posted by jihadists relies on subtle effects and, technically speaking, does not constitute an offense against the criminal code or laws governing the protection of minors. It is therefore essential that young people be sensitized to these issues and supported in developing a critical posture in their media use. It follows that media education efforts are called for, inside and outside of schools. Young users are particularly in need of skills enabling them to identify extremist content and to recognize manipulative intent when confronted with it.

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