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Book Review: The War On Online Terror

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The War On Online Terror

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Countering Militant Islamist Radicalisation On The Internet: A User Driven Strategy To Recover The Web
Johnny Ryan
2007, Institute of European Affairs 23

The Institute of European Affairs (IEA) is a policy research institute based in Dublin and Brussels. In 2006, the IEA identified a number of key themes for priority research, including counterterrorism, immigration and integration. Arising from this research focus, Johnny Ryan, the IEA's senior researcher in Dublin struck a rich seam of data linking all three themes by means of the internet. The results of Ryan's researches are neatly summarised in the IEA published work, 'Countering Islamist Radicalisation On The Internet'.

Ryan, a former Cambridge University researcher – who worked alongside Professor Christopher Andrew, President of Corpus Christi College and Chair of the Cambridge Intelligence Seminar – reveals in this work the elaborate, web-based virtual communications networks employed by groups such as Al Qaeda to connect with, radicalise and recruit young Europeans to their terror cells.

More importantly however, Ryan offers a comprehensive policy based solution to the issue of militant Islamist rhetoric on the internet which he describes as a powerful virtual 'Dawa' – the Islamist call to violent and offensive Jihad against fellow citizens of the EU and United States. Counter-intuitively perhaps – for a defence intellectual – Ryan does not make the case for tougher censorship of the web. Nor does he call for policies that would restrict access to Islamist websites, chat-rooms or blogs. Rather, he calls for proactive EU based strategies designed to educate young EU citizens about the fundamental errors, inconsistencies, lies and inaccuracies inherent in the extremist rhetoric employed by groups such as Al Qaeda.

Ryan's key findings give rise to four main policy recommendations for the EU. To begin with, the author provides the reader with a forensic examination of the various technical means – including both hardware and software solutions – and the corresponding exorbitant costs associated with censoring the web in this manner. He also addresses the many legal and practical problems that would attend such processes given the global and multi-jurisdictional footprint of the word wide web. He states, 'The global nature of the Internet makes common EU action to take down websites both technically impossible and legally irrelevant in the absence of a binding international treaty and an attendant consensus on what material should be subject to removal'.

His first recommendation therefore is to strongly advise against attempts to censor the web. The author discusses the seductive appeal that such 'hard policy responses' might have for EU leaders anxious to be perceived as 'tough' on terrorism. However, the author repeatedly and eloquently reiterates the legal, economic and practical pitfalls of such an approach. Furthermore, perhaps unusually for a counter-terror treatise, the author emphasises the manner in which an EU-wide regime of ad hoc censorship of the web

might significantly curtail freedom of speech and freedom of association – two key civil liberties uniquely facilitated by the Internet.

Ryan's second key recommendation is that resistance to radical Islamist rhetoric on the internet should by 'user driven'. The author advocates a 'soft policy response' on the part of the EU designed to educate and inform internet users as to how to challenge and resist Islamist rhetoric and other 'hate-speech' encountered on the web. This 'bottom-up' as opposed to 'top-down' policy imperative as advocated by the author - though termed a 'soft policy response' – is a radical development in that it recognises the radically different ways in which audiences interact with new media and highly interactive digital formats. Unlike engagement with traditional media such as newspapers, books, radio or television, the policy responses advocated in this book recognise the symmetrical, two-way communication processes that lie at the heart of new media such as the internet. This perspective is consistent with the latest research findings and scholarly literature on mass communication theory and new media.

The author's third recommendation is that internet users throughout the EU, irrespective of nationality, religious identity or ethnicity should be provided with the necessary 'cultural intelligence' to challenge violent Islamist rhetoric. The author's fourth and final policy recommendation is that this 'cultural intelligence' be provided by 'enabling stakeholders' such as schools, community and religious organisations – and particularly by learned Islamic Imams and scholars. This cultural intelligence would directly challenge the fallaciously claimed legitimacy of the use of violence by groups such as Al Qaeda, along with the spurious, faux-Islamist case made for offensive Jihad by such groups.

In summary, Ryan's book recognises the importance of the internet to groups such as Al Qaeda as a global networking tool - especially at a time when physical surveillance has increased exponentially internationally. In the absence of physical sanctuary, the virtual world provides such groups an ideal space to colonise with poisoned rhetoric. Ryan's policy recommendations also recognise that Islam is a legitimate and peaceful discourse and that ordinary Muslims have no greater propensity for violence than any other group in society.

This book de-mystifies the 'intellectual-unknown' of the internet and its use by groups such as Al Qaeda. It also highlights the positive and pro-social role that defence intellectuals in organisations such as the IEA can play in civil society. The book represents the unique and positive contribution that Irish defence scholars can make at EU and international level – especially given our own history and experience of terrorism during the Troubles. The book not only enhances our understanding of the manner in which the internet functions to extend what Habermas refers to as the 'public sphere', it also acts as a compelling argument for extending and consolidating links between Ireland's research and defence institutions – and to firmly establish an intellectual tradition in defence and security studies in this country.

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