

# The Virtual Propagation of Jihadist Media and its Effects

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‘We must get our message across to the masses of the nation and break the media siege imposed on the jihad movement. This is an independent battle that we must launch side by side with the military battle.’

Ayman Al-Zawahiri (2001) *Fursan Taht Rayah Al-Nabi (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner)*

# The Internet

Attributes of the Internet particularly amenable to Jihadist media:

- Accessibility & Cost
- Anonymity & Lack of Censorship
- Speed & Immediacy
- Scope & Audience Reach
- Communication & Interactivity
- Multimedia Environment

# Audiences of Virtual Jihadist media

Difficult to determine constituency of virtual audiences.

- Issues of access to the Internet (age, gender, location, race, socio-economic status etc)
- Can assume profile is similar to current or potential Jihadists or supporters i.e. ~80% live in the Diaspora, male, under 25 etc
- Linguistic issues – primarily Arabic sources

# Virtual Jihadist media

- Corpus of websites, forums, and blogs and Web 2.0 content belonging to this genre is considerably large.
- English language sources underrepresented: <1%
- Ephemeral nature of Jihadist fora

# Websites

Jihadunspun (JUS) [<http://www.jihadunspun.com>]

- High-end production values & sophisticated interface
- Serves as a *prima facie* ‘news’ provider, reporting daily on the ‘War on Terror’, Iraq, etc.
- Claim a daily readership in excess of 800,000
- Also offers ‘premium’ content to subscribers; graphic video clips and images ‘live from the battlefield’

# Forums

*Mujahedon.net* [<http://www.mujahedon.net/forums/>]

- One of the very few English-language forums wholly representative of genre.
- Serve similar function to websites; news, propaganda and audio-visual content.
- Content not published by site, but by users => ramifications for liability.
- Communications medium for the global Jihadist movement and wider audiences
- Discussion and dissemination of new material
- Allow 'outreach' facilities => channel for uninitiated to express discontent.

# Mujahedon.net

- 1<sup>st</sup> appeared online: 05/10/2005 [now offline]
- As of 01/06/2006, 1039 members listed with 22,307 posts
- Majority of users (87%) have never posted on the forums and represent *passive* or casual users
- Only 5% have 50 or more posts => forum dominated by a small but 'vocal' *active* core.
- At least 20% female (from gender-specific usernames)

# Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

Omar Bakri Mohammed's live sermons on PalTalk

- Ephemerality attractive prospect for Jihadists => avoid incriminating evidence of activities
- Regular evening broadcasts [90-120 mins] followed by interactive Q&A session
- Audience: ~50 regular users + guests
- Late 2005/ early 2006 - *explicit* exhortations to violence and jihad

# Web 2.0

Range of 2nd generation Web services, where users contribute as easily as they consume

- Filesharing platforms (YouTube) have facilitated wider dissemination of 'Jihadist' content
- Orkut – hosts 8 Jihadist communities: Al-Qaeda (41 members) & At-tawhid wal-Jihad (261)
- Central hubs => users can share videos and images, exchange messages, and read communiqués.

# Function

Jihadist fora serve four key interrelated functions:

- News provision
- Propagation
- Training
- Expression & Catharsis

# Legitimacy

Jihadist fora seek legitimacy in diverse ways:

- Ostensibly champion uncensored impartiality and audience discretion
- Back up claims with photographic/video evidence
- Sophisticated design and production values
- Indications of popularity and prestige
- Uphold a certain degree of professional conduct

Copyright Al-Azhaar NewsAgency -  
Alleged Picture of American Soldier with his Head out in Kabul Afghanistan



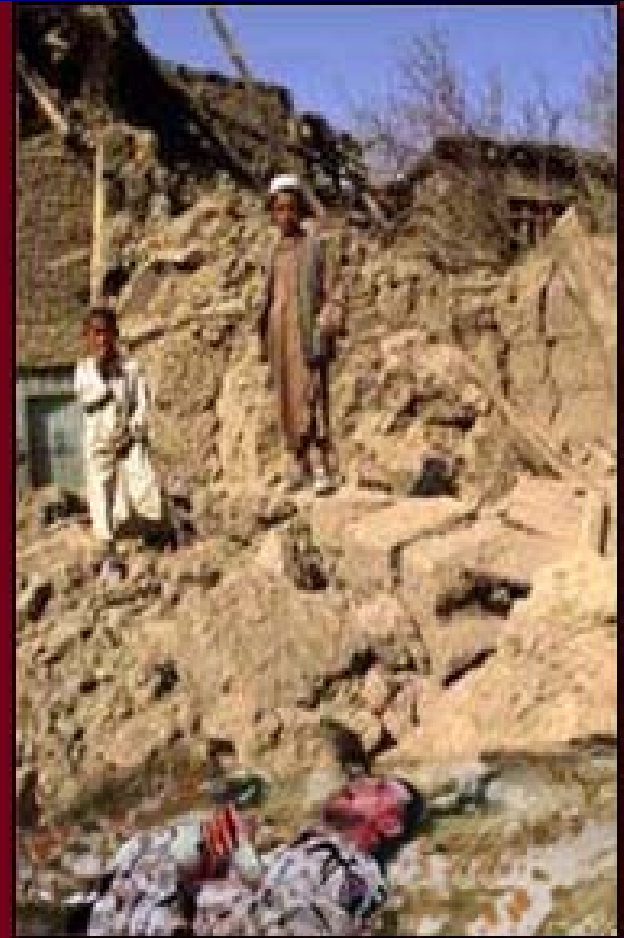
Alleged Casualty Shot



Notice The Difference In  
Resolution From The Top  
And Bottom



Original CNN Photograph



A Casualty Shot We Made

# Radicalisation

- Radicalising effects difficult to ascertain
- Undoubtedly much Jihadist content is propaganda, indoctrination, and publicity
- New Jihadist focus => Intense virtual radicalisation and recruitment drive
- Not solely militaristic => financial and technical assistance requested

# Evidence of Virtual Radicalisation

Limited evidence of virtual radicalisation:

- The 2004 Madrid train bombings
- July 21<sup>st</sup> failed London bomb plot
- Canadian Bomb plot
- Internet only provides initial impetus
- Degree to which wider audiences influenced?
- Elective medium => more likely to reinforce than radicalise

# Convergence with non- Jihadist media

- Mainstream Muslim or ethnic media
- Non-Muslim ‘conspiracy theory’ sites
- ‘Gore’ sites; extreme audio-visual content
- Alternate/non-mainstream news media

# Alternate News Paradigm

Convergence of Jihadist media with alternative news media, critical of mainstream media 'collusion' with Coalition accounts:

- Female sexual abuse at Abu Ghraib
- The 'heroic rescue' of Private Jessica Lynch
- The falsity of Coalition claims with respect to the 'uprising' in Basra
- The use of White Phosphorous as an incendiary
- The use of Mark 77 bombs successor to Napalm

Hypocrisy & double standards also weaken moral high ground:

- Images of al-Zarqawi's bloodied corpse
- The sustained 'war' on Al-Jazeera
- FCC's finding => govt. made news was covert propaganda
- Exacerbate issue of trust
- Grant Jihadist/alternative media greater legitimacy

# Conclusion

- Ideological conflict underlying the War on terror increasingly conducted on the Internet
- Jihadist media largely reactionary => shortcomings within mainstream media
- Not alone in critiques => growing convergence with other non-mainstream media
- Jihadist message expanding beyond traditional ambit
- Surfing habits no indication of extremist proclivities
- Reductive to assume complex process of radicalisation can stem from media effects alone