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# Virtual jihadist media

## *Function, legitimacy and radicalizing efficacy*

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**ABSTRACT** Within the last 10 years, the internet has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism. The exponential growth of jihadist fora, with their increasingly 'high-end' production values, sophisticated critiques of prevailing narratives and ostensive attempts at impartiality, do not occur in a vacuum. To a great extent they are reactive, their *raison d'être* supplied by the mainstream media's perceived collusion with governmental (mis)information, or at least its uncritical acceptance. The jihadist media are far from alone in these critiques and there has been a growing convergence of interests with other non-mainstream media outlets, which are also challenging conventional modes of mediation. This article seeks to explore the functions of the new jihadist media, the ways in which it is granted legitimacy, and the compelling issue of radicalizing efficacy and recruitment.

**KEYWORDS** *internet, Islamism, jihadism, new media, news terrorism, radicalization*

## Introduction

The spectre of a retrograde, puritanical and belligerent ideology may seem anachronistic in the 21st century. However, jihadism (as opposed to the classical reified conception of *jihad*) is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. The internet, that most contemporary of media, is increasingly its medium of choice: jihadist websites, forums and blogs flourish. Prominent jihadist ideologues such as Ayman Al-Zawahiri argue that:

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. (Al-Zawahiri, 2001)

The jihadists' marginalized status vis-à-vis the mainstream media is a consequence of what Hammond (2003) refers to as 'the media war on terrorism'. Bemoaning this 'media siege', they have turned to the internet



as their principal ideological battlefield. Virtual propagation of jihadism proceeds apace, with an exponential growth in jihadist websites from 14 to more than 4000 within five years (Atran, 2005). Despite the pressing need in the current sociopolitical climate to understand the role of this media in political radicalization, the issues have not yet been adequately addressed.

The term *jihad* has become a nebulous, politically-charged catchword, used and abused in different ways. Under its overarching rubric, both synonyms and qualitatively different terms are conflated, such as Islamism, jihadism, fundamentalism, extremism, radicalism, militant Islam and terrorism. This obfuscates the nuances inherent to such terms. The primary distinction to be made is between types of Islamist groups, where 'Islamism' (in this author's own definition) refers to the religion of Islam interpreted and reformulated as a modern ideology to support political and social activism, often allied with attaining temporal power. On the one hand, there are general Islamist groups, such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir or the current incarnation of the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, radical Islamist or jihadist groups are those which have a propensity towards violence or promote violence as an integral part of their ideology. This article deals with the internet-based media production and consumption of the latter type of group.

## **The internet**

Within the last 10 years, the internet has become the principal platform for the dissemination and mediation of the culture and ideology of jihadism (Atran, 2005; Bunt, 2003; Weimann, 2006). Six inherent attributes of the internet make virtual forums particularly amenable to the jihadist media: accessibility and cost; anonymity and lack of censorship; speed and immediacy; scope and audience reach; communication and interactivity; and multimedia environment.

### **Accessibility and cost**

A standard telephone line and a rudimentary personal computer (PC) (or even wireless application protocol (WAP) enabled mobile phone) anywhere in the world will enable access to the same virtual platforms as the most sophisticated of equipment. It is relatively inexpensive to develop and maintain a web presence. Production and consumption of virtual media are easier, less expensive and more widely accessible than other media forms.

### **Anonymity and lack of censorship**

Multiple free webmail addresses and anonymous postings on forums and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) servers often render communication paths untraceable. The theoretical lack of censorship is one of the internet's



most important attributes. Censorship in cyberspace is difficult to enforce due to the permeability of international borders online and the lack of a central regulatory body. Anonymous peer-to-peer (P2P) networks, 'IP (internet protocol) masking' software and the use of proxy servers enable jihadist media to be anonymous and uncensored.

### **Speed and immediacy**

The speed of communication and publication is, in theory, only limited by the speed of the networks over which data is transmitted. Web content can be updated instantaneously, continuously or ad hoc. The time taken to implement changes can be thought of as an individual 'time packet'. These 'time packets' can be contiguous. This contrasts with the discrete time packets within which traditional media operate: for example, a daily newspaper operates within a 24-hour time packet. The internet also allows real-time publication (live streaming video and audio content).

### **Scope and audience reach**

A website's ambit, unlike other media, is spatially and temporally unrestricted. Potential audiences (geographically diffuse) can be immense. Content may be accessed at any time. The popularity of virtual media is also less contingent upon financial and other considerations, compared with other media forms. Small independent websites can compete with the largest international news media for audiences, as search engine results often demonstrate.

### **Communication and interactivity**

A hypermedia interface facilitates user-directed, multi-linear navigation; highly individualistic, user-specific patterns of media consumption; and interactivity or audience participation. Email, forum and messageboard postings and IRC facilitate cheap instantaneous communication, regardless of physical location.

### **Multimedia environment**

Text, graphics, animations, audio and video are combined, facilitated by the use of hyperlinks and a graphical user interface. All may be downloaded for further use, modification or sharing with other users.

## **Audiences of virtual jihadist media**

Weimann (2006) suggests that 'terrorist websites' target three different audience profiles: current and potential supporters, international public opinion and enemy publics. The present study focuses on the first user profile. It is extremely difficult to determine the make-up of virtual media audiences, unless users willingly disclose this information. Audience demographics are dictated to a large degree by extraneous factors pertaining to



the accessibility of the medium itself. Levels of internet access and availability display a marked disparity between regions: it remains inaccessible to much of the developing world's population (United Nations Development Project (UNDP), 2005). Within countries, technological barriers relate to age or gender (Office for National Statistics, 2005b) or to linguistic, economic or ethnic considerations. The last three factors are pertinent to the Muslim community in Britain, the most socio-economically deprived minority ethnic grouping in Britain (Office for National Statistics, 2005a; Peach, 2004). Access to virtual forums demands a certain level of literacy, economic success and technological competence, and therefore the audiences in the present study cannot be considered to be representative of the Muslim population at large.

The audience profile is further limited by the content available, in particular its linguistic demands. The overwhelming majority of virtual jihadist forums are published in Arabic alone (Paz, 2004; Ulph, 2005a) and so inaccessible to a large proportion of Muslims as well as other internet users. British Muslim audiences are predominantly South Asian (74%; Office for National Statistics, 2005a). Therefore they are more likely to speak Urdu, Punjabi or Bengali than Arabic. This study focuses on English-language jihadist forums, as these are readily accessible to British Muslim audiences.

## **Virtual jihadist media**

Many websites, forums and blogs can be identified as having the promulgation of jihadism as their primary goal. It is difficult to know if this genre is overrepresented relative to other Islamist or Islamic sites. Websites catering to an English-language audience constitute a very small percentage of this body of media: less than 1 percent of the total. This 'underrepresentation' is exacerbated by the disruption or removal of some high-profile English-language sites, such as the seminal Azzam.com or Almuhammad.net, over recent years. In fact, one of the most notable features of virtual jihadist forums is their ephemerality. Many sites disappear within weeks or months, then resurface under different names and with different internet service providers (ISPs). Sites can be suspended by ISPs if content is discovered which violates their terms of service, if site visitors complain or even under governmental pressure. Anti-jihadist organizations such as the Internet Haganah use a 'name and shame' strategy, identifying site hosts, administrators and participants and then informing the ISP about the material in question.

A detailed examination of this vast corpus of websites, forums and weblogs (blogs) is beyond the purview of this study. Instead, it will look briefly at the different types of forums, identifying trends and focusing on a representative example of each.



## Websites

Jihad Unspun ([www.jihadunspun.com](http://www.jihadunspun.com)) is one of the most professional jihadist websites currently published and certainly the most professional English-language site, with high production values and a sophisticated interface that caters for streaming audio and video download content. Jihad Unspun claims to be ‘the largest English language site that reports daily news on the other side of this conflict ... and to tell the truth on the so-called war on terrorism’ to a daily readership in excess of 800,000. It is impossible to verify such figures, but indicators such as search engine rankings confirm the site’s popularity.

The site is organized in two parts. The main site serves as a news provider, reporting daily on the ‘War on Terror’, the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and other major conflict zones around the world. Two parallel navigation or menu bars offer ‘mainstream news’ to the left of the screen (stories from conventional media sources) and ‘uncensored news’ in the right-hand column: direct reports (occasionally of the very same incidents) from the frontlines of conflict zones. Its sister site Jusplus (<http://www.jusplus.com>) offers ‘premium’ content to paying subscribers (the JUSClub): video clips and photographs, often of an extremely graphic nature, ‘live from the battlefield ... that show the real destruction of war’. Jihad Unspun’s rationale for having this two-tiered system is curiously reminiscent of sites offering ‘hard’ pornographic material to select subscribers only.

## Forums

The most radical *jihadi* forums are published solely in Arabic; there are between 15 and 25 of them (Paz, 2004). Non-Arabic speaking audiences are not well-catered for; one of the few English-language forums of this type is Mujahedon.net ([www.mujahedon.net/forums/](http://www.mujahedon.net/forums/)). Jihadist forums often serve much the same function as jihadist websites, providing news stories, propaganda and audiovisual media files relating to jihadist activities. The crucial difference is that the material is not published by the site itself, but contained within users’ posts. This has important ramifications for the site’s liability, as the opening statement on Mujahedon’s homepage makes clear:

The postings in the discussion forums do not undergo monitoring and do not necessarily reflect Mujahedon.net views. Mujahedon.net claims NO responsibility or liability to third party links or images contained within users’ posts. We do not encourage any kind of ‘terrorism’ and we follow Swedish law and order, i.e. freedom of speech.

Such disclaimers are important for website owners and administrators, particularly in view of Babar Ahmed’s pending extradition to the US for running the UK jihadist media site, Azzam.com.

Forums also serve as a communications medium for the global jihadist movement and wider audiences, since aside from facilitating the discussion



and dissemination of new material, they also enable the uninitiated to discover a channel for the expression of discontent. Forums can provide much more information on audiences than websites, as users are required to register before being granted access to the content – therefore, it is possible to conduct some form of rudimentary analysis of audiences. For example, although it is impossible to discern real gender ratios, around 20 percent of gender-specific usernames were identified as female. Consumption of jihadist media has often been assumed to be the realm of young Muslim males alone, so this is an intriguing finding.

The Mujahedon forum first appeared on 5 October 2005 and has grown steadily. As at 1 June 2006, 1039 members were listed, with some 22,307 posts between them. An analysis of user activity reveals that the vast majority (87%) have never posted on the forums: they are passive or casual users; 13 percent have posted at least once; 5 percent 50 or more times; 1 percent 500 or more times. A small but vocal, active core posts new content, initiates debates and responds to questions posed by newcomers. The division between passive and active users is perpetuated by the fact that the forum is set up hierarchically and various sub-forums are only available to veteran members.

### **IRC channels**

IRC channels differ from discussion forums in that they are transient and provide no archive of content. This ephemerality can be an attractive option for jihadists keen to avoid leaving incriminating evidence of their activities. The spiritual leader of the now defunct al-Muhajiroun, Omar Bakri Mohammed, regularly communicated with his followers via live webcasts on the Paltalk network ([www.paltalk.com](http://www.paltalk.com)), prior to his departure from Britain. The nightly broadcasts, followed by question and answer sessions, were sometimes attended by 50 regular users and other guests, although the number was often far smaller. Towards the end of 2004 and in early 2005, following the invalidation of various Islamists' 'covenant of security' with Britain, Bakri Mohammed's messages became increasingly hardline. As reported in *The Times*, he exhorted listeners to join Al-Qaeda:

Al-Qaeda and all its branches and organisations of the world, that is the victorious group and they have the emir and you are obliged to join. There is no need to mess about ... these people the martyrs are calling you and shouting to you from far distant places, 'al-Jihad, al-Jihad'; they say to you, my dear Muslim brothers, 'Where is your weapon, where is your weapon? Come on to the jihad.' (O'Neill and Lappin, 2005: 8)

Despite his fiery rhetoric and notoriety, he had previously been fairly reserved in his public exhortations to violence and *jihad*, shrewdly circumventing laws on inciting racial hatred or soliciting murder. These messages were surprisingly candid.



## Web 2.0: blogs, social networking and filesharing platforms

Web 2.0 is an umbrella term for various second-generation services available on the web, where users contribute as easily as they consume: tools and projects fostering collaboration and participation such as 'Wiki' projects, filesharing portals, podcasts, personal spaces, social networking sites and the 'blogosphere'. Blogging technology has been available for more than a decade and its growth is well documented (Alavi, 2005; Davis, 2005; Gilmor, 2004; Gilmor and Perry, 2001). Inevitably, blogs have been employed in the propagation and dissemination of jihadism. The form adopted is incredibly diverse: from individuals who seek to debate the merits of jihadist ideology, such as 'Ninjabi', a female blogger who posted Abdullah Azzam's seminal essay (*fatwa*) 'Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation After Iman Faith' (1979) (<http://islaminspires.blogspot.com>), to large jihadist organizations such as the Mujahideen Shura Council, an umbrella group whose virtual activities are conducted principally from their blog ([www.albayanat.blogspot.com](http://www.albayanat.blogspot.com)).

Filesharing platforms have greatly facilitated the wider dissemination of 'jihadist' content. YouTube, which allows users to share video files, hosts many jihadist videos. The profile of user 'Islamic jihadist' contains an image of the Twin Towers ablaze and the infamous quote from Osama bin Laden: 'These youth love death as you love life.' This user provides very few videos, but compiles an archive of other users' jihadist content, including videos of 'Juba' (the notorious Baghdad sniper of US troops) and improvised explosive device attacks on coalition convoys. The user comments section is indicative of the audience profile. Curiously, it contains no contributions from jihadist sympathizers or supporters. The vast majority of comments are denunciatory: for example, 'if your [sic] ready for martyrdom, our military will be more than happy to kill you. Fag' and 'death to sand nigga!' In far greater numbers, users such as 'Warriors Pain' post numerous pro-coalition videos, some graphically depicting casualties suffered by 'insurgents and terrorists'. Indeed, user comments suggest that users such as 'Islamic Jihadist' are principally reacting to the preponderance of patriotically 'gung ho' videos, many from US marines. However, the debate is far from monolithic. The bulk of jihadist content is not posted by supporters or sympathizers. The highly prolific user 'LizardAlien' has uploaded around 150 videos, mostly from the conflicts in Iraq and Chechnya, which depict both sides: insurgent videos of improvised explosive device attacks on coalition troops are juxtaposed with US military videos of Apache gunships killing insurgents.

Orkut, an 'invitation-only' social networking website which allows users to create personal profiles and associate with others with similar interests, hosts around eight jihadist communities. One, by the name of Al Qaeda (41 members), is described as 'the organization of the people who can go to any lengths to bring freedom and justice on earth'. At-Tawhid wal-Jihad (261 members) is





for those who love Islam, Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda ... The mujahideen of this movement are fighting against American terror in Iraq. It is a branch of Al Qaeda and led by a great Muslim Mujahid Abu Masab Al-Zarqawi. We welcome the Muslim Mujahideen here.

These communities serve as central hubs where like-minded, English-speaking individuals can share jihadist videos and pictures of coalition casualties, exchange messages and read English translations of jihadist communiqués, often long before they become available in English anywhere else.

## Functions

Jihadist forums serve four key interrelated functions: news, propaganda, training and expression.

### News

Many jihadist forums consider their news coverage to be an important part of their *raison d'être*, particularly as existing coverage of Muslim conflicts is deemed to be unrepresentative and skewed towards their opponents' viewpoints. Prior to its closure in 2001, Azzam Publications described itself as 'an independent media organization providing authentic news and information about Jihad and the Foreign Mujahideen everywhere'. A number of sites, such as Jihadunspun.com and Islammemo.cc (www.Islammemo.cc), operate solely as news outlets.

### Propaganda

Perhaps the most important role of virtual forums is the uncensored publication and dissemination of the ideology and culture of jihadism. This ranges from the ideological treatises and theological 'evidences' underpinning the culture of *jihad* and 'official' statements and communiqués from jihadist groups and leaders, to the circulation of 'acts of *jihad*' such as graphic videos of beheadings, or improvised explosive device attacks on coalition targets in Iraq.

### Training

Aside from propagating ideology, virtual forums also provide the means through which those with the inclination may actualize their jihadist aspirations. A plethora of technical and military manuals, such as the notorious *Mawsu'at al-Idad (Encyclopaedia of Preparation)* are widely available. They cover topics as diverse as hostage kidnapping, weaponry manufacture and deployment, guerrilla warfare, training and tactics and bomb-making. For example, the manufacture of acetone peroxide, the substance allegedly used in the 7 July and 21 July attacks in London, is treated comprehensively in the online *Al-Aqsa Encyclopaedia* available on some jihadist websites (e.g. <http://elaqsa.2islam.com/Explo/11.html>).



## Expression

It is widely known that jihadist forums are used by certain audiences in their pursuit of violence or terrorism-related activities (Weimann, 2006). This relationship is incontrovertible in some cases, but less often recognized is that for other, less hardline audiences, jihadist forums may serve an important function in subsuming diverse strains of political activism, unrest and dissent and provide a conduit and framework for its non-violent expression. They can have a cathartic function, allowing audiences to vent their anger and frustration without resorting to violent means, similar to the role played by Al-Jazeera with Middle-Eastern audiences, as posited by Zayani (2006). Relevant forms of expression include engaging in dialogue and debate with other members (such as the perennial debates over the legitimacy of targeting civilians or other Islamic sects), or even venting one's frustration through creative means such as poetry. For example, Khalid, a member of the Mujahedon forum, submitted the following poem which highlights to other members his empathy with the *umma* as a victim of oppression, and alludes to his moral quandary in being unable to match his humanistic aspirations with actions:

When I see a Muslim Father being Humiliated it is my Father being Humiliated.

When I see a Muslim Mother Harassed it is my Mother being Harassed.

When I see a Muslim Brother being Persecuted it is my Brother being Persecuted.

When I see a Muslim Sister being Beat it is my Sister being Beat.

When I see a Muslim Son being Murdered it is my Son being Murdered.

When I see a Muslim Daughter being Raped it is my Daughter being Raped.

I can no longer Ignore the Cries of my family.

I can no longer Watch my family endlessly Suffer.

I can no longer See my family be Slaughtered and do Nothing.

What would I Tell ALLAH on the Day of Judgment.

That I Wouldn't Help them, or that I Couldn't Save them.

I will not have their Blood on my Hands. (<http://www.mujahedon.net/forums/index.php?showforum=28>, accessed 12 September 2006)

## Legitimacy

Legitimacy is crucial for any media source which aspires to credibility. This holds particularly true for jihadist sources which exist to challenge the hegemony of mainstream media. Jihadist websites attempt to gain legitimacy in diverse ways. Aware of the ease of access to opposing viewpoints and alternative accounts and the increasing competency of media-savvy audiences, many ostensibly champion impartiality and audience discretion.



For example, the Alhesbah site ([www.alhesbah.org](http://www.alhesbah.org)), whose primary function is to host its popular jihadist forum, purports to be an impartial news portal. Its homepage is emblazoned with large, professional hypertext banner links to mainstream news media outlets, referred to as 'Alhesbah's media partners'. It is important for jihadist forums to appear to be 'telling the other side of the story'. The Mujahedon forum contains prominent links to the official Iraq Coalition Casualty Count website (<http://icasualties.org/oif/>), despite the fact that jihadist sources disparage these figures as inaccurate and designed to downplay the true coalition casualty cost. Similarly, and despite the patent propaganda of some of its articles, Jihad Unspun highlights its impartiality by presenting mainstream media reports in an unbiased way and then contrasting them with jihadist reports (backed up by selective photographic or video evidence), inviting its audiences to differentiate between its 'truth' and others' 'censored accounts'. This leaves Jihad Unspun less open to accusations of bias and propaganda, ironically shifting the onus for objectivity onto the mainstream news media outlets which fail to represent jihadist viewpoints and are depicted as toeing the official coalition line, as with embedded journalism in the Iraq War (Hammond, 2003; Kull, 2004; Pintak, 2006).

Contrasting the inherent bias and censorship of western or mainstream sources with the uncensored impartiality of jihadist sources, this more sophisticated brand of jihadist media receives further boosts to its potency and legitimacy from the conspicuous absence of commensurate reports from 'Islamic conflict' zones within the mainstream western media. Where there is such coverage, it usually lacks graphic portrayals of violence and its aftermath, reinforcing the perception that the western media presents, at best, a censored, sanitized version of conflict, failing to admit real Muslim suffering – or at worst, that it is somehow complicit in the events. Many jihadist and insurgency groups in Iraq shrewdly exploit this glaring absence of coverage by collecting and compiling data and footage (e.g. dispatching cameramen alongside combatants) in order to back up their own claims and refute those of the coalition and mainstream media (International Crisis Group, 2006).

Sophisticated design and production values often contribute disproportionately to perceptions of the quality and legitimacy of content. A recent development is the advent of online streaming video news programmes, such as the weekly *Sawt al-Khilafah (Voice of the Caliphate)*, 'dedicated to the leaders of Al-Qaeda, the Islamic armies in Chechnya, Kashmir and the Arabian Peninsula': a highly professional 15-minute news round-up with a studio anchor. Indications of popularity and prestige also help to ensure that claims are accorded greater credibility: thus a search for the term 'jihad' on Google (4 April 2006) returns search results that feature Jihad Unspun at positions four and five, which is no mean feat. Indeed, Jihad Unspun has even been included in Google News as a bona fide 'news provider', much to the chagrin of US officials and anti-jihadist civic



groups. Jihad Unspun's professionalism extends to appearing to take great pains in determining the authenticity of material. It elected not to print an alleged US casualty photograph from the Al-Ansaar news agency, which had been circulating on a number of jihadist forums, on the grounds that it was falsely 'doctored'. Not content with 'proving' the falsity of the image by drawing attention to its incorrect perspective and multiple resolutions, it generated its own composite image based on the same original, presenting it alongside both Al-Ansaar's image and the original photograph from CNN, illustrating how easily such manipulation could be achieved.

### **Radicalizing efficacy**

Many commentators have suggested that the primary inspiration for jihadism among diasporic communities may be found on the internet (Atran, 2005; Awan, 2007; Suleaman, 2005; Ulph, 2005a, 2005b). The present study, along with others (Atran, 2005; Eedle, 2004; Last and Kandel, 2005; Ulph, 2005a; 'Using Modern Technology to Sell Jihadism', 2005; Weimann, 2006), has attempted to describe the varied contours of virtual jihadist media and their putative audience profiles, but their efficacy in actual radicalization is extremely difficult to ascertain in most cases. Much of the material that they produce constitutes propaganda and aims at indoctrination; some jihadist groups are well aware of the internet's potential radicalizing efficacy and appear to be explicitly focusing their energies upon virtual radicalization and recruitment. The Global Islamic Media Front recently wrote:

This is the internet that Allah has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the mujahideen, which has come to serve your interests – given that half the battle of the mujahideen is being waged on the pages of the internet – the sole outlet for mujahideen media. (quoted in Ulph, 2005b: 6)

A recent posting on the al-Hesbah forum by the Global Islamic Media Front, entitled the 'Pledge of Death in God's Path', went further and requested a pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) from site visitors, in the hope that they might be prepared to engage in *jihad* and swear

allegiance to death ... in the very near future ... so that Osama bin Laden will have an army in Afghanistan, an army in Iraq and a huge army on a waiting list on the internet pages. (quoted in Ulph, 2005b: 1–2)

This recruitment drive is not solely militaristic: in response to the 'media war' and the ideological battle being waged, the Global Islamic Media Front recently advertised 'vacant positions' for those wishing to help with the 'media jihad' by producing videos and assembling footage of jihadists in Iraq (La Guardia, 2005).

In other recruitment bids, many forums list the exploits and 'glorious' martyrdoms of those slain in the global arena of *jihad*. Messages from



leaders, such as this from Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, attempt to stir audiences into action and are disseminated widely on jihadist forums, via translations into English and other languages:

This is a call to all the Sunnis in Iraq: Awaken from your slumber and arise from your apathy. You have slept for a long time. The wheels of the war to annihilate the Sunnis have not and will not halt. It will reach the homes of each and every one of you, unless Allah decides otherwise. If you do not join the mujahideen to defend your religion and honor, by Allah, sorrow and regret will be your lot, but only after all is lost. (Middle East Media Research Institute, 2005)

This recruitment drive is proving fruitful: there is clear evidence of the role played by virtual jihadist forums in radicalization in a number of cases. The 2004 Madrid train bombings are prime examples. The internet text 'Iraqi Jihad: Hopes and Dangers' (cited in Congreso de los Diputados Madrid, 2004) suggested that strategic bombing of trains would compel Spain's withdrawal from the US-led coalition in Iraq and is thought to have been seminal to the actions of the perpetrators. Similarly, Hussein Osman (a defendant in the 21 July 2005 London 'bomb plot' trial) stated to Italian investigators that his group regularly watched videos of the conflict in Iraq and used the internet to 'read up' on *jihad*. He denied any direct links to Al-Qaeda but admitted to utilizing their online platforms (Elliott et al., 2005). Official reports on the 7 July London suicide bombings also noted (in a general way, not directly referring to those attacks) that the internet was becoming a valuable tool for extremists, being used for propaganda as well as training and grooming potential recruits through chatrooms (Home Office, 2006; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2006).

More recently, a terrorist plot involving 17 young Canadian Muslims was foiled by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service after surveillance of a chatroom in 2004, where inflammatory anti-western rhetoric is thought to have precipitated a 'homegrown' bomb plot (Van Rijn, 2006). Yet even in such cases, where the use of internet communication appears as *prima facie* evidence of its role in radicalization, the internet only seems to have provided the initial impetus: the plot quickly became more conventional in terms of planning and actualization (e.g. group meetings at a 'training camp' in northern Ontario).

Despite limited evidence for internet radicalization in such cases, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which virtual jihadist forums influence wider audiences and users. For all we know, they may be proverbially 'preaching to the converted'. Certainly, Omar Bakri Mohammed's nightly IRC sessions solely targeted the small *côterie* of his followers, with little attempt to reach a wider audience. The bulk of messages posted on the Mujahedon forums originate with a very small core group of active users: 99 percent are passive or casual users. Some analysts doubt whether exposure to the internet can 'turn anyone into a terrorist', arguing that as an elective medium it is more likely to reinforce existing worldviews than



to radicalize (Schanzer, quoted in Shane, 2003). It is alluringly simple to blame the internet, but jihadist material has long been widely available in other media formats. For example, Azzam Publications, one of the most prolific and well-known jihadist media producers on the internet prior to its closure in 2001, operated for many years as a print publishing house in London. Similarly, the Maktabah Al-Ansaar bookshop in Birmingham, which also doubles as an 'Islamic news agency', has been providing jihadist videos since as early as 1999, providing evidence of Muslim persecution around the world and chronicling its corollary: the rise and exploits of Mujahideen in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir and Palestine (Foggo, 2001). This type of publication was thought to cater to a specific audience and was not generally deemed to pose a threat. (The shop was raided under the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2000 in February 2000, but no charges were brought.)

### **Virtual jihadist media as part of the alternative news paradigm**

The jihadist media fulfil some of the same functions as particularistic ethnic media. If one ignores the extreme and sometimes violent tone and content of jihadist sources, they are often concerned with the same issues and topics deemed important by mainstream British Muslim news media such as the Islam Channel and publications such as *Muslim Weekly*, *Muslim News* and *Q-News*. In diasporic Muslim communities in Britain and elsewhere, the consumption of alternative news media is often based upon mistrust and cynicism towards 'western news' (Ahmed, 2006; Gillespie et al., 2002) and thus motivations for production as well as content converge in both cases.

In addition, jihadist websites often converge with non-Muslim sources, although in more limited ways. Many mainstream websites (such as Welfare State for the Rich, [www.welfarestate.com](http://www.welfarestate.com); Truth and Justice, [www.truthseeker.co.uk](http://www.truthseeker.co.uk); and Loose Change, [www.loosechange911.com](http://www.loosechange911.com)) support 'conspiracy theories', a staple of some jihadist media. Another shared aspect is extreme audiovisual content, such as the images and videos of beheadings, civilian casualties and other graphic violence, also a staple of 'gore sites' like Live Leak (formerly Ogrish.com, [www.liveleak.com/?ogr=1](http://www.liveleak.com/?ogr=1)) and Rotten.com ([www.rotten.com](http://www.rotten.com)). The video beheading of Nick Berg was downloaded from Ogrish a staggering 15 million times (Talbot, 2005), granting the material a far higher profile than could possibly have been envisaged by the perpetrators and immediate disseminators. Similarly, Mypetjawa (<http://mypetjawa.mu.nu>), a polemical blog criticizing and satirizing Islamic traditions and beliefs, hosts a complete still and video archive of every Iraqi beheading video released to date, alongside memorials to the victims (<http://mypetjawa.mu.nu/archives/047009.php>). Attempting to locate the same material on jihadist forums alone, particularly



for lesser known kidnapping victims in Iraq, would prove considerably more difficult.

Content-sharing platforms can also contribute to the wider availability of jihadist media. The popular jihadist-inspired rap video, 'Dirty Kuffar', by the UK group Sheikh Terra and the Soul Salah Crew, has been hosted on a very small number of jihadist forums including Tajdeed (<http://tajdeed.org.uk>). The video has not gained widespread acclaim or notoriety through the jihadist community, who are most likely to consider it amateurish and perhaps even offensive in using western-style rap music. Instead, it has relied upon more mainstream platforms to gain a fairly high profile, such as Putfile, Google Video and YouTube.

The jihadist media chiefly converge with non-jihadist sources in presenting alternative narratives and paradigms to those of the mainstream media, and particularly those originating with coalition forces or the US administration. Many websites and blogs are intensely critical of mainstream media 'collusion' with the coalition, which they see exemplified by the statement of CBS news anchor Dan Rather: 'When my country's at war, I want my country to win; there is an inherent bias in the American media' (quoted in Pintak, 2006: 194). Sites claiming to present the 'fuller picture', where many stories bear some resemblance to jihadist media reports, include *Whatreallyhappened.com* ([www.whatreallyhappened.com](http://www.whatreallyhappened.com)), *The Truth Seeker* ([www.thetruthseeker.co.uk](http://www.thetruthseeker.co.uk)), *Iraq Body Count* ([www.iraqbodycount.net](http://www.iraqbodycount.net)) and *Informationclearinghouse.com* (<http://informationclearinghouse.com>). For example, in December 2004 a number of jihadist websites reported that an insurgency attack against Abu Ghraib prison had been sparked by a letter from a female inmate named Fatima, having been written in her own blood and smuggled out of the prison. The now infamous 'Fatima's letter', in which she reported having been raped repeatedly, along with 13 other women, was subsequently circulated via many other sites and email lists. The US State Department continues to deny the allegations, claiming that no sexual assault upon female detainees ever occurred at the prison and that the letter was a complete fabrication (US State Department, 2005). However, the rape of female detainees at Abu Ghraib is well documented (Glaister and Borger, 2004; Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Wilkinson, 2004). The US military's official investigation into the Abu Ghraib scandal, the Taguba Report, identified rape as one of the many abuses that had taken place, disconcertingly opting to describe it as 'a male MP guard having sex with a female detainee' (Taguba, 2004: 17). A collection of 1800 photos and video stills depicting abuse at Abu Ghraib, never released to the public but shown to members of Congress, holds further evidence of sexual abuse of female detainees (Glaister and Borger, 2004).

Whether or not Fatima's specific story is apocryphal is less significant than the fact that sexual abuse of women prisoners had taken place, and thus the story was quickly able to gain currency in the context of growing



mistrust of news and propaganda originating with the US administration and coalition forces, and be disseminated by what are viewed as its proxies, the mainstream news agencies (Hammond, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2006; Kull, 2004; Pintak, 2006). This mistrust has many roots. As well as suspicions over the true motives for the invasion of Iraq and damning indictments of the US and coalition partners in light of the lurid excesses witnessed at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere, evidence of falsification, concealment or infiltration of untrue 'news' into the mainstream media has undermined trust. Examples include the Pentagon's fictitious account of the 'heroic rescue' of Private Jessica Lynch from al-Nasiriyah (Lloyd-Parry, 2003), false coalition claims with respect to the 'uprising' in Basra (Hammond, 2003), the claim that white phosphorus was used only for illumination purposes in the assault on Fallujah (and subsequent admission that it was used indiscriminately as an incendiary weapon; BBC News, 2005), or the denial that napalm was used in Iraq (and subsequent admission of the use of MK77 bombs, the more deadly successor to napalm; Brown, 2005).

Perceptions of hypocrisy and double standards have been detrimental to both the coalition's claim to the moral high ground and the credibility of mainstream news media. Images of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's bloodied corpse are paraded in mission briefings, while images of dead coalition soldiers on Al-Jazeera spark moral outrage. The US administration extolls the virtues of freedom of the press and speech while apparently unable to tolerate alternative viewpoints, as epitomized by its sustained 'war' on Al-Jazeera: the Kabul office bombed in 2001; bomb attacks on its journalists' hotel and the killing of Tareq Ayouh in Baghdad in 2003; the imprisoning of several correspondents; the attempted ban on reporting from Iraq; and the mooted bombing of the Qatar headquarters according to a leaked memo of 2004 (Scahill, 2005). Beside such attempts to deter reporting from the other side (Knightley, 2003), government-made television news segments have been found to constitute improper 'covert propaganda' by the Federal Communications Commission (Barstow and Stein, 2005). All such actions exacerbate distrust and grant alternative paradigms and narratives far greater legitimacy. Overall, the 'adoption' of jihadist stories by non-jihadist and non-Muslim media has had a considerable effect in countering the marginalization of jihadist voices.

## Conclusion

The ideological conflict that underlies the global 'War on Terror' is increasingly conducted on the internet battlefield. Virtual forums are recognized as one of the most important 'fronts'. The exponential growth of Islamo-jihadist websites – forums and blogs with increasingly 'high-end' production values, sophisticated critiques of prevailing narratives and ostensive attempts at impartiality – does not occur in a vacuum. To a





great extent they are reactive, their *raison d'être* supplied by the mainstream media's perceived collusion with governmental (mis)information – or at least their uncritical acceptance of it. The jihadist media are far from alone in these critiques and there has been a growing convergence of interests with other non-mainstream media outlets. The general proliferation of sources of news, information and commentary, coupled with increasingly media-savvy audiences who are far less likely to accept the veracity of any one narrative and more likely to evince dissatisfaction with conventional modes of mediation, is challenging 'media imperialism' (Sonwalkar, 2004). In addition, web 2.0 applications have helped the jihadist message to gain wider circulation and, significantly, outside of its traditional ambit. This has proved crucial: jihadist media forums are no longer the proverbial 'lone voice in the wilderness'.

Jihadist forums represent something of a challenge for western governments. Much has been made of the radicalizing effects of jihadism on the internet, but this is proving to be a 'red herring'. Viewing and surfing habits are no indication of extremist proclivities or terrorist inclinations. In many cases (indeed, the vast majority of cases, in this author's opinion), jihadist forums are completely innocuous and actually serve a cathartic role. Their radicalizing effects have been vastly over-inflated by media and scholars alike, particularly in discussions of western diasporic audiences. For one thing, it is not easy to find high-quality English-language jihadist sites. More importantly, despite widespread dissatisfaction with western foreign policy among British Muslims (FOSIS, 2005; *Guardian*/ICM, 2005; YouGov, 2005), which implies sharing many of the grievances of global jihadism, the actual resort to jihadism is negligible, numerically. The current state of jihadism's appeal is perhaps best indicated by the title of an article on Jihad Unspun by the Kashmiri jihadist Abu Usama Al Mujahid: 'Our Youth Are Allergic to the Word Jihad' (Al Mujahid, 2005).

Despite this lament, radicalization is a growing problem among diasporic Muslim youth. But this complex and multifaceted process has numerous antecedents and causes (Awan, 2007) and it is reductive in the extreme to assume that these complex processes and problems stem principally from media effects. More subtle and nuanced understandings of the relationships between jihadist media and their audiences are needed. The ancient Greco-Roman practice of blaming the messenger for bad tidings, without considering the nature of the message or the reasons behind its appeal, will prove to be lamentably short-sighted in the fight against radicalization.

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