

NOVA University of Lisbon

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(Centro de Investigação e Desenvolvimento sobre Direito e Sociedade – CEDIS)

Concept Note – Research Project

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WORDS AS DEEDS: FROM ONLINE TO OFFLINE VIOLENCE

Non-Kinetic Hybrid Threats and the Weaponization of Social Media by Violent Non-State Actors

Summary

Hybrid threats combine multi-dimensional attacks, both coercive and subversive. The aim is not only kinetic but also to influence different forms of decision making. It can range from cyberattacks on critical information systems, to "narrative led operations", mainly through social media. Both states and non-state actors use hybrid approaches to pursue their political and military aims. Social media seemed to have become the best weapon of choice for a non-state actor – from jihadi organisations to violent extremist-right movements. For these groups, the online realm has become increasingly important since it offers the opportunity to form virtual communities of similarly minded but geographically dispersed individuals.

Social media have become the weapon of choice of a non-state actor to fight asymmetrically. It is an offensive capability intended or designed to be applied to a military object or enemy combatant: easy for nearly every actor to access and use – generates effects that are disproportionate concerning the investment. The consequences that support the goals and objectives of the multiple actors "fighting" in the social network media sphere, including in influencing perceptions of what is going on, can, in turn, inform decision-making and behaviours of relevant actors. It also facilitates recruitment. Furthermore, the visual violence has a substantial impact on western societies.

What is the role of social media in hybrid threats? How is it "weaponised"? What techniques and tactics non-state actors employ to support their political and military aims using social media? What effects can they achieve? What rhetorical *topoi* and figures are adopted to terrify, intimidate, and threaten, and entice potential sympathisers? What kind of subject is posited by the discourse, and what sort of addressee?

The rationale behind these research questions addresses specific gaps in knowledge about violent extreme-right groups in Portugal and jihadism strategic communication, conceptually, methodologically and regarding law enforcement needs. In sum, this project can be seen as a direct response to calls for furthering terrorism and political violence research, including to widen the range of types of violent online extremism being studied; to engage in more comparative research, not just across ideologies, but also

groups, countries, languages, and social media platforms; and to outreach beyond terrorism/security studies and engage in interdisciplinary research.

Study Case 1 (jihadi audio-visual content with *al-Andalus* references). DAESH is not the first in the social media for information activities and support. However, they do it more effectively than their counterparts. This project pretends to analyse the Portuguese and Spanish references in open-source jihadi videos. Through a semiotic analysis, with both qualitative and interpretative content analysis, we will figure if there is a rhetorical/communication strategy aimed explicitly at Portuguese and Spanish speakers, and how it is conveyed – considering language, gestures and other non-verbal codes.

Study Case 2 (Portuguese violent extreme-right textual content) – Concerning the rising of the far-right movements in the social media spectrum, the second study case pretends to analyse the impact of online violent extreme-right propaganda in Portuguese social media in the "offline" realm. It will utilise data gathered from Facebook and Twitter – specifically, all posts and tweets posted by chosen groups – focused on language use – both content and function. Through a semiotic analysis, with both qualitative and interpretative content analysis, we will figure if there is a rhetorical/communication strategy aimed explicitly at Portuguese speakers, and how it is conveyed, analysing language, narrative and symbols.

Key words: security, strategic communication, hybrid threats, weaponization of social media, terrorism, jihadism, anti-Semitism, extreme-right.

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