Caught in the web

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There are clear signs that Internet-radicalization was behind the terrorism of Anders Behring Breivik. Though most research on this points to jihadism, it can teach us a lot about how Internet-radicalization of all kinds can be fought.

Then there is the “ideological front” model, initially advocated by a famous jihadi strategist, Abu Musab al-Suri. The premise here, as with the spider-web approach, is that the most secure way to organize is without an organization. “This defeats any security arrangement,” al-Suri wrote in a 1,600-page paramilitary manual, “The Call for Global Islamic Resistance”. Omar Ashour [1]

On 21 September 2010, Interpol released a press statement [2] on their homepage warning against extremist websites. They pointed out that this is a global threat and that ever more terrorist groups use the Internet to radicalize young people.

“Terrorist recruiters exploit the web to their full advantage as they target young, middle class vulnerable individuals who are usually not on the radar of law enforcement”, said Secretary General Ronald K. Noble. He continued: “The threat is global; it is virtual; and it is on our doorsteps. It is a global threat that only international police networks can fully address.”

Noble pointed out that the Internet has made the radicalization process easier and the war on terror more difficult. Part of the reason, he claimed, is that much of what takes place is not really criminal.

“Lock and load”

With the spotlight on the dangers of Islamist - or to be precise, Salafi-jihadist - terror over the past few years, one could perhaps expect Noble’s statement to receive a certain amount of attention from the press in Norway too. But an Internet search in the Norwegian Atekst site and the rest of the web reveals that the interest was limited. There
was a brief statement by NTB [Norsk telegrambyrå, a Norwegian press agency – trans.] specifically referring to al-Qaeda even though the press release from Interpol doesn’t. A few weeks later the same Interpol statement was referenced in the daily Dagsavisen in a translated comment with the following introduction: “We live in times of dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with Islam.” [3]

The multicultural paper Utrop was one of the few that wrote about Noble’s warning. [4] This was also noted by a commenter in the debate forum Hegnar Online. He commended Utrop for their article and argued that reducing the police force makes it easy for those radicalized by the Internet. For this particular debate forum it was an unusually sensible comment.

But not all comments that followed were equally on topic. One of them stated: “One wonders if [the radicalized] aren’t ruling the entire West. The West is kept hostage by Islam. The West is so afraid not to be seen as inclusive and tolerant that it allows the most intolerant and excluding of ideologies to attack it.” Another simply wrote: “Lock and load. Ready as can be.” [5]

**One-sided focus on jihadism**

Much research has been done on Internet radicalization over the last few years but the emphasis has been on Islamist terror. The phenomenon can be summarized thus: young boys and men of Muslim background have, via the Internet, been exposed to propaganda, films from war zones, horrifying images of war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Chechnya, and also extreme interpretations of Islam. They are, so to speak, caught in the web, and some have resorted to terrorism, or at least planned it. The BBC documentary Generation Jihad gives an interesting and frightening insight into the phenomenon.

Researchers Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann write in a report focused on Islamist Internet radicalization that Islamist groups are hardly unique in putting the Internet in the service of political extremism:

> Although Al Qaeda-inspired Islamist militants represented the most significant terrorist threat to the United Kingdom at the time of writing, Islamist militants are not the only – or even the predominant – group of political extremists engaged in radicalization and recruitment on the internet. Visitor numbers are notoriously difficult to verify, but some of the most popular Islamist militant web forums (for example, Al Ekhlaas, Al Hesbah, or Al Boraq) are easily rivalled in popularity by white supremacist websites such as Stormfront. [6]

Strikingly, Stormfront – an international Internet forum advocating “white nationalism” and dominated by neo-Nazis – is one of the websites visited by the terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, and a forum where he also left comments. [7] In one place he writes about his hope that “the various fractured rightwing movements in Europe and the US reach a common consensus regarding the ‘Islamification of Europe/US’ can try and reach a consensus regarding the issue”. He continues: “After all, we all want the best for our people, and we owe it to them to try to create the most potent alliance which will have the strength to overthrow the governments which support multiculturalism.” [8]
In this comment he introduces himself as Swedish. Another commenter in the forum replies: “Welcome, friend! Good to see a supporter from Sweden, from what I’ve read in Fjordman’s work, that part of the world is getting a really hard time these days.” [9]

Fjordman is a Norwegian blogger who has received a fair bit of attention since the terrorist attacks on 22 July. We shall return to him below, but let’s first stay a while with these two comments. It demonstrates that the distance does not have to be great between the “old” rightwing extremism of neo-Nazism and the new version that combines hatred of Muslims with conspiracy theories.

**Fjordmann’s world view**

The Utøya/Oslo terrorist is not a neo-Nazi and says that he despises Nazism – not unlike many others in the Internet milieu where he drew inspiration. He was also, he alleges, evicted from Stormfront. Internet radicalization is, of course, not something that only influences Muslim minority youth in western countries. There is an abundance of extreme rightwing websites that both in form and tone share features with those of the jihadists. Some are more or less neo-Nazi, such as Stormfront or nordisk.nu (where Breivik also was active). Others belong to the so called “contra-jihadist” milieu. This was what inspired Anders Behring Breivik directly.

Here one gets served propaganda, everything from deceitful statistics to real news items about terrible deeds carried out by Muslims – or by people of Muslim background (whether or not the person has ever set foot in a Mosque is less important) - in various parts of the world. One can read about real problems such as forced marriage, genital mutilation and oppression of women, or one can indulge in imaginary problems based on conspiracy theories. This is where the idea of a conscious and planned “Islamization” of Europe is central. According to this theory, Arab and western governments have joined forces in this Islamization, together with journalists, academics, bankers and even the Vatican. There are propaganda films on YouTube. One can join debates in the forums, debates where all are equally convinced about the clash of civilizations, about the limitless and singular evil of Islam, and that “moderate Muslims” are a pack of liars.

An important blogger in the “contra-jihadist” blogosphere is the Norwegian Peder Nøstvold Jensen, who has blogged under the pseudonym Fjordman on sites such as Gates of Vienna, an American blog that functions as a sort of central meeting place in this particular universe. Fjordman is named by the Utøya/Oslo terrorist as a main source of inspiration. Thirty-nine of his essays from the Gates of Vienna site and elsewhere are included in the terrorist’s so-called manifesto, a cut-and-paste document of 1500 pages. Fjordman’s world view can perhaps best be illustrated through a comment he made on the site document.no – paradoxically in reply to a comment from the terrorist himself:

> My prediction is that EU will find itself in internal disintegration within 20 years and that there will be a full-blown civil war in at least one western European country before that. People will sooner or later discover that EU and European state leaders have already decided behind their backs that Muslim colonization of our continent shall continue unhindered. This is the greatest betrayal in history and it is unbelievable that our so called power-critical press corps, including the country’s biggest daily newspaper VG, doesn’t write a single word about it. The
fact is that western leaders are conducting a demographic and legal war on the white majority population in western countries to break them down, to the advantage of an authoritarian, post-democratic world order with themselves on top. EU is already well on the way. [10]

Fjordmann’s ideology is also coloured by extreme nationalism and by ideas of a political, social and ethical turn-around and the necessity for a form of national rebirth – in his own words, “a new renaissance where European civilization can bloom again”. He hasn’t directly encouraged the use of violence but has, in connection with a sort of “ultimatum”, demanded the abolition of EU and the end to all Muslim immigration to Europe. He has also insisted that politicians be court marshalled for their part in the Euro-Arabian conspiracy, and hinted at using “the requisite methods” to “ensure our national survival”.

In his book Defeating Eurabia he also seems willing to “suspend” parliamentary democracy and is greatly concerned with historical figures – of whom he presents caricatured heroic images – such as Charles Martel and Jan III Sobieski of Poland. [11] He fits, in other words, amazingly well with the definition of fascism as presented by Roger Griffin: “Fascism is best defined as a revolutionary form of nationalism, one that sets out to be a political, social and ethical revolution, welding the ‘people’ into a dynamic national community under new elites infused with heroic values. The core myth that inspires this project is that only a populist, trans-class movement of purifying, cathartic national rebirth (palingenesis) can stem the tide of decadence.” [12]

The third wave

In Norwegian terms this means that we are facing the third wave of rightwing extremism since 1970. The first wave was neo-Nazism represented by Erik Blücher [13] and others – a wave that still exists but is small and weak. [14] The second was the circle around the People’s Front Against Immigration – FMI, established in 1989. This is also small today, and dominated by old age pensioners. It is worth noting that both milieus gave rise to political violence to a degree which can be termed terrorism. The Nasjonalt Folkeparti (national people’s party), which has its roots in Blücher’s Norsk Front (Norwegian front), was behind the terrorist bombing of the Nor mosque in Oslo in 1985. And in 1990 Arne Myrdal of FMI was given a prison sentence for his planned destruction of the asylum centre in the town of Tromøy. The third wave is now “contra-jihadist” rightwing extremism, dominated by hatred of Muslims and conspiracy theories.

Three problematic features

If we look at the warning issued by Interpol last year there are several accurate words that were used. They point to a “virtual” threat – in other words, a threat from the Internet. They mention “middle class” background and that the extremists are “not on the radar” of the police. In the case of Anders Behring Breivik, one can safely say that they got only one point wrong: that there were clear indications that the terrorist did not belong to a group. The explanation that he was “a lone wolf” is not uncommon in the case of rightwing extremist terrorists.

But like other lone wolves, this one also came from a pack.
Let’s go back to Stevens and Neumann, who point out three particular features of the web which raise concerns connected to radicalization and recruitment to extremist organizations/networks. Even if their discussion focuses mainly on Islamist groupings, it is still highly relevant here. [15] The first concern is that the web can be used by extremists to illustrate and reinforce ideological messages and narratives. Newcomers can get instant access to ideological texts, but also to visually powerful pictures and films made to emphasize the extremists’ claims.

Secondly, the web makes it easier to join or contact formal organizations and networks in a manner that involves far less risk than when attending meetings in person, for instance, as in the past. In Breivik’s case it has become evident that he was an active participant on several websites, but also that he had contact via Facebook with others in the Muslim-hating milieu both in Norway and abroad. He was in contact with, among others, the British rightwing extremist group English Defence League and its Norwegian sapling Norwegian Defence League. A source from this milieu told the newspaper Dagbladet that Breivik’s profile on Facebook was “one big temple-knight-Viking-anti-Labour-profile”, and that he was admired.

Many from this milieu have since claimed that they never encouraged the use of violence, but it is not difficult to find violence being romanticized and descriptions of violent scenarios. [16] The Norwegian public channel TV2 has published remarkable and shocking revelations, such as that an a-list candidate for The Democrats party [17] wanted to shoot a government minister and dreamt of a violent attack on the government’s Christmas party. [18]

The third concern is that the Internet creates new social milieus where opinions and behaviour normally seen as unacceptable are normalized. Because extremists can be with others who share their views one gets a virtual “echo-chamber” where their most extreme ideas and suggestions are supported and encouraged. This echo-chamber effect is most obvious on dedicated websites such as Gates of Vienna or Stormfront, but also appears in other places. Norwegian media houses have, to a point, allowed extremist voices to dominate their own online debates. One example is Hegnar Online where one can find the most insane statements. In July 2010, for instance, a thread was started on how Jens Stoltenberg was a greater traitor than Quisling, and one of the “debaters” opined that the “trash on Utøya were trained to applaud treachery”. Few voiced any opposition to the one who initiated the thread against Stoltenberg. [19] Anders Behring Breivik has also published comments on Hegnar Online. [20]

Many of these debates have become so extreme that serious debaters have simply withdrawn.

**Islam-hatred in Serbian**

When terrorism came to Norway on 22 July 2011, it came from a man who had likely been radicalized via the Internet. The chairman of FpU [Progressive Youth Party], Ove Vanebo, believes, after reading forum comments left by Breivik in 2003 while he was a member, that “something happened [to Breivik] in 2003”. [21]

At what point “something happened” is actually hard to speculate about, since
radicalization via the web is generally a gradual process. The comments Breivik left in FpU’s forum in 2002 and 2003 even demonstrate that the claims in his manifesto – that the NATO bombings in Serbia initiated a change in himself – are untrue. In comments written in 2002, three years after NATO intervened in Serbia, there are even signs that Breivik was a lot more positive towards both Islam and immigration than many of the other debaters in the FpU forums. It is therefore more logical to think that the terrorist’s claim on events in Serbia as a significant change in his own thinking is a latent attempt to adapt his story to an ideological narrative. In the “contra-hijadist” milieus, support for Serbian nationalism is widespread, often combined with a denial that the Srebrenica massacre ever happened.

It’s here worth mentioning that Serge Trifkovic is one of the sources repeatedly mentioned in the so-called manifesto, often via essays written by the aforementioned Fjordman. Trifkovic is one of the ideologists behind modern Islam-hatred, but he is also more than this. He was the advisor to Biljana Plavsic, the “iron woman” who was interim president for the Serbian breakaway republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and later vice president of Republika Srpska and a member of the central command of its army. She later pleaded guilty and was sentenced for war crimes by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

The leader of the Conservative party of Norway, Erna Solberg, recently drew parallels between modern Islam hatred and anti-Semitism in the 1930s. As the example of Trifkovic illustrates, similarities with Serbian anti-Islamic propaganda and hatred are equally appropriate. [22]

At this point it might be useful to look at a few concrete examples from Serbia that have clear parallels to the Norwegian debate. [23]

Take the historian Vojin Davic, who in 1993 argued that Muslims in the Balkans represented a “danger to Europe since Islam can’t accept a separation between religion and state and between religion and nation” but stands for “a bizarre symbiosis between religion and state and between religion and nation”. Or take the political scientist Miroljub Jevtic, who claimed that Islam “excludes all other world-views and strives for a monopoly” and is therefore “dangerous to modern societies” and the “antithesis of all rightful relations, to tolerance, dialogue and shared existence”. Or take Momo Kapor, who in 1993 wrote that the battle against Islam “is a question of preserving civilization and culture”. Another example is Zoran Djindic, later the Serbian prime minister, who in 1994 stated that Kosovo-Albanians represented “an element in our lives that are hard to integrate, and which will be difficult to integrate into any western civilization”. Nada Todorov warned against “Islamization and its dimensions”. Or look at the Department of Information in Belgrade, which in January 1993 published a pamphlet in English to explain why the Serbian actions were fair:

[The Muslims] want for the second time to create a Turkish Bosnia, or a Bosnia in Turkey […], with Sharia law and other norms that are unacceptable in the 2000s. […] To this bloody feast they invite all sorts of secular parasites, murderers and wardogs. Mujahedin and jihad-fanatics from Muslim countries came to fulfil their “holy duty” and eradicate us. This absence of scruples fit perfectly with their religion and traditions.
Don’t some of these arguments sound oddly familiar?

... but never naivety

The question is: what do we do about this hatred? Once again it can be useful to look at the extensive research on Internet radicalization in connection with Islamism. The Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI) has contributed considerably to this research material. [24] It is undoubtedly a complicated topic, connected to the moral, ethical and legal differences between word and action, between hate-speech and violence, between the romanticization of violence on computer screens and terrorism in reality. It also raises questions about freedom of speech vs. stopping websites that spread pure hate propaganda. Little is as clear as crystal, but one thing is: academics, politicians and journalists – in Norway and elsewhere – will now have to look at these questions in a new context, namely that of the rightwing extremist. It should have been obvious a lot earlier since this is far from the first act of violence inspired by Muslim hatred on the Internet, but 22 July has highlighted it in a bloody, frightening and unspeakably sad way.

Prime minister Jens Stoltenberg said – and has rightfully received a lot of praise for doing so – that Norway’s response to the terrorism will be “more democracy, more openness”. This is now regularly quoted by rightwing extremists, rightwing radicals and people who generally lean towards the Right, in protest against the focus aimed at them after 22 July. But Stoltenberg added something rarely quoted. He said: “…but never naivety”.

And this brings us to the core. Nobody should be naive when it comes to the threat of Islamist terror. It’s a real threat. Nobody should for that matter be naive when faced with reactionary, hateful, misogynistic or homophobic behaviour within minority groups. But the 22 July has shown that we can’t allow ourselves to be naive when it comes to bloggers in shades of brown, when encountering single-minded propaganda aimed at Muslims and Islam, or rightwing conspiracy theories – or any conspiracy theories. Critical questions must be asked, not just of extremists but also of those who, by borrowing ideas, arguments or politics from the conspiracy theorists, have contributed to neutralizing, legitimizing and normalizing extremism.

Four approaches

We need to discuss tactics to oppose the threat of Internet radicalization. Stevens and Neumann list four areas of action: making the Internet less accepting of extremist material; strengthening self-regulation within social networks; reducing the appeal of extremist websites; and promoting positive messages as alternatives. [25]

The first can mean doing something which, from a freedom of speech point of view, is less desirable, namely filtration of the Web: blocking or closing down websites. But it can also involve more reasonable initiatives such as targeting so-called “black hat search engine optimization” where creators of search engines and others in the field cooperate to make sure that extreme websites don’t rank highly in search results. The second area is a challenge to the media houses and those who run online debate fora: limit what is allowed to be published. Others’ right to freedom of speech does not oblige editors to pass on those opinions. The third area is a challenge to educators and parents. Through
strengthening young people’s ability to think critically and inoculating them against extremist thought one can make the soil for extremism much less fertile.

The last area, where Stevens and Neumann emphasize what governments can do, is just as much a challenge to all of us. It is we who, via grassroots initiatives and through creating platforms where people can meet across cultural and religious barriers, can drive out extremism.

This way we can avoid having more young people caught in the net of extremism. Because that’s something we can’t afford.

**Footnotes**


2. [Press release](http://www.interpol.int) from Interpol, 21 September 2010.


5. From Hegnar Online's forum, only available through Google Cache.


8. Discussion thread on Stormfront.

9. Ibid.


11. See Øyvind Strømmen, ["So, what¹s the deal with Fjordman?"](http://www.interpol.int), 5 August 2011.


13. Erik Blücher or Tor Erik Nilsen (born 1953) is a Norwegian former neo-Nazi activist. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Blücher)

14. In the open threat-assessment of 2011 by the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) is written: "Rightwing extremism in Norway has in recent years been mostly inactive. The tendency towards increased activity from 2010 is however expected to
continue this year. Several actors wish to revitalize the rightwing extremist milieu. The absence of strong leaders is however hampering the growth of the milieu." This is an analysis which matches well with both "traditional neo-Nazis" and the environment which grew up around FMI (the people's front against immigration). See also: www.pst.politiet.no.


16. See for example "Bang, bang, there goes a muzzie!", veepsen.org, 28 July 2011 and "Møtte engelske ekstremister i Oslo", veepsen.org, 10 August 2011.

17. The Democrats in Norway, formerly and commonly known as the Democrats, is a Norwegian political party. The party was formed in 2002, chiefly by former Progress Party members. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democrats_in_Norway)


19. Øyvind Strømmen, "Hatet på nettet -- noen norske døme".


23. The following is based on: Andreas Malm, *Hatet mot muslimer*, Stockholm, Atlas, 2009, pp 437-528. While there is good reason to be sceptical of Malm's own political empathies -- he has connections to the far-Left in Swedish politics -- there is little to object to regarding the research behind this book. Especially the chapter on the Serbian anti-Islamic propaganda, which is relatively unknown in Scandinavia -- is worth reading.


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