

# Distance Learning and Jihad: The Dark Side of the Force

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## **Abstract**

The ability to reach a variety of audiences in diverse environments has made distance learning a major form of education and training in the 21st century. Though traditionally encountered in the educational and business communities, distance learning has proven an important resource for a variety of other constituencies. Terrorist groups have exploited the digital domain as a means of recruitment, propaganda and training, and other related activities, including the use of distance learning as a strategic resource and force multiplier. The distance learning strategies and tactics of jihadists are reviewed as we explore the dark side of distance learning.

## **Introduction**

The ability to reach a variety of audiences in diverse environments has made distance learning a major form of education and training in the 21st century. Distance learning extends educational and training opportunities to geographically, temporally or organizationally challenged populations. With the development of television, and other forms of wireless electronic access, distance education and training rapidly expanded in the latter part of the twentieth century. With the advent of the Internet, cyberspace has become the premier vehicle for distance learning and training.

The spread of new communication technologies has established cyberspace as the environment that globalizes interaction by allowing users world-wide to connect with others through both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Since cyberspace is mainly considered to be organic rather than centrally directed, no single central player controls it (Matusitz, 2013).

In academic circles, distance learning has become, perhaps, the greatest opportunity and challenge in the history of higher education. According to Lutz (2012), “the current crisis in higher education funding, both in the U.S. and abroad, coupled with significant technology advances and the demand for more college degrees across all sectors of society, have placed distance learning in the center of every higher education discussion.” Likewise, distance learning has become a fundamental component of the corporate world by providing continuous opportunities for training workers and administrators in an evolving environment of change. However, once considered a tool of education and social progress, distance learning has now become an enormously useful vehicle for terrorists with which to market their propaganda and multifarious conspiracy theories, while rallying their followers to commit violence (Brown, 2005). Specifically, the digital domain has become a critical environment for the dark side of the Global Village (McLuhan, 1962).

Terrorism in the twenty-first century has evolved from a local to a world-wide phenomenon. Cyberspace has transformed the ways that terrorist networks communicate and conduct their activities (Matusitz, 2013). The scope and scale of the Internet, through web-sites, personal computers and cyber-cafes have successfully eliminated many of the functional barriers which once limited the activities of terrorists. In fact, the democratic autonomy of cyberspace has enhanced the possibilities of current and future terrorists.

Modern terror organizations place a high priority on the methods of psychological warfare and how to successfully increase fear within their target audiences (Ganor, 2002). Specifically, media technology as a force-multiplier is a frequently invoked tool of terrorists. Terrorists rely on the media to facilitate and enhance their efforts. Previously, the drama of terrorism has provided attention, recognition and even claims of legitimacy (Alexander, Carlton and Wilkinson, 1979). Traditionally, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, posters and other print media were the tools of dissemination. In the electronic age, movies, radio and television emerged as favored means of public influence and persuasion. With the emergence of the digital age, the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and distance learning has reached a new zenith.

Military actions by the United States and other nations have disrupted the training of terrorists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and other remote geographic areas (Fagin, 2006). However, the tools and tactics of today's terrorists have evolved from the knife, bomb and machine gun to include mobile phones, laptops and the Internet. In fact, for terrorists cyberspace and distance learning have become force multipliers as well as a virtual haven or safe zone to compensate for their loss of geographic sanctuaries.

Interestingly, it is a significant paradox that jihadist terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, have turned to the internet as their new safe haven (Regan, 2004). Primarily driven by 14th century Islamic ideology, today's jihadist terrorist groups have turned to 21st century information technology as a fundamental component of their war on their enemies both near and far. As recently noted:

Whether to tell their story of a sacred mission to reduce the shadow cast by American power over the Muslim world, to motivate recruits to join the jihad, or to provide a form of "distance-learning" in terrorist tradecraft, al Qaeda operatives have made extensive use of cyberspace-based connectivity. And somehow, after more than a decade of being so relentlessly hunted, they still enjoy the largely unobstructed use of this virtual haven (Arquilla, 2013).

Jihadists recognize the power of cyberspace as a weapon and tool for terrorism. They employ the Internet and the advantages of distance learning in support of their mission. Extremist Islamic jihadists repeatedly take advantage of this new learning technology to advance their philosophy of warfare. The recent decades are rife with numerous examples of how Islamic jihadists have used the technology of distance learning to promote their goals and to plan and execute their attacks.

### **Jihad and Distance Learning**

The term "jihad" stems from the Arabic root "jahada," which means "to strive" (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Historically, jihad has symbolized a religious duty to practice Islam in spite of oppression and persecution and to wage a holy war on behalf of Islam. This war may be waged against oppressors or against oneself in a personal spiritual struggle. Despite contemporary connotations, jihadi ideals were rooted in nonviolent means of protest and spiritual growth, unless circumstances required violence as a last resort (Heit, 2005). The actions of extremist jihadists in recent years, and the transnational reach of information in the digital age, have shaped and transformed Western views of jihad into what we now commonly associate with modern Islamic terrorists.

Distance learning, as a mode of delivering knowledge to students, has also undergone a tremendous transformation in its own realm. Early iterations of distance education involved correspondence courses and mail delivery. Distance education later evolved into purely online courses of study with robust levels of interaction, and this area continues to evolve and mature. It has been noted that "[t]he development of distance education [is] shaped by technological, demographic, economic, and political forces, as well as by pedagogical insights from its practitioners" (Dedes, 1996).

While at first blush distance education is seemingly unrelated to terrorism and insulated from political landscapes, it is becoming an invaluable tool through which terrorists and scholars in extreme Islam are reaching students of the faith and effecting violence (Arquilla, 2013). The asynchronous feature of distance learning makes propaganda and other material accessible on individual timetables. It also fosters participatory and collective activities that extend beyond geographic boundaries (Selwyn, 2011) and allows previously unconnected individuals to develop their cultural identities and form social bonds (Schmidle, 2009). In addition, social media platforms, which are mainstays of online discourse, have been likened to a "global town square for the digital age" (Kjuka, 2013) with users numbering in the billions. Communications in the digital domain have therefore expanded beyond one-way message "blasts" to multi-dimensional discourses.

The vast majority of educational content available on the Internet is not regulated or censored (Bolechow, 2006). These largely unfettered channels of communication provide an ideal platform for the dissemination of information through easy access, minimal regulation and censorship, anonymity of communication, speed, low cost, a multimedia environment to combine text, graphics, audio, and video, and perhaps most significantly, the ability to shape coverage in the traditional mass media (Rothenberger, 2012; Weimann, 2005). These strategies are employed to recruit new members, educate the public about a group's ideology, generate fear, obtain financing and organize events that endorse the stated objectives of the group (Freiburger & Crane, 2008). Ban Ki-moon, Secretary General of the United Nations, has urged that, "[t]he Internet is a prime example of how terrorists can behave in a truly transnational way; in response, States need to think and function in an equally transnational manner" (UNODC, 2012).

Numerous examples exist of terrorists using the Internet for recruitment, training and the spread of ideology. According to

the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2012), almost every prosecuted case of terrorism has utilized Internet technology and online communications. Some examples of Internet usage by terrorists include translating and encrypting pro-jihadist materials, moderating terrorism-related websites, using GPS mapping programs and photographs in the public domain to identify and study potential structural targets, and studying instructional videos of step-by-step guidance on how to execute a hostage-taking situation (Coll & Glasser, 2005). In a 2012 federal conviction resulting in a life sentence, Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, a Texas resident, was convicted for acquiring ingredients through the Internet to build a weapon of mass destruction, for making violent and martyrdom statements on his blog, and for conducting online research of several potential U.S. targets (U.S. v. Aldawsari, 2012).

Likewise, in February 2014, Jose Pimentel entered a guilty plea in a New York trial court after he was caught building a nail-filled pipe bomb with parts from Home Depot and Target stores. Pimentel, a Muslim convert, was caught on wiretaps boasting about how much damage could be done with an inexpensive pipe bomb. According to his statement to the court:

In November of 2011, I along with a man named Abdul, who I now know is a confidential informant, attempted to make and possess an explosive device, namely a pipe bomb here in New York City. I used an article, 'How to Build a Bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom' " from *INSPIRE* magazine, an online jihadist publication (Rosenberg, 2014).

The Manhattan district attorney who prosecuted the case noted that the threat of terrorism comes from radicalized individuals living in our communities, and the Pimentel case is an example of a homegrown terrorist-in-training who educated himself through online channels.

The magazine, *INSPIRE*, published online by the al-Qaeda branch in Yemen since 2010 to help Muslim militants train at home, has served as an instrumental tool for other terrorists. The accused 2013 Boston Marathon bombers, brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, whose actions killed three people and injured at least 260, are another recent example of virtual recruitment and radicalization. The brothers' radicalization stemmed from watching images and accessing terrorist-related information on the Internet (Guarino, 2013). The year 2009 also contained two significant examples of terrorists who admittedly turned to the Internet for training and self-radicalization: Major Nidal Malik Hasan, who went on a shooting spree on a Fort Hood, Texas military base that killed thirteen people and injured 30, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, known as the Christmas Bomber, who attempted to board and detonate an underwear bomb on a Detroit-bound international flight. Both the Tsarnaev brother and the Christmas Bomber consulted *INSPIRE* magazine for their training. The Tsarnaev brothers ostensibly learned how to make pressure cooker bombs by reading articles in *INSPIRE*, and the Christmas Bomber and his accomplices credit the magazine with providing teaching and training for their mission (Cruikshank & Lister, 2013).

Terrorists often post content on the Internet to stoke anger in marginalized, often younger people (Carpenter, Levitt & Jacobson, 2009) who are impressionable, disenfranchised and seeking a cause (USDOC, 2012). For some jihadist groups, the dissemination of violent imagery and combative messages has served as a popular means through which to incite action for social and political ends (Ryan, Vanderlick, & Matthews, 2006). Another example of the Internet being used for nefarious purposes were digital breadcrumbs left by Norwegian gunman Anders Behring Breivik, who confessed to killing 93 people in 2011. Breivik's computer showed a history of attempts to join radical groups on Facebook, a series of online discussion posts and an online journal entry stating, "It would have saved me a lot of hassle if I could just 'borrow' a cup of sugar and 3 kg of C4 from my dear neighbor" (Sullivan & Golijan, 2013).

While limitations may exist on the scale and scope of coordinated efforts that can be executed through online training and coordination, often terrorists can cause enough damage to capture the public's attention and create fear. Various jihadist ideologues rely upon historical or religious justifications for engaging in a "media battle." They point to the Prophet Muhammad's sanctioning of various types of warfare and popular online manuals, such as *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad*, which encourages "performing electronic jihad" as "a blessed field" by which to spread news, defend ideas and reach the people through discussions and computer hacking (Awan, 2010). While modern jihad is generally associated with young men (Awan, Hoskins, & O'Loughlin, 2011), the digital domain has also provided a venue for the recruitment of female participants who are generally less attracted by messages of violence. For example, in *44 Ways to Support Jihad*, respected leader Anwar Al Awalki, who has been credited with the online radicalization of the Fort Hood shooter and the Christmas Bomber, implores non-violent supporters to disseminate jihadist literature and news through its "WWW Jihad" initiative (Al-Awalaki, 2010). He further encourages "nasheers," Islamic musicians and poets, to expand their audiences beyond Islam by performing in different languages and forums. And al Qaeda publishes *AL SHAMIKA*, an upscale women's magazine. Launched in 2011, this print and online medium mixes beauty tips with advice on suicide bombings. Meaning "the Majestic Women," this propaganda vehicle includes interviews with the wives of suicide bombers and admonitions to marry mujahedeen and to raise their children to be ready for jihad (Daily Mail Reporter,

2011).

## The University of Terrorism

Al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations are offering their own form of distance learning, likened perhaps to a decentralized set of online universities that do not confer diplomas but whose marketing brochures could boast the following enthusiastic recruiting language published by one student:

Al-Qaeda is a university that is decentralized, respects no geographic boundaries and does not exist in any one location. And anyone who loves his religion can register. Praise be to God that the Al-Qaida University graduates [so many] heroes with various specializations . . . This university even has various departments: one for electronic jihad, one for jihad against oneself [to overcome inner resistance], one for the technology of explosives and others!" (Musharbash, 2012)

These online training facilities are mostly offered for free and are accessible through semi-centralized, password-protected forums, such as Ansar al-Mujahidin English Forum (AMEF) and the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Form (AMAF) (Zelin & Fellow, 2013). Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that are gaining popularity in Western spheres and the open online courses in which students of extreme Islam are enrolling. They both have the goal of educating students in particularized topics while operating in a decentralized "classroom" of sorts. And, we can even find MOOCs entitled "Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Comparing Theory and Practice" and "American Counterterrorism Law" being offered in Western online classrooms that are available to everyone, including students of jihad.

Prior to the widespread use of the Internet, terrorist recruits studied teachings contained in physical copies of the ultra-secretive *Encyclopedia of Jihad*, a collection of essays on weapons handling, bomb making, and military training. The contents of this terrorist training manual, along with *The Terrorists Handbook* and *The Anarchist Cookbook*, and instructional videos are now widely available on the Internet (Weiman, 2005). According to researchers at the Violence Policy Center (2014), another important military training manual, *How Can I Train Myself for Jihad*, which was uncovered in terrorist safe houses in Afghanistan, is now published on the Internet through the British company Azzam Publications and its affiliated websites. This manual has been traced to the 9/11 terrorist, Said Bahaji, who was responsible for coordinating logistics of the 9/11 terror attacks, including helping the suicide pilots who crashed the airplanes into the World Trade Center towers to obtain visas for entry into the United States (VPC, 2014).

The availability of online training materials may contribute to the creation of online cells of dissidents who may act in concert or solo. For example, the conviction of Zachary Chesser, a young Virginia man who was admittedly schooled in terrorism techniques by Internet resources and is serving 25 years in prison on terrorist-related charges, shows how new models of virtual education are being employed (United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2012). As seen in the instances involving Major Hassan, the distance learning arm of Al Qaeda is a potent force in the recruitment and training of lone-wolf terrorists. However, lingering doubt exists about the ability of Internet-trained militants to carry out larger scale strikes without formal training in a physical camp, and these formal camps still exist in more remote areas (Coll & Glasser, 2005; Kaplan, 2009). Online terrorist education, like education in traditional realms, is on the upswing while evolving to satisfy its learning outcomes and to meet the needs of its consumers.

## Conclusions

Distance learning provides a powerful tool for education and training. It has introduced asynchronous learning and a world without borders that has democratized communication. The accessibility and ease of communications in the digital age connects students and teachers in an unprecedented and largely unregulated manner, promoting education in populations previously unreachable. However, like many technologies, the Internet and its vast resources present a double-edged sword. As online education continues to evolve and to connect people of varying backgrounds and ideologies from across the world, education from a distance is experiencing its own revolution in the digital age. Distance learning has been an emerging source of enlightenment in the twenty-first century. However, as a tool and tactic of terrorists, distance learning also has manifested a dark side.

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