

Mastering Modern Media, the Way Jihadists Do

On Halloween, shortly after police say Sayfullo Saipov barreled a truck down a New York bike path, killing eight people and wounding 11 others, he reportedly told investigators he was inspired by Islamic State videos he found online.

A man who had never traveled to Iraq or Syria — never trained in a terrorist camp and perhaps never been in contact with anyone from a terror group — allegedly became a soldier for the Islamic State after watching propaganda clips on his cellphone.

“I think it’s pretty scary,” said Cori Dauber ’84 (MA), a UNC communication professor who has become an expert in jihadi filmmaking. “The online space is flooded with all of these increasingly high-end materials. And there’s a reason these groups are trying to increase the quantity and quality of what’s out there. They believe it works.”

Dauber believes it does, too. That’s why she and her colleagues have spent years analyzing the way Islamic State and other terror groups have mastered digital propaganda. In an age when warfare is about imagery as much as weaponry, when terrorist violence can begin with hidden conversations on cellphone apps, experts who study communications and media are becoming as vital as battlefield tacticians.

Figuring out ways to counter that online expertise falls not just to military and security officials but to scholars like Dauber. Her specialty is analyzing jihadi videos the way a film student might pick apart an art house movie. She pays attention to the lighting, the colors, the graphics and the pacing. She notes the careful repetition of

certain images, the professionalism of the editing and the choice of camera angles.

In many ways, the national security community is still racing to catch up with a changing media landscape. The speed of internet culture, the borderless nature of social media and ever-shifting communications platforms make it tough for security services to mount an effective response.

“We need campaigns designed not by 50-year-olds in government but by this same demographic,” Dauber argues. “The only way to beat a 20-year-old is with another 20-year-old.”

Last year, she and Mark Robinson ’91 (’01 MA), director of UNC’s multimedia lab, and other colleagues won a Homeland Security grant to put that theory to the test, with \$900,000 in funding to build a team of media-savvy students to create counter-narratives against radical messaging. The grant was canceled without explanation, along with 11 others among the 38 originally funded, shortly after the change of administration in Washington.

Before applying for the grant, Dauber and Robinson ran a proof-of-concept trial as part of a Maymester course at UNC, pairing 12 students from Dauber’s rhetoric classes with trained film producers from Robinson’s multimedia lab.

“It ended up being the best class I ever took at UNC,” said Jacob, a film production student who has since graduated. (Last names are being withheld, given the sensitive nature of the coursework.) “It was mind-blowing that these things exist. I didn’t know anything about extremist recruiting when I started

the class, and it was upsetting to see how good their videos were, production-wise.”

Jacob and his classmates worked over a few short weeks to research extremist content — everything from ISIS videos to neo-Nazi Twitter feeds — and created high-quality films designed to pull people back from the brink. “It was really motivating,” he recalled. “We tried to tap into people who feel alone and maybe don’t realize their friends and their family care about them.”

The Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College has taken an interest in Dauber’s research, twice inviting her to spend time researching and lecturing alongside a mix of civilian academics and military officers.

Dauber hopes they’ll find funding to continue the work. In the meantime, she’s focused on educating students and policy-makers about the role our own technology plays in amplifying extremist messages. The same algorithms and apps that connect and entertain us can lead vulnerable people down dangerous paths.

“I absolutely think the big technology companies should be taking more heat,” she said. “This content is still incredibly easy to find. And the way these platforms are set up, you can be led to more and more radical material even after you’ve searched for something fairly benign.”

With companies and government slow to adapt, the burden is falling on schools and community groups to help build new-media literacy among young people.

— Eric Johnson ’08

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