From al-Zarqawi to al-Awlaki:
The Emergence of the Internet as a New Form of Violent Radical Milieu

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Introduction

The vast majority of research into violent online political extremism produced to date has focused on the new media practices of violent jihadis and their supporters (see, for example, Brachman & Levine, 2011; Conway, 2007; Ducol, 2012; Kimmage, 2008; Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007; Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2011; Seib & Janbek, 2011). This is unsurprising given that jihadis have significantly grown their online presence since 9/11. Increasing numbers of individuals and groups that advocate violent jihad are known to be using the Internet extensively, both as a tool for spreading their message and, in some instances, attack planning and preparation. Hussain Osman, one of the 21 July, 2005 London bombers, claimed to have been influenced by watching Internet video footage of the Iraq conflict and reading about jihad online, while Arid Uka, the 21-year-old Kosovar who shot dead two US airmen at Frankfurt Airport in March 2010, told a German court he had been radicalised by jihadist propaganda videos he watched online.[1] Other attacks in which the Internet has played a prominent role are the 2009 Fort Hood shootings, the 2008 Mumbai attacks, and the 2004 Madrid bombings, and in various terrorist plots, including amongst the Netherlands' Hofstad Group, Younis Tsouli (i.e. 'Irhabi007') and the Balkan plotters, and Colleen La Rose (i.e. 'Jihad Jane') and others plotting to murder the Swedish cartoonist, Lars Vilks.

Jihadis are not alone amongst violent political extremists in recognising the power of the Net however. According to the European Police Office (Europol), in their *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2011*, the vast majority of EU-wide terrorist attacks in 2010 were carried out by traditional separatist terrorists and not violent jihadis as some might expect (p.9). Many of these 'old' terrorist groups retain a significant online presence, but very little academic research has been conducted on this to date. While the heyday of the Provisional IRA pre-dated the Web, for example, dissident Irish Republicans (e.g. Real IRA, Continuity IRA, etc.) have a growing online presence (Bowman-Grieve & Conway, 2012). Other 'old' political groups that are in a renewal phase are the many variants of the European extreme Right, which have a long history of Internet use, dating to the earliest days of the public Internet (Cohen-Almagor 2011: 4), and an even longer history of violence and threats of violence against non-whites, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, and others. The politics of Norway's Anders Behring Breivik, the right-wing extremist responsible for the bomb and gun attacks in Oslo in July 2011 that resulted in 77 fatalities, appears to have been at least partially influenced by his online content consumption and interactions (Archer, 2011).[2] While Breivik, along with others, may be held up as an

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[1] One of the videos purported to show US military personnel raping an Iraqi Muslim girl, but was instead a scene from Brian De Palma's 2007 anti-war film, *Redacted* (BBC, 2011).

[2] Breivik also carefully prepared an Internet-based media strategy to accompany his attacks (see Ungerleider 2011).

example of the Internet's role in recent increases in so-called 'lone wolf' terrorism, more traditional extreme Right group activism is also on the increase, aided too by new media technology. Breivik had online contacts with the English Defence League (EDL), for example, which has a strong Internet presence (Bartlett 2011; Bartlett, Birdwell & Littler 2011; Bartlett & Littler 2011), while the increased prevalence of extreme Right groups and their representatives on online social networking sites has led to the establishment of a German online portal called 'Netz-Gegen-Nazis' ('Net-Against-Nazis').[3] In short, the amount of online content promoting violent politics is increasing all the time and is not limited to purveyors of any one political ideology.

The spread of violent online political extremism is also influenced by changes in the Internet landscape, both in terms of access and technologies. Large numbers of people have cheap and easy access to the Internet, particularly in the European Union, where fast, home-based access is widespread and growing. Mobile Internet access is also speedily becoming the norm, especially amongst youth, who increasingly go online using mobile telephones and other mobile devices. For these young people, the Internet is often their first port of call for background and information on topics with which they are unfamiliar or, indeed, for discussion and networking around topics with which they are. This may help to explain, for example, the high numbers of European children and teens who report having accessed hate websites; some 12% of European 11-16 year olds reported having viewed these in the past year, rising to one in five 15-16 year olds (Livingstone et al 2011: 28).Violent extremists are aware of this trend and seeking to exploit it through the use not just of dedicated websites, but also by pushing out their content across the Internet, including via social networking sites such as FaceBook and Bebo, video sharing sites such as YouTube, dedicated blogs, and via the Twitter micro-blogging website. In this way, violent radicals hope to reach far larger and more diverse audiences than they previously had access to.

The question addressed herein is whether the above-described activities and environments constitute (violent) radical milieus? And, if so, what do the concepts of '(violent) radical milieu' and '(violent) online radical milieu' contribute in terms of our understanding of the contours and working(s) of violent online political extremism and the possibilities for violent online radicalisation, in particular? The main argument contained in this chapter is that violent online radical milieus have distinctive qualities that make these environments social entities in their own right, but that not enough research has yet been conducted on these to be able to accurately describe their levels of influence in terms of processes of violent radicalisation. The chapter is composed of three sections. The first section contains some preliminary clarifications with regard to the author's conception of 'radicalness,' which differs somewhat from other accounts contained in this text, and also briefly discusses the emphasis on 'real world' settings within traditional definitions of radical milieus. Section two explores the emergence and contours of the violent jihadi online milieu, with an emphasis on what this shares with traditional radical milieus. The one important aspect of traditional radical milieus that is still a matter of debate in respect of their online counterparts is the role of violent online radical milieus in producing 'real world' terrorists. The third section of this chapter is therefore concerned with outlining available perspectives on this issue. Finally, the Conclusion enquires into where we go from here and outlines some avenues for future research.

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[3] http://www.netz-gegen-nazis.de/.

Some Preliminary Conceptual Clarifications

On Radicalness

In his background paper on 'The Radical Milieu' (2010), Stefan Malthaner makes an explicit link between 'radicalness' and violence. 'Radicalness' is, he says, an attitude characterised not just by a high degree of commitment to one's own side in a conflict, but approval of the use of the violence—up to and including participation in violent acts—to forward the position of that side. (p.2). This conception of what makes someone or something radical is wider than standard Anglo-American dictionary definitions, which have no requirement that radicals be associated with violence. In terms of 'radical milieu,' the types of politics to be considered are political activities situated at the outermost ends (i.e. the extremities) of any political spectrum. The centre of any such spectrum is generally held to be moderate; 'radicalness' may thus be conceived as the opposite, in either direction, of moderation. The problem with this approach however is that it is highly dependent on identification of the 'centre' (i.e. moderates), which in itself can be a highly subjective decision. It is therefore this author's preference to employ the qualifier 'violent' to describe my research interest(s), which is in individuals and sub-state or transnational groups that employ or advocate physical violence against other individuals and groups to forward their political objectives. The radical nature of the politics I am interested in is thus not decided upon by me, but by the decision of those involved in particular types of politics to employ or advocate violence to advance their goals; thence my use of the terms 'violent radical milieu' and 'violent online radical milieu' as the preferred descriptors throughout this chapter.

On Violent Online Radical Milieus

Malthaner, in his background paper (2010: 1), also puts forward a specific conception of the term 'milieu,' which draws on the original meaning of the term in French historian and critic Hippolyte Taine's (1828 – 1893) milieu-theory and Durkheim's (1858 – 1917) concept of 'milieu', insofar as both of these emphasised the social aspects of milieus and their formative character in relation to individual actors. Malthaner's definition of 'milieu' is thus as follows:

The term 'milieu' is used here to denote the specific social environment in which individuals and groups live and act, and out of which they develop in the sense of emerging from its social networks and out of relationships formed in this milieu; but also in the sense of being shaped by its culture, narratives, and symbols […] Yet, it goes beyond that insofar as it conveys an independent, distinct quality to this environment as a social entity in its own right; that is, as a 'milieu' in the sense of a collectivity of people sharing a certain perspective and identity, and *linked by social relationships and face-to-face interaction*. The 'milieu' as we see it can take the form of a subculture or of a community, and far from being mere passive 'context' it represents a protagonist with [its] own interests, interacting with and at times criticizing or even confronting the terrorist group [my italics] (ibid.: 1).

Or, put another way, the (violent) radical milieu is the social space in which political experiences are made and violent radical ideas are generated, tested, and refined.

The aspect of Malthaner's (violent) radical milieus that I want to enquire into in this chapter is the condition that the individuals composing any given milieu be "linked by social relationships *and* face-to-face interaction" [my italics] (2010: 1). The underlying assumption here seems to be that 'real' social relationships cannot exist in

the absence of face-to-face interaction and that the Internet is thus not a 'social space' and/or lacks some fundamental aspect of 'collectivity.' In fact, Peter Waldmann had already raised this question of virtual versus 'real world' interaction and the merits or demerits of each when he asked if "the Internet and its chat forums offer a substitute to face-to-face contacts as a base of mutual support [for violent radicals]?" (Waldmann 2008: 27). My argument here is that the Internet, and Web 2.0 in particular, has been shown to facilitate the virtual establishment of strong social and personal bonds in many different contexts (Baym 2010: Ch.6; Csipke & Horne, 2007; Naito, 2007), including amongst violent political extremists.

I agree with Malthaner that the usefulness of the concept of the (violent) radical milieu is that it allows—perhaps even causes?—us to identify and examine two relationships that are crucial to the analysis of radicalisation processes and the emergence of terrorist groups: (1) The relationship between radical milieus and their wider environment, i.e. social movements or ethnic/religious communities (the "outer boundary"); and (2) the relationship between radical milieus and terrorist groups (the "inner boundary"). Both boundaries—and relationships—entail interactive and collective processes in which opinions and perspectives are shaped and social networks are formed, which may include elements of support, solidarity, influence, and control, along with debate, controversy, isolation, and radicalization (Malthaner 2010: 3). The purpose of this chapter is to expand the concept of the radical milieu to the virtual sphere by showing that many of these basic characteristics of traditional (violent) radical milieus are also apparent in violent online radical milieus, though the latter have their own unique characteristics and complicating factors that must be taken into account too.

Characteristics of Violent Online Radical Milieus Shared with Traditional Violent Radical Milieus

It is said that traditional (violent) radical milieus often "emerge during processes of violent escalation" (ibid.: 2) and this seems to have been a factor in the emergence of, for example, the violent jihadi milieu that mushroomed online post 9/11. There is an important aspect of this mushrooming that is rarely treated in the literature however and that is the way in which the escalation of jihadist violence—not to omit also retaliatory American violence—after the 9/11 attacks coincided with rapid advances in terms of both broadband penetration and the development and uptake of new Internet tools and technologies. The events of 9/11 did not cause the latter, but the latter certainly facilitated violent jihadis new media strategies. The advent of Web 2.0 was particularly important as it was this, it is argued here, that offered violent radicals the chance of altering their previously largely broadcast Internet presences (Conway, 2005) into meaningful violent radical milieus. Bin Laden's cadres had employed the Internet for communication and propaganda purposes prior to the attacks in the United States (Conway, 2002; Seib & Janbek 2011: 26), but their use of the Internet increased exponentially thereafter. This had two interrelated causes: a.) the loss of al-Qaeda's Afghan base and the consequent dispersal of fighters, and b.) the rapid development of the Internet itself and the computers and other gadgets—such as mobile telephones—with which it could increasingly be accessed, along with the proliferation of Internet cafes globally (Scheuer 2004: 78). Up until the emergence of Web 2.0 with its emphasis on user-generated content, social networking, digital video and the integration of these however, Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda Central

maintained some level of control over the al-Qaeda narrative. Having said this, it was the instigation by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda in Iraq's (AQI) separate online strategy in the interregnum between the demise of the early Web and the full fledging of Web 2.0 that marked the beginning of violent jihad's transformation from a movement with a significant Internet component to a genuine violent online radical milieu.

Like traditional (violent) radical milieus, violent online radical milieus are "a collectivity of people beyond the perpetrators of violence" (Malthaner 2010: 2). The basic idea is that terrorist groups and/or attacks spring from radical milieus (i.e. they are violently radicalising environments) and thus terrorist groups and/or attacks can also spring from their online variants. On the other hand, "What distinguishes the milieu from simple sympathizers is that within the former, there exists a form of social structure responsible for the observed in-group cohesion. It is not merely a sum of individuals holding similar political/cultural attitudes" (Waldmann 2008: 25). A violent online jihadi milieu worthy of the name thus emerged when the 'jihadisphere' came to encompass a wide cross-section of producers and consumers, from al-Qaeda Central to media arms of various al-Qaeda franchise organisations to the globally dispersed array of 'jihobbyists' (Brachman 2009: 19) with no formal links to any violent jihadist organisation, all contributing to the everyday making and remaking of the violent jihadi narrative.

Al-Zarqawi's Online Exploits as Turning Point

In a little over four weeks in April and May 2004, Zarqawi shot to worldwide fame—probably, more appropriately, infamy—by a strategic combination of extreme violence and Internet savvy. In early April 2004, Zarqawi posted online a thirty minute audio recording which explained who he was, why he was fighting, and details of the attacks for which he and his group were responsible. Paul Eedle described the latter as "a comprehensive branding statement." The Internet allowed Zarqawi to build a brand very quickly: "Suddenly this mystery man had a voice, if not a face, and a clear ideology to explain his violence." But what was AQI's purpose in building a brand and establishing a public profile in this way? The answer is clearly magnification of the impact of their violence (Eedle 2005: 124-125). Prior to the initiation of his Internet-based public relations campaign, each of Zarqawi's attacks had to kill large numbers of people in order to get noticed in the chaos and mounting daily death toll in Iraq. By going online however, Zarqawi was able to both control the interpretation of his violent message and achieve greater impact with smaller operations. In May 2004 Zarqawi took things a step farther when he used the Internet's force multiplying effect to the maximum effect for the first time when he was filmed personally cutting off the head of Nicholas Berg and had the footage posted online. The purpose of this beheading was precisely to videotape it. The resultant images gripped the imaginations of AQI's allies and enemies alike. Al-Zarqawi risked nothing in the endeavour while making himself a hero to jihadis worldwide (ibid.: 126). And, in fact, it was only after these online exploits that al-Zarqawi was actually endorsed by Osama bin Laden as 'Emir' (i.e. 'leader') of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Government and policymakers' fears of the potential for the Internet to act as a vehicle for violent radicalisation spring from the alleged effects of such combinations

of extreme political violence with the affordances of the cyber world (i.e. potentially vast audience, geographical reach, and multimedia capabilities). Al-Zarqawi was however a terrorist who migrated some of his activity to the Internet rather than himself emerging out of a violent online radical milieu, which is composed of sympathisers whom through their interactions in their violent radical milieu of choice become active supporters of, in this case violent jihadism, and may even themselves wind-up becoming terrorists. It was however the legions of fans inspired by al-Zarqawi's online activity that took up the banner of violent online jihad thus generating even more of the same and so on until eventually coalescing into the contemporary violent jihadi online milieu.

The Contribution of Changes in the Internet Landscape to the Emergence of the Violent Jihadi Online Milieu

The emergence of the violent jihadi online milieu was also influenced by changes in the Internet landscape, both in terms of access and technologies, that were gathering pace at around the same time as al-Zarqawi came to the world's attention for his cyber strategy and resulted in a transformed Internet environment by the time of the emergence of probably his most prominent online successor, Anwar al-Awlaki, in 2008 (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2011: 56 & 70). What were these changes? Firstly, large numbers of people came to have cheap and easy access to the Internet. Today, always-on mobile Internet access is speedily becoming the norm, especially amongst youth, who increasingly go online using mobile telephones and other mobile devices. Second, online social networking, an integral part of Web 2.0, took-off in the mid-2000s. Consider that Facebook was established in 2004 and is now thought to have 800 million regular users[4] while YouTube, which only came into existence in 2005, currently has 48 hours of video uploaded to it every minute.[5] It was these changes that caused *Time* magazine to name 'You' as their 2006 'Person of the Year' (Grossman, 2006) and it was the same changes that ushered in the violent jihadi online milieu, the beginnings of which had been instigated by al-Zarqawi.

No figure immediately emerged from within the ranks of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to fill the cyber-gap left by Zarqawi's death in June 2006. But the emergence of such a figure was no longer integral to the buoyancy of al-Qaeda's online presence. Official and semi-official websites were no longer the only important jihadi cyber spaces (Seib & Janbek 2011: 36). Increasing numbers of violent jihadi websites and content began to become available in English, French, German, Spanish, and Dutch, signifying both the rise of violent jihadism in the West and growing efforts by violent jihadist voices to reach Western (Muslim) populations online (Gruen 2006: 363-364; see also Europol 2011: 10). Changes in the nature of the Internet encouraged increasing numbers of supporters of violent jihad to (re-)post articles and analyses, exchange information, voice opinions, and debate ideas on blogs, websites, and forums that they themselves established. The proliferation of fan sites acted as free publicity for the violent jihadi cause. Today, new web sites appear—and also disappear—frequently, popular chat rooms have stringent admission policies, and most sites evidence

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[4] Of these, 350 million are said by Facebook to access the site through mobile devices. See Facebook's 'Statistics' page at http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics.

[5] Further, over 3 billion videos are viewed a day, more than 13 million hours of video were uploaded to YouTube during 2010, and 70% of YouTube traffic comes from outside the US. See YouTube's 'Statistics' page at http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics.

technical savvy on the part of their producers, including all the latest Internet tools and gadgetry. Al-Qaeda did not nor does not provide financing or have any management role in these sites; nonetheless they act as an invaluable force-multiplier for its cyber-based incitement strategy.

Recognising this benefit, al-Qaeda assured its "Internet brothers" early on that "the media war with the oppressive crusader enemy takes a common effort and can use a lot of ideas. We are prepared to help out with these ideas" (as quoted in Scheuer 2004: 81). Thence the establishment of al-Qaeda's official media—largely audio and video—production arm known as as-Sahab or 'the Clouds' in 2001. With the advent of easy digital video composition and fast download, huge amounts of violent jihad-supporting video began to be produced, distributed and consumed. Between 2002 and 2005, for example, as-Sahab issued a total of 45 tapes; there was an explosive increase in 2006 however, which saw the distribution of 58 productions (Rogan 2007: 91). 2007 too was a banner year with 97 original productions (Seib & Janbek 2011: 32). Violent jihadi online content takes three major forms: basic text, including forum postings, magazines/journals, books, and written statements; audio, such as statements by leaders, sermons by violent jihadi preachers, *nashid* (chants); and video. Genres of video include political statements, by al-Qaeda leaders and Western 'spokesmen;' attack footage; 'pre martyrdom' videos, such as that made of 7/7 bomber, Mohammed Siddique Khan; instructional videos, of both theological and military or operational sorts; memorial videos commemorating persons and/or events; music videos; and beheadings. Together these contributions add up to a tremendous input into what Osama bin Laden repeatedly said was his, and remains al-Qaeda's, top priority: the instigation to violent jihad of as many Muslims globally as possible (ibid.: 29).

This violent jihadi content increasingly migrated to global portals such as YouTube, which had the effect of making the content much easier to locate as no Arabic language skills nor high level of Internet literacy were any longer necessary to locate it. Consider too that these global portals are known and attractive to young people in particular and that multi-media content, especially moving images, are held to be more convincing than text in terms of their influence capabilities. Couple this with the Internet's crowd-sourcing properties and the violent jihadi online milieu is ushered into existence. Masses of violent jihadi texts that were originally produced in Arabic began to be translated into a multitude of other languages. Large amounts of violent jihadi video began to have sub-titles, again in multiple languages, added by fans. All of this modified material is then re-uploaded for consumption online or indeed easy copying and dissemination via links embedded in emails, instant messages, SMS/text messages, etc., but also via VHS tapes, CDs, DVDs, and mobile phones (ibid.: 35). The spread of such content across multiple platforms and in multiple formats means that it is increasingly difficult to combat, especially as portals such as YouTube can't generally be shut down in the same way as, for example, jihadi online forums.

Critical Voices

It is important to note here that while (violent) radical milieu can be largely characterised as "the segment of a population which sympathizes with terrorists and supports them morally and logistically" (Waldmann 2008: 25), this support is not wholly uncritical:

[N]otwithstanding their shared experiences and perspective and their general approval of violent action, radical milieus do not unconditionally support or approve of terrorist groups and their violent campaigns. What emerges is a complex and ambivalent relationship, which may include interactions and close social ties as well as dynamics of separation and isolation; and entails solidarity and support as well as controversies and confrontation (Malthaner 2010: 3).

The same holds true for violent online radical milieus. At least one function of Zarqawi's original audio statement mentioned above, for example, was to alert audiences that Zarqawi viewed the world rather differently than Osama bin Laden, conceiving the enemy as not just American troops, but also the Kurds and Shi'ite Muslims. On a different occasion, al-Zawahiri criticised the young online followers of al-Zarqawi for their preoccupation with the staging of blood-soaked media spectacles, writing:

Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable, also, are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their descriptions of you as the Sheikh of the Slaughterers (as quoted in Awan et al 2011: 31).

Clearly, efforts put into the production and circulation of "images signifying Muslim suffering, Western hypocrisy, Jihadist heroism and so on was intended to create effects; to legitimise violence and recruit and mobilise supporters" and was facilitated by what Awan et al (2011) term the "new media ecology." As the latter also point out however, the very openness of this new ecology led to a loss of control over the 'core message' or 'single narrative' as new and differing interpretations and conflicting versions of the violent jihadi message began to appear and new figures emerged explicitly challenging the position of al-Zawahiri and others (ibid.: 128). Thence al-Zawahiri's rebuke of al-Zarqawi's independent, and therefore competing, online strategy.

In fact in 2006, the violent jihadi media production outlet al-Boraq Media Institute published what could be called a 'policy document' on this issue entitled *Media Exuberance* that sought to curb the uncontrolled and "exuberant" production and distribution of violent jihadi fan content (ibid.: 54). Similarly, the posting guidelines for the Al-Faloja online discussion forum "primly exhort posters to avoid material likely to give offense or create *fitna* (division) in the community, as well as, interestingly, information on subjects such as how to make bombs" (Ramsay 2009: 35). Many violent jihadi discussion forums are, in fact, tightly controlled in this way. Ramsay provides the example of a conversation on the English-language Islamic Awakening forum in which a member complains of having been ejected from the al-Qaeda affiliate forum Al-Ikhlas after raising al-Qaeda in Iraq's tendency to kill Muslims, to which another poster responds saying that he deserved it and that the mujahidin must be dismayed at the persistence of such questions (ibid.: 42). This illustrates another vitally important aspect of the contemporary violent jihadi online milieu: that it was not intentionally constructed and thus has aspects that are lamented by some users, especially those directly al-Qaeda affiliated elements of the violent jihadi movement (Kimmage, 2008), but also some of the grassroots. Having said this, what the concept of the violent online radical milieu draws our attention to in this respect is the way in which 'official' voices must now co-exist with 'un-official' or those seeking to seize the mantle of 'officialdom' within the jihadisphere. The violent online jihadi milieu is not—despite the best efforts of some—'owned' or controlled

by any one group, but encompasses a plurality of overlapping, and sometimes clashing, cyber spaces and voices, which contribute to making it a milieu.

Eventually, online jihadist activity came to have standing in its own right with popular texts such as Muhammad bin Ahmadal-Salim's *39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad* extolling "performing electronic jihad" as a "blessed field which contains much benefit" (as quoted in Awan et al 2011: 56). In fact, the success of violent online jihad led Awan and his colleagues to argue that "The virtual or media Jihad has not only gained prominence and credibility as a wholly legitimate alternative to traditional conceptions of jihad, but has also progressively outpaced the militaristic or physical Jihad in the modern era" (ibid.: 64). In other words, all of this online activity had the effect of constituting a powerful new community, here termed the violent jihadi online milieu, that had to be attended to by al-Qaeda leaders and, indeed, any individual or group that wished to play a prominent role within violent jihadism because it was by dent of their efforts as least as much of those purveying solely 'real world' violence that violent jihadism continued to prosper from the mid-2000s onward. Thence, for example, al-Zawahiri's agreement to an online question and answer session in 2007 – 2008 (Seib & Janbek 2011: 55); it also explains the emergence of Anwar al-Awlaki as a major figure within violent jihadism, at least in the West. Awlaki, an English-speaking Yemeni-American cleric—who doesn't seem to have been personally known to Osama bin Laden (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2011: 11)—was, by dent largely of his video-taped speeches and their online distribution, considered by some to be "terrorist No. 1" in terms of the threat he posed to the United States (Rep. Jane Harman as quoted in Lubold, 2010) and at least partially explains his targeted killing in a US drone attack in Yemen in September 2011. This is a significant development when one considers that al-Awlaki was not known to have ever personally engaged in any political violence himself. In fact, this allows us to arrive neatly at the one important aspect of traditional (violent) radical milieus that is still a matter of debate in respect of their online counterparts: the ability of violent online radical milieus to produce 'real world' terrorists.

The Role of Violent Online Radical Milieus in Violent Radicalisation Processes?

There is controversy as to whether the changes wrought by Web 2.0 ensure that any given contemporary violent online radical milieu "stands at the center and 'embodies' the process of radicalization in a social sense: [that] it becomes the main object of police measures […] and it represents the social space and collectivity in which political experiences are made and radical perspectives are formed" as per Malthaner's (2010: 2) description of traditional (violent) radical milieus. The focus in this chapter has been on the violent jihadi online milieu; the question however is whether such can be said to exist in the absence of agreement on the Internet's role in contemporary violent jihadi radicalisation processes? The basic assumption, shared both by violent political actors and policymakers, is that the Internet, and especially Web 2.0 applications, are making it easier for individuals to learn of and become immersed in violent online radical milieus and thus potentially to themselves become ensnared in violent politics, not just online, but in 'the real world' too. There is some dispute amongst academics on this matter however; so whilst the present author agrees that the Internet can play a significant role in violent radicalisation processes, it's also important to make the case, as I do below, for further research in this area.

Arguments against a prominent role for the Internet in violent radicalisation processes take two main forms. One position is that claiming violent extremist online content radicalises individuals into committing violence makes no sense given that other consumers of the same content don't also commit violent attacks. The most that can be said, on this approach, is that such content can buttress an individuals' resolve to engage in violence, but is not generally the cause of such a commitment (Githens-Mazer, 2010). Others suggest that most, though not all, contemporary violent online extremists are dilettantes, in the sense of restricting themselves to using the Internet to support and encourage violent extremism, but largely confining themselves to activity in this realm and thus posing no 'real world' threat. Put another way, there is the possibility that violent political extremists' online 'venting' or 'purging' suffices in terms of their desire to act and their Internet activity, rather than an avenue for violent radicalisation leading to potential off-line action—in the form of, in the most extreme instances, large-scale terrorist attacks—instead becomes for many a mechanism for neutralising the desire for violent action (Awan et al 2011: 58-59 & 64-65; Ramsay 2009: 35).

The alternative view, of course, is that the violent extremist cyber-world is a progressively more important staging post for 'real world' violence. Security practitioners and policymakers appear increasingly swayed by this argument, as it relates to violent jihadists in particular. Europol has, for example, described the Internet as "a crucial facilitating factor for both terrorists and extremists" (2011: 11), with its Director General underlining that he believes the "Internet has replaced Afghanistan as the terrorist training ground, and this should concern us the most" (Noble 2011). The US government's new strategy for countering violent extremism also mentions "the important role the internet and social networking sites play in advancing violent extremist narratives" (2011: 6) while the British government emphasises:

Al Qa'ida and some Al Qa'ida affiliates have increasingly encouraged acts of terrorism by individuals or small groups independent of the Al Qa'ida chain of command and without reference to, or guidance and instruction from, the leadership. The internet has enabled this type of terrorism by providing material which encourages and guides radicalisation and instructions on how to plan and conduct operations. In practice some attacks have been conducted or attempted by groups or sole individuals seemingly at their own initiative; in other cases they have had some contact with other terrorist networks (UK Home Office 2011: 25).

Manfred Murck, head of the Hamburg branch of Germany's domestic intelligence service, made similar comments to the Reuters news agency in September 2011 (Maclean, 2011): "The tradition of terrorism is more or less a tradition of groups. But now we see that the group is not always necessary and that the Internet functions as a kind of virtual group."

Such beliefs have been stoked by the rash of terrorist attacks and thwarted attacks, such as those described in this chapter's introduction, in which the Internet played a role. The examples alluded to above and others have involved Internet users who run the gamut from prominent figures in the 'jihadisphere' who spent large portions of their lives networking around, consuming, and producing jihadi online content to youth who entered the violent jihadi online milieu, consumed its products—largely or entirely in isolation from other denizens of the milieu—and acted on these. An illustrative example of the former type was Abu Dujana al-Khurasani, a well-known

administrator of the al-Hesbah jihadi forum, who undertook the suicide attack at US Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan in December 2009, which killed 7 CIA operatives and a member of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate.[6] He was described by his wife as "constantly reading and writing. He was crazy about online forums" (Awan et al 2011: 63). Al-Khurasani was immortalised online after his death in videos, photo montages, and poetry, including an ode entitled 'Our James Bond' (ibid.: 64). British Muslim student Roshonara Choudhry is an example of the other type. She was jailed for life in November 2010 for attempting to murder a UK MP. Ms. Choudhry claimed she was radicalised after navigating from YouTube to a stream of videos featuring extremist preacher Anwar al-Awlaki (Dodd, 2010).

Al-Awlaki was an interesting figure as he was implicated in a number of additional attacks and plots, including Major Nidal Hasan's shooting spree at Fort Hood in 2009 and the attempted Times Square bombing in 2010, with both Hasan and Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bomber, thought to have been in online contact with the preacher prior to their attacks. For many, including policymakers and security practitioners, these cases and others like them are illustrative of the violent radicalising properties of radical online milieus. For others however, they raise more questions than answers. Up until recently, al-Awlaki's sermons were widely available on mainstream Islamic websites. At the time that it came to the attention of US authorities in 2008, for example, his popular lecture 'Constants on the Path of Jihad' was available on Ummah.com, a mainstream site that according to US authorities at that time received approximately 48,300 visits per month from the US alone (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2011: 56). Some of these visitors must surely have viewed 'Constants,' but presumably never acted on the advice to carry out attacks within the United States and abroad contained therein. Are direct contacts with violent extremists therefore more important than simply consuming violent extremist content? Can this then explain the attacks carried out by Hasan and Shahzad? If so, what about Roshonara Choudhry and the influence of al-Awlaki's video sermons on her decision to attack a UK Member of Parliament?

Questions such as the above cannot yet be adequately answered. However, outright denials of a role for the Internet in violent radicalisation processes seem to me to be premature and put me in mind of the following observation made by Walter Laqueur, a respected figure in Terrorism Studies, in 1999:

No amount of e-mail sent from the Baka Valley to Tel Aviv, from Kurdistan to Turkey, from the Jaffna peninsula to Colombo, or from India to Pakistan will have the slightest political effect. Nor can one envisage how in these conditions virtual power will translate into real power (p.262).

The following much more recent quote from Jason Burke (2011) also resonated with this author for similar reasons:

Twitter will never be a substitute for grassroots activism. In much of the Islamic world, social media is only for super-connected local elites or supporters in far off countries. Neither are much use on the ground, where it counts. Social media can bring in donations or some foreign recruits. It can aid communication with some logistics and facilitate propaganda operations, but it is not much use in a firefight with Saudi, Iraqi or Pakistani security forces. *Twitter won't help al-Shabab retake Mogadishu or the Taliban reach Kabul in any meaningful way* [my italics].

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[6] It has since come to light that the al-Hesba online discussion forum was actually run by the CIA (Awan et al 2011: 125).

Both Laqueur and Burke mention specific Internet technologies, but one assumes that they were/are making claims about the role of the Internet in radicalisation and terrorism more generally. Laqueur's stance is particularly startling when one considers that a few lines previously he describes how audiocassettes smuggled into Iran played a key role in the Khomeini revolution. Burke, on the other hand, seems to dismiss out of hand all those preparatory steps—donations, foreign recruits, logistics, propaganda—and the potential role of violent online radical milieus in facilitating these that together culminate in 'firefights.' Both authors too are erroneous, in my opinion, in insisting upon maintaining rigid distinctions between the 'real' and 'virtual' worlds. For increasing numbers of people globally, particularly those young people who have grown-up with the Internet, such distinctions are meaningless as their lives play out in both realms simultaneously, although not necessarily as mirrors of each other.

Burke (2011) also draws attention to issues of access; in large parts of the Muslim world, he says, online social networking is restricted to elites and is thus not "much use on the ground, where it counts." It is certainly true that home-based Internet penetration rates are low in, for example, the Middle East as compared to the West; Internet cafes are widespread however and there are soaring rates of mobile phone usage. While widespread fast always-on Internet is doubtless preferable in terms of instituting a durable web-based political violence strategy, it is not crucial. The Internet, and Web 2.0 in particular, facilitates small contributions by large numbers of people along with large contributions by small numbers of people that together can constitute a significant whole. Nor is it necessary for all those engaged in any activist project, violent or non-violent, to be themselves Internet users. Internet content circulates online obviously, but can also be disseminated via photocopying, audio tapes, VHS and CDs, text-messaging, and plain old word-of-mouth, depending on its nature. In the context of the present analysis, the violent jihadi online milieu is a component of the wider jihadi milieu with ideas and content from each penetrating the other in multiple ways. The same can be said of the events of the so-called 'Arab Spring' in which Internet tools played an important—though not determining—role 'on the ground' for users and non-users alike. On the other hand, the wider Middle Eastern political milieu underwent seismic changes in 2011, which will doubtless also impact the jihadi milieu, including its online component, in ways which may or may not be conducive to the violent jihadi agenda in the longer term.

Having said this, it has seemed to this author for some time now that the Internet is likely to play a greater role in violent jihadi radicalisation processes in a Western context than in other locales. This would seem to make sense on the basis not just of widespread access in the West to cheap—often free—fast always-on Internet with less content restrictions than in most parts of the Muslim world, but also because it seems less likely that persons on the ground in 'hot' conflict zones need to rely on the Internet for consumption of violent extremist content or discussion than those resident in Western countries who share the same violent jihadi commitments. This hypothesis too needs testing however. It is important to underline too, as I alluded to in my introduction, that violent radicalisation is not something that should be explored only in the context of jihadism. So what is happening in the Middle East or the Muslim world more widely and how this may affect violent jihadism, both off- and online, should not be our sole consideration. If the Internet has a role in some violent jihadis radicalisation processes, then it follows that it should play a role in other violent

political extremists' radicalisation processes too. The online strategies of these other violent political extremists, to include so-called 'old' terrorist organisations (i.e. national-separatists, ethnic-separatists, etc.) and the extreme Right, therefore need to be explored in much greater depth and at much greater length than they have been to date. Do these other violent extremist online spaces also constitute radical milieus as described herein? If so, why; if not, why not? Consistent cross-comparative research of this sort is crucial if we are to accurately address questions of the role of the Internet in violent radicalisation.

Conclusion: Where Do We Go From Here?

There are more questions than answers available to us in respect of the role of the Internet in processes of violent radicalisation and ultimately terrorism. The usefulness of the concept of the violent radical milieu is that it underlines the inescapably social nature of radicalisation processes, including violent online radicalisation processes. Tim Stevens and Peter Neumann's influential report *Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action* (2009) contains the following statement: "Self-radicalisation and self-recruitment via the Internet with little or no relation to the outside world rarely happens, and there is no reason to suppose that this situation will change in the near future" (p.13). One does not radicalise oneself in cyberspace, anymore than one is radicalised by oneself in the 'real world' however. The concept of the violent online radical milieu thus works to show that ideas such as 'self-radicalisation' and 'self-recruitment' are effectively redundant, which is not to underplay the role of the Internet in violent radicalisation processes. It is clearly this author's opinion that the Internet can have a significant role in same; the answers to the questions of how we know this and the evidence for same are of a different order however. The problem is that there is a dearth of empirical research exploring the role of the Internet in processes of violent radicalisation. There is an assumption that the Internet plays a part in some individuals' radicalisation, on the basis of self-reporting, but no large-scale studies showing this to actually be the case or measuring the extent of the Internet's role in such processes. This omission is important even if one believes, as I do, that there is sufficient anecdotal evidence available to us at this stage to allow a role for the Internet in contemporary violent radicalisation processes. Why? Because successful policy responses can only be crafted on the basis of sound long-term comparative interdisciplinary research and analysis, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, that identify the factors involved in violent online radicalisation.

In terms of future research, combining analysis of jihadi, nationalist-separatist, extreme Right, and other potential violent online radical milieus would provide a considerably more comprehensive view of the violent online political extremist landscape than heretofore. Beyond a more complete overview and analysis of violent online political extremism generally, both contemporarily and in retrospect, this holistic approach is vital in other respects too. The concept of the violent online radical milieu draws particular attention to the way in which support for terrorist groups is generally more widespread than the small numbers of participants in actual terrorist violence; so while entire communities may have a degree of sympathy for a particular cause, a minority engage in political violence activities. This is a point particularly worth underlining in respect of the Internet where acting "on the

assumption that sympathy for terrorism is a kind of terrorist offense may be a classic example of the counterproductive counterterrorist excess" (Ramsay 2009: 34).

Finally, Waldmann's 2008 article on (violent) radical milieu appeared in a special issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism* dedicated to 'Under-Investigated Topics in Terrorism Research.' Alex Schmid also included various aspects of the terrorism-Internet relationship in his, more recent, list of 50 terrorism topics and issues that need more thorough researching that also appeared in *Perspectives* (2011). Waldmann (2008) focused in his article on traditional (violent) radical milieus; those, in other words, having 'real world' settings. Schmid, on the other hand, does not mention (violent) radical milieus, but lists at least eight research topics that are directly or indirectly impacted by the Internet.[7] Deployment of the concept of violent online radical milieus by researchers would help us to think through and analyse all of the Internet-related terrorism topics raised by Schmid, and more besides, requiring as it does a more holistic approach to the intersection of violent politics and the Internet, in at least three important directions: widening our research beyond violent jihadis; deepening it to extend to, for example, more ethnographic research in the area; and scaling upward to engage in analysis of the publicly accessible 'big data' arising out of online interactions.

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[7] See topics 11, 18, 19, 28, 32, 36, 42, and 50 on Schmid's list.

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