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Radicalization through social networks during the pandemic

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Abstract. The coronavirus pandemic has led to the use of social networks at an unprecedented level. The use of social networks and isolation have created an ideal framework for carrying out radicalization activities. Social networks have helped with the way communication is achieved, but there are also negative effects produced by them, and online radicalization is one of these negative effects. In the digital age, information has crossed the barriers imposed by time and geographical space. This was also exploited by terrorist groups that took advantage of the opportunities offered by the online environment, and the pandemic period represented a new opportunity for these groups to recruit new members. Based on this premise, we analyzed the articles on radicalization through social networks to observe the effects that the coronavirus pandemic had on the research of the phenomenon of radicalization. We believe that in this digital age, efficient communication is difficult to achieve, given the large volume of information accessible to all. That is why researchers in the field of radicalization have an extremely high responsibility, namely, the efficient spread of messages in order to prevent this phenomenon.

1. Introduction

The motivation of this research is based on the author's interest in identifying the negative impact of social networks on society during the pandemic. The coronavirus pandemic has meant many changes for the whole world. Physical distance required the adoption of a lifestyle to compensate for this. Social networks have helped activities in many areas and, in particular, have facilitated communication between people, this being the main function for which they were created. However, the use of social networks has also helped those activities that should not exist, including terrorism. The use of social networks and isolation are factors that increase the activity of radicalization in the online environment, and the pandemic that began in 2020 forced people to do both: to use social networks to compensate for physical distance and to isolate, given that many activities were conducted from home.

Starting from this aspect, we intend to analyze the articles that were written during the pandemic about radicalization in the online environment to create an image of how radicalization was perceived during this period. We will create this image based on the conclusions obtained by researchers in the field. We do not assume that we will identify all articles related to this topic, which is why we will establish the criteria set for identifying the articles. We will identify articles by using the Google Scholar search engine. Then, we will go through the results obtained to identify that information that indicates how the radicalization phenomenon was treated in 2020. The hypothesis we state is that the pandemic was an opportunity for terrorist groups to attract new followers.

2. The role of social networks in the radicalization process

The first step in our research will be to establish the definition of radicalization to which we will refer throughout the research process. Radicalization is a concept that has been defined many times, which is why we have chosen to present the definition found in the law on preventing and combating terrorism

in Romania, given that this is the official definition of this process. Under this law, radicalization is defined as "the complex process by which a person ends up perverting their beliefs, feelings and behavior, following the adoption of an extremist form of thinking, in which the use of violence and even self-sacrifice through suicide are legitimate and desirable forms of defense and / or satisfaction of interests promoted by terrorist entities " [1]. Summarizing this definition, we can say that radicalization is the moment before the terrorist attack, including all those actions taken by a terrorist group to persuade another person to commit a terrorist attack or help plan the attack, through various activities.

Technology has radically changed the way we live, globally. The impact of technology has been felt from simple daily activities to the most complex activities related to national security. Social networks are the invention that controls the lives of many people today. The development of technology has also helped terrorist groups expand their portfolio of radicalization methods. Social networks have become a tool often used by these groups and with a very high success rate. Some researchers believe that the online environment is an important way of radicalization that facilitates interaction, but that it cannot be said with certainty that the radicalization process can be accelerated in the online environment. [2]. Radicalization in the online environment is a topic often addressed by researchers in order to identify ways to stop this phenomenon.

However, the fact that social networks solve the problem of physical distance in terms of information exchange cannot be disputed. Terrorists can send information much faster to a much larger group of people and, worst of all, they can contact people who are not part of their social circle. Through this method, radicalization in the online environment has reached enormous proportions.

The pandemic caused by coronavirus has limited physical contact and forced the isolation of people globally. Based on this fact, we want, through this study, to identify the impact that the pandemic caused by coronavirus had on the radicalization activity in the online environment. In order to establish this impact, we considered it necessary to identify the research carried out during this period on the phenomenon of radicalization in the online environment because, if we did not pay attention to this phenomenon, from a scientific point of view, it would mean that it no longer represents an issue that affects humanity.

3. Radicalization research during the pandemic

After searching on Google Scholar, we identified 10 articles written about radicalization through social networks in the period 2020-2021. For the search we set this period because the period covered in this research is the pandemic period. We filtered the search to identify only those articles that refer to this topic in the title. The search aimed to identify articles that contain the words social media radicalization. The next step in this research was to analyze the 10 identified articles and extract information of interest for this topic.

In order to make a quantitative comparison of the radicalization research in the pandemic period and in 2019, we performed the same search for 2019. Following this search, we obtained the same number of articles, 10 articles written about radicalization through social networks in 2019. In the case of this search, we also specify that the result obtained is based on the set criteria, it does not represent the total number of research carried out in 2019.

The first article identified is a doctoral thesis, *Understanding radicalization and counter-radicalization communication in social media: a Twitter analysis*. The purpose of this paper was to analyze and evaluate how radicalization is achieved in the online environment. The research conducted in the paper was based on the analysis of existing methods by which radicalization is achieved in the online environment. The paper focused on the use of the social network Twitter in the process of radicalization, this being the most used social network by terrorist groups. Following the research, it was concluded that social networks are currently an essential tool in the preparation and execution of terrorist attacks [3]. Social networks are a means of distributing information in a very short time, making it very easy to send messages to a fairly large group.

The second article identified is a chapter in a book, called *Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet*. The title of this chapter exemplifies very well the theme of the chapter,

namely, the identification of ways in which radicalization on social networks can be prevented. One of the strategies identified in the research is the strategy of preventing and banning the online distribution of materials that provide information about terrorism. The strategy also prohibits online propaganda of terrorism issues [4]. Implementing this strategy involves, among other things, blocking such content, filtering information and, if such content is identified, deleting it.

Another strategy to prevent radicalization in the online environment involves attacking terrorist messages [4]. The views of those who consider terrorist attacks to be a way of expressing their views must be combated, either online or offline. [4]. This strategy refers to the fact that those who have radical views should not be ignored, but should be attacked by counter-arguments to what they convey, so that it can be very clear that their views are not agreed by society.

ICTs, Social Media and Tendencies of Radicalization in the Sahel is the fourth item identified in the search. The author of this article presented the important role that communication plays in areas where armed conflicts take place. According to him, those who control communication will win the war [5]. Communication through social networks is much more dangerous because the information reaches the recipient immediately. Violent groups attract many more followers through social networks due to the communication options they offer. With the help of social networks, messages can be sent through images or videos that could more easily convince a person to embrace radical ideas.

Bruijin believes that new ways of communicating succeed in uniting people [5]. Through social networks, groups can be created within to transmit the ideas that underpin that group. The problem arises when the purpose for which people decide to make a common front has no positive connotations. Terrorist actions fall into this category, and the radicalization process is very successful in such groups. Moskalenko conducted a study on mass radicalization through social media. He claims that social networks have revolutionized mass radicalization. [6]. The evolution of social networks has allowed terrorist groups to identify vulnerable people who could easily join their cause and made it easier for them to interact with them.

The possibility of free expression on social networks offered an opportunity for extremists to express their dissatisfaction publicly, the message reaching as many corners of the world as possible. Heie and Bory believe that the most effective messages are those transmitted through images and videos, because people are naturally attracted to videos and images that present tragedies. [7] In addition to this opportunity offered by the acceptance of the population of the information transmitted through images and videos, the extremists were helped in the radicalization process by the lack of responsible censorship and the lack of monitoring of online activity. [7]

The pandemic period offered advantages to terrorist groups in terms of radicalization. Young people are the ones who spend more time on social networks [8] and the pandemic has led to an increase in their presence on social networks. Dissatisfaction with the situation created by the virus, the possible economic problems of the family, feelings of disorientation, confusion, fear and anxiety have created the perfect setting for extremists to act. [9]

The process of radicalization can be started by people who want this, without being recruited, and in such cases, we are talking about self-radicalization. Cases of self-radicalization are more difficult to detect because we are not talking about large groups, but about individuals who observe and inform themselves about a certain terrorist group or about terrorist attacks. Sharp Parker [8] argues that ways to identify potential terrorists need to be changed, as most cases are identified after the radicalization process is over, making it difficult for the authorities to prevent an attack. Greater attention must be paid to the methods used to achieve radicalization on social networks because it is the most widespread in the digital age.

Conclusions

Given that in 2019 10 articles on radicalization on social networks were identified, and in 2020 10 articles were also identified, we can conclude that the interest of researchers, although the coronavirus pandemic was the focal point in everyone's lives, did not decreased. This means that the process of radicalization has been an important topic because it has continued to be practiced. One of the methods

that terrorist groups use to attract new followers is represented by social networks. Their impact on the radicalization process has been felt because the information is transmitted to a much larger number of people in a much shorter time. The identified research on radicalization through social networks during the pandemic did not refer to the pandemic context and how it could be influenced by the characteristics of the pandemic period. However, given that radicalization through social networks has the highest success rate on people who are isolated from society and who spend much of their time on social networks, we believe that the stated hypothesis was validated: the pandemic was an opportunity for terrorist groups to attract new followers. The hypothesis was validated because the coronavirus pandemic required isolation and spending more time on social networks to compensate for physical interaction.

The limitations of this research stem from the fact that criteria have been imposed for the identification of research conducted in 2020 on the process of radicalization through social networks. A greater number of researches would have helped to draw a clearer picture on this subject, so we consider it necessary, in the future, to conduct research that includes a larger number of papers.

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