



Articles

This is Not Your Mother's Terrorism:

Social Media, Online Radicalization and the Practice of Political Jamming

by Laura Huey



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Abstract

It is commonly recognized that social media presents vast new opportunities for terrorist groups seeking to radicalize audiences. However, few scholars have studied the actual mechanisms by which radicalizing messages are delivered to those audiences. Within this paper, the author explores one key aspect of the phenomenon of 'jihadi cool' – that is, the rendering of pro-Islamic terrorism into something hip and trendy among online audiences. Discussed is the use of political jamming: a subversive, satirical activity that draws on humor to reinforce ideological messages. The opportunity for countering these messages through the same technique is also considered.

Keywords: radicalization, social media, Twitter, political jamming, counter-terrorism, jihadi cool.

"@ABC: JUST IN: FBI: Alleged ISIS supporter in Ohio arrested over plan to carry out "jihad" attack on US Capitol with bombs, guns" HAHA COOL (Twitter user 2015).

"I like watching angry arab videos bc the arabs in the videos are angry ... Angry arabs are cool and dangerous at the same time" (Twitter user 2015).

For the past couple of years, news and social media outlets have been trending with stories concerning the phenomenon of 'jihadi cool' – the rebranding of Jihadist forms of terrorism into an appealingly 'hip' subculture through the use of social media, rap videos, counter culture magazines, clothing and other forms of propaganda aimed at disaffected youth. Of potential sources of radicalization, commentators cite online spaces as a primary concern, noting how sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram function as 'radicalizing milieus' (Bloom 2013) within which young people are introduced to pro-jihadist messages, networked to others with similar (reinforcing) views, and, in some cases, actively recruited to join in Islamic terrorist groups (Stevens and Neumann 2009; Venhaus 2010). Although much has been written on various aspects of this phenomenon, there is one propagandistic device frequently found on social media sites that has generated little attention: the subversion of popular memes to propagate pro-terrorist messages, a device known as political jamming.

Within this paper, I draw on materials collected from online sources to explore the phenomenon of political jamming by those promoting radical jihadist ideology. This material was collected as part of a larger study



on the role of gender in social media in fostering online radicalization. Through tracking online activities of those disseminating material in support of the Islamic State (IS), a group of Islamic jihadists also known as ISIS or ISIL, a number of different propaganda techniques aimed at Western audiences, or those familiar with Western culture, were identified. Notable among these are pro-jihadist messages presented in rhetoric and imagery linked to memes in Western popular culture to create results intended to be satirical. Originally a tool of a counter-culture movement, political jamming is today familiar to anyone who has watched an episode of the Colbert Report or spent any length of time on the Internet. As I document in the pages that follow, pro-jihadist ideologues use political jamming to appeal to younger audiences raised within cultures that treat forms of dark, political humour as hip, trendy and counter-culture. Disseminated through online milieus to individuals already potentially interested in receiving such messages, political violence becomes ‘jihadi cool.’

In the pages that follow, I begin tracing this phenomenon with a discussion of the emergence of ‘jihadi cool’ through social media, before providing a more detailed examination of political jamming as a technique used to endorse political violence and racist ideology, among other sentiments. While much of the focus of this paper will be on analyzing political jamming by pro-jihadi individuals and groups, I also explore the use of this technique by individuals and groups for counter-terrorist purposes.

‘Jihadi cool’ and the emergence of pro-jihadi political jamming

Conducting terrorist operations is a resource intensive enterprise, requiring organizations to continually seek out new recruits in order to replace individuals lost to fighting, suicide bombings and arrests (Bloom 2011), as well as to add new recruits in order to expand operations. Over the past couple of years, groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda have turned to the Internet as a recruitment tool, presenting their ideology in often fairly slick packaging (Stern 2010). Indeed, IS members and their supporters can be found using a variety of social media apps and file-sharing platforms, from Facebook and Ask.fm to kik and YouTube (Klausen 2015). Within these spaces, they provide consumers access to, among other things, rap videos and online magazines with messages aimed directly at disaffected youth. What these communications typically have in common is that they present jihad as a “cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with the powerful elite” (ibid.). One study of U.S. Al-Qaeda recruits found that these individuals were typically confused, young people searching to define themselves and gain a sense of purpose. “Al-Qaeda’s ability to turn them to violence,” the study’s author (Venhaus 2010: 1) suggests, “is rooted in what each seeks: Revenge seekers need an outlet for their frustration, status seekers need recognition, identity seekers need a group to join, and thrill seekers need adventure.” Media content is pitched at audiences in ways that exploit these longings. Videos on YouTube emphasize romantic notions of brotherhood, revolution and sacrifice in pursuit of an Islamist utopia (Payne 2009). Interaction with others through Internet channels fuels a sense of belonging and common cause. Photos of dead ‘martyrs’ and children wounded in drone strikes are used as propagandistic devices for representing jihad as a defensive strategy against Western, Saudi and other powers– messages that are ubiquitous across the twitterverse and other social media sites (Payne 2009).

*Bomb by bomb,
blast by blast,
only going to bring back the glorious past*

“Blow by Blow” by Abu Mansoor al-Amriki (2009).[1]

None of the above is to suggest that online spaces that provide radicalizing platforms have a direct causal



effect in producing terrorists. Indeed, research on radicalization appears to suggest that most become individuals who become actual participants in foreign fighting and/or terrorist activities are not recruited online, but rather are influenced by connections to pro-jihadist social networks in the 'real world' (Bjelopera 2013). Thus, instead of thinking about the role of the Internet and, in particular, the accessibility of radicalizing content on social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, in terms of direct effects it is perhaps more useful to think of the ways in which online radical milieus normalize political violence through messages that promote pro-terrorist ideology to audiences who may be susceptible (Stevens and Neumann 2009). They also serve to continually reinforce those messages through the posting activities of one's friends and online acquaintances, increasing both retention of the message and its credibility (ibid.; Venhaus 2010). In describing the potential effects of online radical milieus, Bjelopera (2013: 20-21) puts the matter most succinctly:

The interactivity of chat rooms, blogs, social networking sites, message boards, video hosting sites, and e-mail blurs the lines between readership and authorship that previous generations of terrorists and sympathizers encountered with pamphlets, newspapers, and newsletters. This blurring possibly encourages people who interact in such forums to more easily see themselves as part of broader jihadist movements and not just casual readers or online spectators. They may eventually engage in more substantive activity—actual propagandizing, financial support, or joining a terrorist network.

Certainly within the social media site, Twitter, we see individuals, if not directly engaged in physical or material support of IS or other groups, than highly involved in the dissemination of pro-jihadist propaganda embedded within pictures, video clips, comments and found in links to off-site content (Klausen 2015). While much of this propagandizing still involves the rather standard techniques noted previously – of exploiting grievances, demonizing targets and/or promoting a culture of martyrdom (Bloom 2011) – it also frequently entails efforts directly aimed at making jihad look appealing to younger audiences.

Aside from posting romanticized and/or hyper-masculine images of IS fighters to portray jihad as 'cool', pro-jihadist supporters employ another communication strategy now commonly found within and across various Internet subcultures: political jamming. Political jamming entails the deliberate alteration of representations of a logo, photo or meme in order to subvert its meaning for the audience and thus disrupt its political or commercial use – a form of what Lasn (1999) terms 'meme warfare'. Long used by counter-culture and anti-consumer groups to spread political and anti-consumer messages, 'culture jamming', Frederick Jameson (1992: 409) describes jamming as a form of "cultural politics" that allows jammers to confront "the image society" by "undermining the image by way of image itself," thus imploding its logic and presenting the viewer with alternate, often ironic or satirical meaning. A classic example of this technique is the spoof of the famous Joe Camel cigarette ad, in which the cigarette smoking camel is renamed Joe Chemo and shown suffering from cancer as a result of his use of tobacco.

Political jamming differs from culture jamming in three key aspects. First, where culture jamming is directed at altering the behaviours of consumers, political jams are oriented towards changing individual and group attitudes towards public policy, spurring changes to government practices or regimes and/or influencing global social change (Cammaerts 2007). Second, political jamming is used by a wide array of individuals and groups, from the radical to the mainstream, and thus "cannot be coined as a counter-hegemonic practice per se" (ibid: 71). Indeed, with the accessibility of Photoshop and other editing software, and free use of meme generating software online, political jamming is today a standard feature of Internet discourse, routinely found and propagated across social media, created by anyone with the time, software and creativity to come



up with a clever play on a popular meme. Third, political jams are not necessarily progressive. They can entail calls for the maintenance of the status quo or support for reactionary policies, can be intolerant or racist towards minority or other groups, or attempt to incite hatred towards demonized others (ibid.).

As a political communication tool, jamming is particularly appealing to younger audiences. Not least among reasons for this is that most youth today live within a world in which information comes in small, highly digestible forms. The phenomenal rise of Twitter – with its famous 140 character limit – is one piece of evidence in support of this contention. Thus, a cartoon or altered photograph that conveys meaning is much more likely to incite interest than a book or other treatise on the same topic. Further, in today's digital media age, it is *de rigueur* for information to be presented in ways that excite audience interest, visually and rhetorically. The alternative is to risk losing one's audience. Political jams, with their subversive use of imagery and rhetoric retain, a counter-culture appeal (even when they're not) because are inherently transgressive. They ask their audience to laugh as their creators poke fun at a given person, group or idea. Thus, to the extent that they contain dark humour intended to bond a target audience while denigrating another, that they feed into the desire among disaffected youth – who variously create, consume, comment on and share these images – to be seen as cool and edgy among their peers. To the extent that some of these doctored images glorify political violence through the use of popular memes that were violent in their original context – Clint Eastwood's "go ahead, make my day" being a prime example – they present information in ways that are already familiar to many audience members and thus require little to no pre-knowledge in order to interpret the jammed image correctly.

Political jamming, mujahedeen style

Among social media and file sharing platforms used by Islamic radicals and their supporters, Twitter is seen to be among the most popular (Klausen 2015). The ability to communicate with network members through cellular technology – more easily available than 3G or wi-fi access – is only one of its perceived advantages (ibid.). Twitter also allows for easy uploading of images and embedded links to video (ibid.). My own research suggests another benefit: while Twitter suspends user accounts that violate its Terms of Service (ToS), they do not appear to engage in IP blocking or other measures that make rejoining difficult. Thus, individuals whose accounts are suspended re-join within hours and resume tweeting until reported again. To help suspended users reconnect, messages are tweeted across online communities.

"I was Suspended. This is My 4th acc. Please Follow, Retweet & Support Me."

– post of a pro-Jihadi Twitter user, retweeted by another formerly suspended pro-Jihadi account.

For each of these reasons, plus the issue of researcher ease of access, the project upon which the present study is based used Twitter as its primary research site.

The research project from which this data is derived consists of 3 inter-linked projects: a quantitative analysis of posting/tweeting patterns by males and females (from multiple pro-jihadist groups on Twitter), a network analysis of selected online Twitter-based groups (pro-IS, pro-AQ) and a qualitative study tracking and analyzing posting activities of approximately 50 Twitter accounts belonging to females [2] linked to IS Twitter networks and disseminating pro-IS content. For this third study, tweets produced were captured on a daily basis using N Capture (a text-based tool for use with NVIVO), twittonomy (a program to create Excel files and provide analytic support) and an Acrobat tool for converting webpages to pdf (thus allowing for the capture of photos, video link postings and text). When conducting daily reviews of tweets produced by the

accounts being followed, I routinely selected propagandistic images that were clear examples of pro-jihadist political jams. These were screen shot and saved. Collected images were then subjected to image content analysis, the results of which inform this paper.

This project has coincided with several recent key events. Among these was attack in France on the offices of Charlie Hebdo. The attack itself generated a significant volume of both satirical cartoons and doctored photos, as did the Unity march that followed. Among other examples, the march prompted the following political jam (figure 1), which foregrounded world leaders, such as the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the French President Francois Holland, now shown marching with genocidal dictators such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin in an obvious attempt to show a certain parity in political outlook and action. Additional political figures photoshopped into the picture include former Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian leader currently engaged in a conflict with IS and other groups. This image needs to be read in light of a series of similar political jams in which world leaders (sans additional figures) are shown to be carrying a banner reading “Je suis hypocrite” – a remark on the fact that the march was in support of democratic values, such as freedom of speech, when several of the countries represented by marchers had been routinely violating those same values and/or violating the rights of their Muslim citizens.



Figure 1.

U.S. foreign policy is another frequent target of pro-jihadist satire. The meme subverted in the jam below (figure 2) is from President Barak Obama’s historic 2008 New Hampshire Primary speech in which he states that the slogan, ‘yes we can,’ embodies the spirit of the American people. In this reworking of this famous campaign piece of rhetoric, the spirit of the American people is represented as an imperialist force that kills children through drone strikes.



Figure 2.

Despite its earlier support of IS fighters against the Shia-backed government of Bashir al-Assad in Syria, Saudi Arabia's attempts at clamping down on IS activities within its own borders, coupled with its long-standing relationship with the U.S., make its leaders another target of pro-Jihadist political jams. In figure 3 below, titled 'Obama walking his dog', King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia is depicted as being, using the popular vernacular, Obama's 'bitch' in both literal and metaphorical senses of the word.



Figure 3.

Other jams take as their subject matter the fighting between U.S. and other forces against IS members and/or Western efforts against the war on terror more generally. Displays of American military might are denigrated through images that show vulnerability and/or weakness. In the example found below (figure 4), American personnel exhibiting a macho, military presence are linked to an image of dead military personnel being returned home in caskets, presumably after fighting IS members. It is worth noting that the captions that guide the viewer through the transition between one state (alive and tough) to another (dead) invoke typical teenage slang – a rhetorical strategy that, in this context, is intended to mimic the nonchalance of the cool teenager. ‘Death? Whatevvvvver.’



Figure 4.

While political leaders and public policies are the subject matter of a number of IS political jams, others are directed at 'kafirs', those individuals who are deemed to be non-believers and thus the enemy of IS and Muslims more generally. The following jam draws on an image of a police officer ('Officer Pepper Spray') who used capsicum spray in a notorious incident involving protestors at the University of California Davis. Picking up on the irony of police 'keeping the peace' by casually inflicting pain on peaceful citizens, the image became a meme used in a variety of political jams, including by pro-jihadists. The image below (figure 5), when placed within a stream of invective against kafirs, suggests that casual violence against non-believers is not only acceptable, but potentially comical to audience members.



Figure 5.

Countering the 'cool' message

Some have suggested that the way to counter pro-jihadist messages is to discredit their 'brand' in the eyes of potential converts by portraying their activities "as inglorious and shameful" (Venhaus 2010). I disagree. Part of the appeal of any counter-culture movement is the fact that actions undertaken by their members *are* frowned upon by the larger mainstream society. Another significant component of the allure of belonging to a counter-culture group of this nature is that adherents can see themselves as non-conformists, fashioning new identities that are 'cool' and 'dangerous.' Indeed, attempts at discrediting IS or AQ violence by Western governments simply draw cries of hypocrisy from pro-jihadist propagandists. Other proposed solutions have included creating alternate websites promoting peace by moderate Islamic factions and/or former extremists (Cohen 2009) and adopting zero tolerance measures such as removing, censoring or blocking pro-jihadist accounts and websites (Stevens and Neumann 2009; Bergin, Osman, Ungerer and Yasin 2009). However, moderates are routinely denigrated as 'coconuts'[3] – making them 'uncool' – and accounts deleted on mainstream websites reappear under another name within hours. Extremist content is simply moved to other sites or posted to mainstream social media.

So, what can be done? In an article for the public policy think tank, the Hoover Institute, Jessica Stern (2012) reflected on the fact that radicalizing agents online are "increasingly adept at making jihad cool" and raised the question of whether it might "be possible to reduce the appeal of terrorist fads, perhaps by helping youth understand that these groups are not actually as cool as they might look, from the outside?" The answer to this is an unqualified yes. Indeed, the accessibility of many of these online milieus not only permits new opportunities for developing important insights into the phenomenon of jihadi cool and its role in facilitating online radicalization, it also provides means by which propagandist messages can be countered in ways that will resonate with intended audiences. One of the potential tools in the counter-terrorism arsenal is political jamming, the same device used by pro-jihadist factions.

The root of the political jam is subversion for a satirical purpose. It is intended to mock – that is, to make a particular individual, group, belief, action and/or ideology a subject of scornful laughter, and thus influence views on the desirability of aligning one's self with the target. As I have noted earlier, political jams require from their creators knowledge of popular culture, a sense of humour reflective of the audience one is addressing, some basic creativity and access to the Internet.

The use of political jamming to counter terrorist propaganda is not a hypothetical scenario, as recent events demonstrate. On January 20th, 2015, IS released a YouTube video of two Japanese hostages, Kenji Goto Jogo and Haruna Yukawa. Although the kidnapping and video were purportedly made to demand a \$200 million ransom in retaliation for Japan's decision to financially support anti-IS efforts, the propaganda value of the video lie in its ability to strike fear in the Japanese public.

While many reacted with fear, within twelve hours Japanese Twitter users began responding in the form of political jams, using photoshopped images of the video to mock IS. This was followed by the creation of a hashtag – #ISISCrappyCollageGrandPrix – to encourage others to create their own anti-IS jams and thus continue using humour to subvert IS propaganda. The message of participating Japanese tweeters was simple: “You can kill some of us, but Japan is a peaceful and happy land, with fast Internet. So go to hell” (Twitter poster, 2015).

Many of the jams create by Japanese Twitter users drew on an image of the two men held hostage by a masked kidnapper. In the jam below (figure 6), this image is mocked by reworking the figure to be one of fun (a sushi eating contest) rather than fear (hostage-taking).



Figure 6.

The jam in figure 7, however, retains the menacing aspect, but reverses the figures so that it is now the Japanese hostages who threaten the IS hostage-taker. The knives, pointed forward towards the viewer,

adopt standard IS imagery in which knives pointed at an anonymous viewer indicate future threat ('we're coming for you'). The caption below the post reinforces the image of Japanese domination over the situation: "Japanese doesn't have feeling of strain."



OG LOW&SLOW @r18436572 · Jan 21

Japanese doesn't have feeling of strain. #ISISクソコラグランプリ

Figure 7.

In figure 8 below, the creator significantly alters the intent of the original video message by having the IS figure now posing with the hostages in support of a message of world peace: "we are the world." As IS ideology promotes a view of community as being constituted only of 'believers' (the 'ummah'), such a message, coupled with a show of brotherhood towards 'kafir' [4] in the form of clasped shoulders, would be entirely offensive to IS supporters. Thus, this jam works as a highly ironic statement.



Figure 8.

Other Japanese jams were directed at the purported identity of the hooded figure. One of the most well-known IS-related figures is an individual known as Jihadi John. Jihadi John's notoriety comes as a result of his association with kidnappings of Western targets and his appearance in videos in which IS prisoners are depicted as being beheaded.[5] In figure, the fearsome image of Jihadi John morphs into the figure of Mike Myers' comic villain, Dr. Evil.



Figure 9.

In another jam, Jihadi John's omnipresent beheading knife is shown more prosaically slicing chicken in a

kebab shop (figure 10).



Figure 10.

While many across the globe were confused, upset or offended by the political jams featuring the hostages, within the first 24 hours, others were laughing at IS and the recasting of its fear-mongering video. In defense of the rogue Tweeters' actions, one user posted, "If you don't understand why Japanese tweeters are mocking ISIS threat, then ISIS has control of you. #NoFear." Others noted of the strategy that it demonstrated "resilience v. terrorism" and, said another user, was thus "rather brilliant." Echoing the sentiments of many other Twitter users, one poster tweeted: "Japan is winning the Internet with #ISISクソコラグランプリ which means something like "ISIS Crappy Collage Grand Prix" #nofear #日本人." Even Anonymous, who themselves have been known to strike fear in some individuals and groups, tweeted their enjoyment of the online battle: "HAHA #ISIS, the Japanese are STILL mocking you RT." Sensing they were losing some of their 'coolness,' IS propagandists responded by issuing comments about the impending death of their hostages to little effect on many Japanese Twitter users. As one commented: "Tomorrow will be sad but it will pass and #ISIS will still be a big joke. You can't break our spirit."

Rethinking strategy on the 'rhetorical war front': Some concluding remarks

Despite the expertise and sophistication of political communications and the exploitation of satellite television, the Internet, DVD technology and cellular communications in the West, al-Qaeda is beating us at our own game ... They know how to forge, project and drive messages that strike a responsive chord (Farwell 2010: 145; underline mine).

Although Farwell is commenting on the failure of Western attempts to counter al-Qaeda propaganda efforts, his remarks are equally salient in discussions of countering pro-IS radicalizing discourse (see also Sorenson 2014). This paper has attempted to shed some insights into at least one rhetorical device employed by IS propagandists – their use of political jamming – which has been unexamined by terrorism scholars in the West and unmatched by Western online counter-terrorist strategies.



How to explain the failure noted by Farwell and others? Stevens and Neumann (2009: 11) suggest that policy-makers and counter-terrorism experts simply do not understand the Internet and thus the nature of the problem: “Though everyone uses the Internet, most members of the public – including many policymakers and politicians – have only the most cursory idea of how it works.” Generational and cultural gaps are a significant impediment that allow pro-IS propagandists, many of whom have grown up in the Internet age, to flourish in their work.

One key to understanding social discourse on the Internet is to understand young people frequently use social media as a site in which to develop a sense of themselves, as well as positive relationships to others, and that a fundamental aspect of this is the search for ‘coolness.’ Being ‘cool’ denotes a desirable insider status, someone to be admired or looked up to because of their unique qualities. Among earlier generations of youth, ‘cool’ was associated with counter-culture elements, its meaning “intrinsically anti-social, anti-family, pro-drug, anti-caring and most of all anti-authority” (Pountain and Robins 2000: 13). While modern consumer culture has co-opted some of that meaning to help product branding (Runyan, Noh and Mosier 2013), ‘cool’ not only still retains some of its counter-culture associations but more than ever demarcates the boundaries between insider and outsider status within social groups.

Satire – a key element of the political jams – also marks boundaries between social statuses. It marks a boundary between what is ‘cool’ and what is not. The purpose of satire is, after all, to use wit to attack an idea, group, individual or other target for the purpose of holding them up to public ridicule (Tang 2013). As was noted in a recent discussion of Chinese Internet satire, “Exposing others’ shortcomings and stupidity in a clever way and making them a laughing stock gratifies the audience’s sense of superiority,” at the same time that it might offer others an alternate perspective on a given issue (ibid.: 484). Japanese Twitter users demonstrated the fact that it becomes increasingly difficult to see something as ‘cool’ when it is the target of public laughter. Even the subsequent beheading of one of the Japanese hostages – a standard piece of terror theatre intended to gain control of an audience through fear – failed to staunch changing attitudes across social media. “Terrorism is meant to be belittled,” a poster tweeted from Manila, “#teamJapan”.

George Orwell (1968: 284) once observed that “every joke is a tiny revolution.” Within the context of countering online radicalization, the creative subversion of memes can provide excellent opportunities for sparking tiny counter-revolutions aimed at making jihad far less ‘cool’. Thus, I would encourage future terrorism research aimed at improving our understanding of this phenomenon, both in terms of its present use and its untapped potential as a counter-terrorism tool. In relation to the latter, we need a better understanding of how audiences receive these messages. We also need a more accurate picture of who – by age, gender, ethnicity, among other demographic factors – are most likely to employ political humour in this context. In relation to the latter, this paper is intended to serve as a preliminary step in what will hopefully be the construction of a larger, more detailed analysis political jamming and its use within terrorist propaganda.

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Notes

[1] Lyrics from the rap video Blow by Blow by U.S. foreign fighter, Abu Mansoor al-Amriki. See: <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/video/american-jihadi-sings-blow-blow-10676504>

[2] Initially, for the qualitative portion of this project, I tracked prolific pro-IS tweeters of both genders; however, this strategy was abandoned after several weeks when it became apparent that the volume generated by the male posters was simply too much to analyze given resource and time constraints.

[3] A term used to indicate that someone is seen as being 'brown' on the outside and 'white' on the inside.

[4] Unbelievers.

[5] There is some debate as to whether the actual beheadings take place off-camera and are then re-enacted for filming (CBS 2014).