Violent Jihadism in Real Time: Al-Shabaab's Use of Twitter

OVERVIEW

Since December 2011, the Somali jihadist group, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, had been actively using the popular micro-blogging platform Twitter to engage with English-speaking supporters. At the time of this brief's publication, the organization (@HSMPress) had more than 20,000 followers and had tweeted approximately 1,250 times, before its English-language account was suspended by Twitter Jan. 25, 2013.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project is part of a broader paper published by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), "Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy," and seeks to analyze the al-Shabaab's use of Twitter to better understand its messaging priorities. The findings show that the organization is most concerned with promoting its narrative, which states that Somalia is a front under siege in the war on Islam. The group also highlights its ability to carry out attacks and reject the bias of the Western media.

METHOD

This project has adapted the six categories of influence warfare developed by James Forest: **operational capacity** (instilling the idea within supporters that the organization comprises serious warriors who are able to carry out attacks); **competing voices** (promoting the idea that al-Shabaab's media arm is the only reliable source of information); **strategic authority** (messaging that demonstrates the organization is a 'competent vanguard' of the Islamist movement); **group integrity and cohesion** (ensuring that followers trust and respect al-Shabaab as a group promoting the interests of all Muslims); **relevance** (a pre-emptive response to the concern that one day an organization's supporters will no longer view it as effective or capable of achieving meaningful goals); and **religious authority** (promoting the idea that the organization is serving God's will and that its members are true holy warriors).

Those were combined with an additional category developed by the authors, **narrative** (the real threat is foreign invasion and foreign control of their government), to create a quantitative framework to analyze the Twitter output of the al-Shabaab Twitter account from December 2011 – April 2012. Each tweet from the account in this time period was coded into one of the seven analytical categories. Additional analysis outside of the quantitative study was carried out using Topsy Pro software, which aims to provide deep, comprehensive analyses of hundreds of billions of Tweets and web pages gathered from millions of unique websites, blogs and social media services.

INTERIM FINDINGS

The graph below illustrates al-Shabaab's primary aim on Twitter: to promote its own overarching narrative of events. This narrative places invading East African forces and the Transitional Federal Government, defined as Western proxies, as being at war with Muslims in Somalia. The group is also concerned with encouraging the perception of its ability to carry out operations (of varying types) against these foreign entities. Messaging also seeks to establish its media arm, al-Kataib, as the only reliable source of information.

@HSMPress Tweets Dec 2011 - April 2012
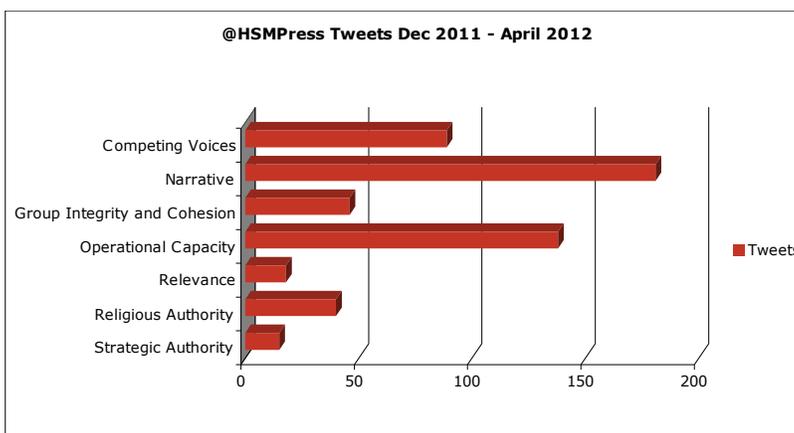
The remainder of its messaging is important in the establishment of what could broadly be called legitimacy – a stable group that is divinely sanctioned and has the support and expertise to succeed. The medium, Twitter, is important as well, as it offers a real-time form of communication that is effective in framing events that have recently occurred. Describing specific atrocities committed by the enemy, or touting one's operational successes, is easily done in real-time, allowing users to experience events as they happen. This gives Twitter an advantage over traditional media, which require an editorial process.

In this respect, al-Shabaab's Twitter messaging does not focus extensively on matters of strategy. Instead, it prefers to offer quick updates on operational capacity, possibly because such messages resonate with diaspora Muslims, who are not military strategists but who might be sympathetic with the group's overall aims. This presents tangible and simple information that is easily comprehended: an attack has taken place, and this was the outcome. This is what Twitter best lends itself to, and it allows the group to effectively communicate with its primary foreign audience: Members of the Somali diaspora and English-speaking Muslims.

Using Topsy's 'Gross Impressions' analysis, which counts the number of times tweets from the user have appeared in other user's timelines, it becomes possible to determine the size of al-Shabaab's audience over a given timeframe. Some examples of tweets that have reached a substantial audience include messaging about Hurricane Sandy (how it was a small fraction of the destruction that the U.S. deserves) and direct threats made against the United Kingdom (that the horrors of 7/7 and 7/21 will be eclipsed by what is looming on Britain's shores). Recently, there were more than 300,000 gross impressions made by @HSMPress from Jan. 13 to 15. This traffic was generated from a series of tweets showing the remains of a recently killed French commando. Al-Shabaab's most retweeted photo had the caption, "François Hollande, was it worth it?" Additionally, the group's cumulative exposure has grown over the past year (how many times tweets from the organization have appeared on user timelines) and was almost 4.5 million before its account was suspended.

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There are several factors to consider here. First, not every Twitter user sees every tweet that appears on their timeline. If they are not on the platform then the tweet will eventually be replaced by other tweets from the users that they follow. Second, many of the organization's followers are Western academics, journalists and other interested parties who are not supporters of the group. It is impossible to determine how many of the organization's followers are legitimate supporters and how many are following the group for other purposes. Information about followers can only be gleaned from the profile information they choose to make public and the context of their responses or comments to al-Shabaab messaging. This is to say that researchers, journalists and practitioners should be aware of al-Shabaab's reach on the platform but avoid sensationalizing these figures.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As al-Shabaab struggles to operate in a weakened status, future research should seek to further understand how its Twitter-based messaging (and messaging overall) begins to change, should the account be reinstated. In addition to examining this broader trend, research on how the group develops messaging surrounding specific organizational crises or relevant world events are central in understanding what the group wants its supporters to know and think.

RESEARCHERS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Project Lead: James Sheehan
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The full ICSR report, "Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab's Western Media Strategy," can be found online at:
http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ICSR-Lights-Camera-Jihad-Report_Nov2012_ForWeb-2.pdf.

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