

## **SOCIAL MEDIA—A REAL SOURCE OF PROLIFERATION OF INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM**

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*ABSTRACT: Although in 2011 there were registered the fewest terrorist attacks since 2007, the groups involved in such acts significantly expanded geographically, this being due to the use of modern technologies and, implicitly, the use of social networks. Thus, the terrorist organizations have developed quickly by using at larger scale new methods of communication and information, these giving them the ability to communicate over long distances and in a safe way. In this context, this paper had as the main objective the analysis of the role and the implications of social media in the proliferation of terrorism. The results of the study showed an increased presence of extremist groups in the virtual world of the Internet, 9 of 10 cases of organized terrorism on the Internet being based on social media.*

*Keywords: social media, international terrorism*

*JEL Codes: L82, O33, K14, K42*

### **Introduction**

The informational aggression could take the form of an action for which the information is the weapon and the targets are the social processors of information, respectively the people, the organizations or the human communities that create an account or a page on social networks. The main purpose is to control, to disrupt or to assimilate the social processors of information. In this respect, the terrorist groups use the social networks (Facebook, Qzone, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ etc.) in order to provide through them the information necessary and sufficient to achieve their objectives, such as promoting their ideology and recruiting new aspirants. Thus, in the present, there could be talked about a phenomenon of globalization of the risks and security threats, social media becoming an essential provider of information for terrorist groups.

Therefore, in this paper was developed a study on the role and implications of using social networks in the proliferation of international terrorism, also being highlighted the main components of the specific profile of terrorists.

### **Internet and social media**

The origin of the Internet lies in the U.S. armed forces. In 1969, the Internet has emerged as an internal network of the Ministry of Defense of the United States, which was resistant to crises and of maximum safety. ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency) offered the possibility of unifying various military and research institutes, being initially used as a research project and aiming the construction of a stable and robust computer network to ensure the communication even after a disaster of nuclear attack.

The Internet has become the most notorious case of technology transfer from military to the civilian sector. The developed countries are increasingly requesting the use of information

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technology, but the vulnerability of the Internet allows the cyberterrorist attacks to cause as many disasters as more other familiar forms of terrorism.

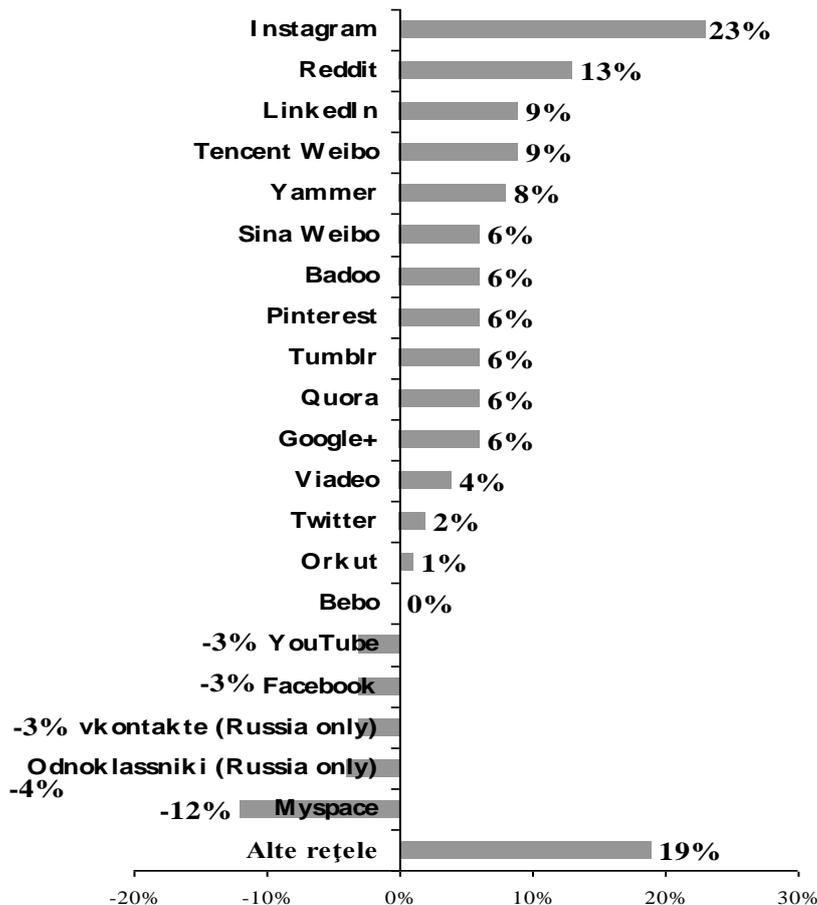
The cyberterrorists intend to cause panic and to influence the public opinion using significantly limited financial and human resources.

Attacks launched in cyberspace involve the use of various methods of exploiting the weaknesses of the computers security, cyber viruses, stolen passwords, secret entry software that allow to the intruders to penetrate the systems without being detected. The attacks could involve the theft of secret files, the altering of web pages content, the sabotage of operations, the erasure or the threatening of disclosure of confidential information for money or concessions (Romanoschi, 2007).

In the last decade, the Internet has known an impressive evolution, having a major impact on all aspects of life and making possible *an instant, decentralized and global communication* (Seitan O et al, 2010). Therefore, social media has become an important and unlimited resource through which people can connect with each other and obtain the needed information, the social networks ensuring a flow of information in real time and attracting an increasingly number of users.

From MySpace and Google+ the social networking platforms have changed over time, following the trends and the new developments.

According to data provided by Global Web Index, the first 5 places in the top, based on the number of accounts created and the number of active users, are occupied by Facebook, YouTube, Google+, Twitter and LinkedIn. However, compared to the second quarter of 2013 in the last three months of 2013, Facebook and YouTube have registered a decrease of 3% of the number of active users (Figure 1).



**Figure no. 1 - The evolution of the number of active users of social platforms in Q4 2013 compared to Q2 2013**

Source: Chaffey, 2014

The most popular social network remains Facebook, with more than 1 billion active users worldwide. It is the most visited site, available in 70 languages and with more than 500 million likes per day and an average of 12.1 minutes per visit. Facebook offers a variety of free services and allows users to connect with friends, update their status, share pictures, videos and links and also use the chat provided by this website. Through "News Feed" users get information from friends to whom they are connected and from the pages they gave "like". The second most popular social media site is Twitter, a microblogging platform with over 500 million registered users and an average of 36 minutes per visit. Twitter requires users to answer the question "What's happening?" which generates over 340 million tweets per day. Users can use the "News Feed" application, they can register themselves and also publish information that is not necessarily verified or approved.

According to Gabriel Weimann, a professor at Haifa University in Israel, who has studied the use of the Internet by terrorist organizations in the past 10 years, *approximately 90% of organized terrorism on the Internet is performed today through social media* (Mielach, 2012). Using these social networks, the terrorist organizations recruit new active aspirants, take initiative and send friend requests, upload videos and give likes. The terrorist organizations use social media also for getting information about the enemies. For example, the terrorist group Hezbollah searches for information about the Israeli army by monitoring the soldiers' activities on social networks. As a cautionary measure, the soldiers of the United States, Canada and Great Britain were trained to erase their personal data from the social networking sites. Social media also allows the rapid exchange of information between the members of the terrorist groups regarding the explosives, the targets etc

Another effective means of communication used by the members of terrorist organizations is the forums. Most of these forums have fully or partially restricted access, to become a member being necessary a proof of faith and loyalty to the group or a recommendation from those who are already members. They are advised to use decryption software for the direct communication (Europol, 2012).

The social networks have taken measures against the terrorist and extremist groups, defining usage rules that prohibit the use of their services to promote the terrorist activities. For example, Twitter prohibits the publishing of direct threats of violence against others and the use of its services for any illegal purposes or in order to support illegal activities (Twitter, 2014). In the case of violation of these terms, Twitter reserves the right, although it hasn't this obligation, to remove or refuse to distribute the offensive content or to stop providing the service. However, even if the terms and conditions of the use of Twitter are well defined, there are difficulties in implementing these measures due to the impossibility of monitoring in real time the large volume of information generated by users (UNODC, 2012).

### **Social media and terrorism**

In the specialty literature there are many definitions of terrorism, the difference between them being given by the role and the responsibilities of the issuing organization.

Thus, the U.S. Department of Defense defines terrorism as *the calculated use of unlawful violence or the threat of its use, to induce the sense of fear with the intent of forcing or intimidating governments in order to achieve their goals that are generally of political, religious or ideological nature* (FM 100-20, 1990).

The UNO presents terrorism as *a state of anxiety inspiring repeated violent actions, engaged by state actors, by groups or individuals acting clandestinely, for very different reasons, criminal or political and in which, in full contrast with assassinations, the direct target of the violence are not the main target* (The International Encyclopedia of Terrorism, 1998).

Another definition is given by the Law on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism (Law no. 535/2004). According to this legislative text, terrorism is *the set of actions and/or threats that present public danger and affect national security, having the following characteristics:*

- a) *their aim is to achieve specific goals, of political nature;*
- b) *they are deliberately committed by terrorist entities motivated by extremist beliefs and attitudes, hostile to other entities, against which they act in violent and/or destructive ways;*
- c) *they target human and/or material factors within the public authorities and institutions, the civilian population, or of any other segment belonging to them;*
- d) *they produce states with a strong psychological impact on the population, meant to draw attention to the aims pursued.*

According to statistics of Worldwide Incidents Tracking Systems (National Counterterrorism Center, 2012), over 10,000 terrorist attacks occurred in 2011, resulting in 45,000 victims and 12,500 deaths in 70 countries. The total number of the attacks recorded worldwide in 2011 registered a decrease of 12% in comparison with 2010 and a decrease of approximately 29% compared to 2007 (Table 1).

Table no. 1

**The evolution of terrorism worldwide in the period 2007-2011**

Indicators	Years				
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Attacks worldwide	14,415	11,663	10,968	11,641	10,283
Attacks resulting in at least 1 death, injury, or kidnapping	11,085	8,361	7,874	8,259	7,453
Attacks resulting in the death of at least 10 individuals	353	234	236	193	193
Attacks resulting in the death of at least 1 individual	7,229	5,040	4,761	4,704	4,502
Attacks resulting in the death of only 1 individual	3,982	2,870	2,695	2,691	2,550
Attacks resulting in the death of 0 individuals	7,186	6,623	6,207	6,937	5,781
Attacks resulting in the injury of at least 1 individual	6,231	4,831	4,530	4,724	4,333
Attacks resulting in the kidnapping of at least 1 individual	1,156	948	882	1,118	795
People killed, injured or kidnapped as a result of terrorism, worldwide	71,803	54,290	58,720	49,928	43,990
People killed as a result of terrorism, worldwide	22,720	15,709	15,311	13,193	12,533
People injured as a result of terrorism, worldwide	44,103	33,901	32,660	30,684	25,903
People kidnapped as a result of terrorism, worldwide	4,980	4,680	10,749	6,051	5,554

\* *The attacks refer to those against noncombatant targets. The values for 2007-2010 have been updated since their publication in 2010 and include data recorded in the Worldwide Incidents Tracking Systems, [www.nctc.gov](http://www.nctc.gov).*

In 2011, the most terrorist attacks were registered in the Middle East and South Asia, they representing 75% of all terrorist attacks. In addition, in the past five years, the African and Western Hemisphere have registered an increase of the number of attacks, highlighting the constant evolution of the terrorist threat.

In the Middle East and South Asia there were 7,721 terrorist attacks and 9,236 deaths, most of them taking place in three countries – Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan and representing 85% of all the attacks that took place in these regions and about 64% of the attacks registered worldwide. While the attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq have decreased by 14% and 16% in comparison with 2010, in Pakistan there was an increase of 8%.

The attacks in Europe and Eurasia registered a decreasing of 20%, from 703 in 2010 to 561 in 2011. The largest decrease was recorded in Russia, where the terrorist attacks have dropped from 396 in 2010 to 238 in 2011. Instead, in Turkey there has been an increase of the terrorist attacks,

respectively from 40 in 2010 to 91 in 2011. Russia and Turkey have recorded almost 70% of all terrorist attacks resulted in deaths in 2011 in Europe and Eurasia.

Africa recorded 978 attacks in 2011, an increase of 11.5 % over 2010. This was due, in large part, to the aggressive attacks of the terrorist group Boko Haram from Nigeria, which conducted 136 attacks in 2011 and 31 attacks in 2010.

The number of terrorist attacks in East Asia and the Pacific declined for the fifth consecutive year by 25% compared to 2010, from 724 in 2010 to 543 in 2011. Thailand and the Philippines continued to be the main targets of terrorist groups in this region.

Terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere have increased by almost 40%, from 343 in 2010 to 480 in 2011, most of them being conducted by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

In 2012 the number of the terrorist attacks was 6,771 resulted in 11,000 deaths and 21,600 wounded persons (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2013). Also, over 1,280 people were kidnapped or taken hostage (Table 2).

Table no. 2

**The number of the terrorist attacks and casualties worldwide (2012)**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Values</b>
Attacks worldwide	6,771
People killed as a result of terrorism, worldwide	11,098
People injured as a result of terrorism, worldwide	21,652
People kidnapped as a result of terrorism, worldwide	1,283

On average, per month, there were 564.25 attacks, 924.83 deaths, respectively 1804.33 injured persons. The highest number of deaths was recorded in January 2012, this being mainly due to the terrorist violence in Iraq (425 deaths) and Nigeria (348 deaths).

Although in 2012 the terrorist attacks have occurred in more than 85 countries, most of them were concentrated in Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan.

**The terrorist profile versus the profile of social media user**

For a proper understanding of the methods of supporting the terrorist ideology through social media is necessary to know the characteristics of terrorists and users of social media. There is neither a well defined personality profile of the terrorist and the user of social media nor the possibility of drawing up a specific test that could guarantee its identification. Based on studies conducted by Teodor Frunzeti (Frunzeti, 2006), Pingdom (Pingdom, 2012) and Neil Patel (Patel, 2012), there was realized a comparative analysis of the two categories:

**a. Age.** In general, the terrorists are young. The leaders, those from the support group and the instructors are aged between 40 and 50 years, and the active members between 20 and 35 years. Individuals under age 20 are enrolled usually as soldiers in guerrilla groups, but the terrorist organizations don't accept among them too young individuals, even if they are used as non-operational supporters. The groups running suicide attacks engage in such activities young people who are not actually members of these groups, but rather, they are exploited or forced to do so.

On average, more than half of social media users are aged between 22 and 44 years . A percentage of 55% of Twitter users, 65% of Facebook users and 79% of LinkedIn users are over 35 years old. By comparison with the results recorded 2 ½ years ago, the number of the young Twitter users increased and the segment of those who use Facebook are older.

**b. Gender.** The terrorists are not exclusively men. Women in the Islamist groups are used most often in the group of support or in the intelligence domain, but some of the fundamentalist organizations use them as operational members. In those groups in which religion does not restrict the role of women, their number could exceed half of the total number of members and

the assumption by them of the role of leaders is not unusual, the women being not at all inferior to men, at least in terms of violence.

On social media networks most of the users are female, namely 51.25%, compared to the percentage of men (48.75%). Facebook and Twitter users are 60% women and 40% men.

*c. Education.* In general, the level of training of terrorists is above average and very few of those in the West are below average or illiterate. The leftist terrorists, the international terrorists and the leadership echelon of the right-wing groupings are usually of average or relatively high education. In fact, the terrorist groups recruit an increasingly number of members trained in communications, computing, engineering and financial sectors (Hudson, 1999). There are very important the backgrounds, thus in the societies where the religious fundamentalism prevails, the higher level training is usually the religious one and the right-wing terrorists come from the lower social and educational strata.

Most users of social media graduated at least a high school. A percentage of 60% of Facebook users and Twitter have completed high school, 17% of those who have a Twitter account and 13% of the Facebook users have a university diploma.

*d. Social status.* Contrary to all the allegations that terrorism is a product of poverty and despair, the terrorists belong most often to middle class and, lately, even to the category of the very rich and privileged ones. Recent statistics show that, at least in terms of Islamist terrorists, 75% come from the middle class and 90% of two parent families. The leaders of the organizations may resort to the use of less educated individuals to execute terrorist attacks. However, this feature should be considered according to the society from which they come. The terms “middle class” and “privileged” are relative and could mean totally different levels of income between West Africa and Western Europe (Sageman, 2004).

The users of social networks belong to the middle class, as it follows:

- 32% of Facebook users have an annual average income of \$25,000 – 49,000;
- 15% of Facebook users have an annual average income under \$25,000 year.
- 12% of Facebook users have an annual average income of \$50,000 – 75,000;
- 40% of Twitter users have an annual average income of \$25,000 – 49,000;
- 10% of Twitter users have an annual average income of \$50,000 – 75,000;
- 10% of Twitter users have an annual average income under \$25,000.

Studies show that the profiles of the two groups are not significantly different. This explains the use by the terrorist and extremist groups the social networks to attract new recruits. Consequently, the fight against terrorism has become an issue of utmost importance for the targeted countries, involving two types of actions: antiterrorism (defensive measures) and counterterrorism (offensive measures). If the antiterrorism is a set of defensive measures to reduce the vulnerability of individuals and property to terrorist attacks, with a minimal involvement of local military forces, the counterterrorism consist in offensive measures taken to prevent and to stop the terrorism (SRI, 1999).

### **Conclusions**

The terrorist and extremist groups have become increasingly more present in the virtual world of the Internet, about 90% of organized terrorism on the Internet being based on social media. Although social networks have taken measures against terrorist and extremist groups, defining usage rules and prohibiting the use of their services to promote terrorist activities, in practice there are many difficulties in their efforts to implement these measures, due to the impossibility of monitoring in real time a large volume of information generated by users.

In consequence, this paper was intended to be a source of information regarding the main risks of social media in terms of the proliferation of terrorism. It could also be a reference point in the deepening the central theme of this study and in the process of designing the most viable measures against the terrorist actions. Thus, in combating the terrorism in social media the

strategies must target mainly the prevention of creating online groups/communities and the restriction of distributing information by terrorist groups in order to increase the safety and the security of online environment. The meaning and the significance of the concept of safety and national security get a new content in the context of social media, more complex and dynamic, and anchored in the globalization process. Thus, it is necessary that in the field of combating terrorism in social media to be taken the following measures:

- the promotion of a comprehensive legislation on social media;
- the simplification of the procedure regarding the removal/restriction of the social media accounts of the terrorist groups;
- the promotion of the programs designed to control the information generated by social media users;
- the development of effective systems for the supervision of all registered users on social networks;
- the promotion of joint programs created for to secure the social media;
- the intensification of international cooperation; international cooperation represent an effective way to fight terrorism by providing information absolutely necessary to ensuring the security and to promoting the fundamental interests of the state and through the major contribution to the identification of the security space.

The countering of terrorism in social media requires fundamental reassessment at the political and strategical level and also at the level of fighting against terrorism, taking in consideration the development of social networks, which should not be neglected.

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