

# Digital natives and online identity construction

## How does the internet facilitate radicalization?

by Linda Schlegel



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### ABSTRACT

Online radicalization has become an increasing problem with the spread of modern communication technologies. The article examines how a radical identity is constructed by digital natives in the online sphere, utilizing Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* development. Three interrelated factors derived from the *habitus* theory facilitate our understanding of online radicalization mechanisms: (1) familiarity, which leads to (2) increased trust, which in turn makes a (3) collective identity construction based on a virtual community more likely. Digital natives share a part of their habitus as they were brought up using modern communication technologies. This leads to increased familiarity and trust in other digital natives which they engage with online and makes radicalization more likely if these other digital natives display extremist ideologies. The implication for counter-terrorism measures is the need for an empowerment of digital natives prone to radicalization in counter-messaging since they too share part of the necessary *habitus*.

### KEYWORDS

Online radicalization, identity, digital natives, habitus

**During the last decade** we have seen the rapid development and spread of information technology and social media. Facebook alone counts about 1.5 billion active users, which is almost 20 percent of the world population (Aly et al. 2017: 2), and in the West, it is estimated that about 90% have access to the internet through various devices (Sageman 2008: 110). In addition to transforming broader social processes, these technological advances have impacted the behavior and organization of various groups including those with radical or violent ideologies. Various studies have sought to explain how radical groups organize online and exploit the opportunities of the virtual sphere (Morris 2016; Huey 2016; Wadhwa/Bhatia 2015; Musawi 2010; Brandon 2008; Kimmage 2008).

The aim of this essay is to contribute to the current debate on online radicalization. The focus is placed on cognitive rather than behavioral or violent radicalization (Neumann 2012: 13) as the process of adopting extremist ideas is contested (compare for example Sageman 2004, 2008; Moghaddam 2005) and the advance from belief to action is likely to follow a different dynamic than the process of acquiring the belief itself. Radical Islamism is employed as a case study as it arguably presents the biggest terrorist threat to Western nations (Bartlett/Birdwell/King 2010). This focus, however, is not to suggest that other groups are not impacted by the technological change (Wilkinson 2016; Bartlett/Litter 2011). Specifically, so-called homegrown jihadists, who have grown up or lived in the West for a prolonged period of time, are examined.

Utilizing Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1994) and Prensky's theory of digital natives (Prensky 2001a, 2001b), it is argued that due to the similarity in their socialization processes, digital natives are more likely to construct their identity based on a virtual community and are at greater risk to radicalize online. The focus is placed on bottom-up rather than top-down radicalization. This is justified because the best top-down propaganda strategy will be ineffective if it does not resonate with those targeted. In other words, radicalization is a highly individualized process and it is therefore reasonable to examine one part of bottom-up radicalization processes, namely identity construction. It is important to note that this essay is a theoretical investigation of internet radicalization. While examples from radical Islamist websites will be used to illustrate certain points, the underlying premise of the argument, namely that using digital technology alters the *habitus* construction, is theoretical in nature and requires further empirical testing beyond the scope of this work. The essay proceeds in three parts. Firstly, the reader is introduced to the theoretical background. Secondly, the implications of these theories for online radicalization are examined. Lastly, possible limitations and cautions are briefly addressed.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Terrorism studies in general suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity, including how terrorism can be defined (Hoffmann 2006; Schmid/Jongman 2005; Weinberg/Pedahzur/Hirsch-Hoefler 2004). Conceptualizing and researching the processes of radicalization are equally

difficult tasks, because radicalization is a relative term and the meaning changes over time and context. Boundaries of what is considered radical are fluid. Nevertheless, scholars of various disciplines have attempted to enhance our understanding of radicalization (Venhaus 2010; Moghaddam 2005; Wiktorowicz 2005; Sageman 2004), including the role of identity (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010) and online radicalization (Neumann 2012; McNicol 2016). This article adopts the definition of the U.S. Department of Justice (2014) of cognitive online radicalization as a

“process by which an individual is introduced to an ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily through the use of online media, including social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube” (U.S. Department of Justice 2014).

It needs to be noted that, for the purpose of this work, cognitive radicalization is analyzed in isolation from behavioral radicalization, although the two can overlap in reality. Also, those who engage in exchanging radical ideas online and adopt certain ideologies to construct part of their identity, are treated as members of the terrorist ideological network regardless of their actions in the real world.

De-radicalization describes processes by which an individual comes to abandon an extremist ideology, whereas counter-radicalization describes measures to prevent individuals from radicalizing in the first place. Both may be part of general counter-terrorism measures, which may be described as a holistic set of actions aimed to prevent radicalization, encourage de-radicalization, pursue active terrorists and protect both civilians and property from attacks. More in-depth analyses have been conducted into each of these components (Foley 2013; Omand 2010), but for the present work, it is most important to consider processes of radicalization in the online realm and the corresponding counter-terrorism measures, including counter-radicalization. Identity refers to how one perceives oneself in relation to others, and it is reasonable to assume that because the process of radicalization involves identification with a group, the individual identity is also altered in this process. This essay is mainly concerned with how the internet facilitates radical virtual communities of belonging, which the author defines as a *network of people with common ideology, who are connected and interact through social media*.

Prensky (2001a) coined the term digital native – defined as a person using modern communication technologies

(MCT) their entire life – when he was theorizing about perceived differences between school children today and previous generations. For him, a “big discontinuity” (Prensky 2001a: 3) has taken place with the dissemination of digital technology as students’ learning and information processing is altered by their experiences with MCT from an early age on (Prensky 2001a). Prensky goes as far as saying that being used to receive information fast and engaging in virtual environments possibly changed the brain structures of digital natives and calls this a “new generation with a very different blend of cognitive skills than its predecessors [...] As a result of their experiences, digital natives crave interactivity” (Prensky 2001b: 5). While the implications he brings forward are contested (Veinberg 2015; Thornham/McFarlane 2011; Bennett/Maton 2010; Bennett/Maton/Kervin 2008), the importance of conceptualizing this particular cohort of individuals as digital natives is not. If we accept the existence of digital natives, it is reasonable to argue that their cognitive differences affect how they relate to each other online.

Bourdieu (1994) was also concerned with how early experiences shape who we are. Humans are socialized in certain surroundings, or *milieus*, and thereby acquire a shared set of behaviors, values and communication patterns with those socialized in similar circumstances. This set of shared social practices is called *habitus*. Individuals who share a *habitus* are able to relate to each other more intuitively due to displaying similar social practices. Those who were socialized in very different circumstances cannot relate to each other as easily. Bourdieu re-frames Mead’s dialectical relationship between the self and society (Hunt/Benford 2004: 435) by stating that “the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structures of the *habitus*, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences [...]. The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices” (Bourdieu 1994: 279, emphasis added). The *habitus* is a lens through which we interpret the world, it is structured and structuring at the same time and shapes our understanding of everything. While for Bourdieu, the *habitus* is mainly based on class, one may argue that because MCTs are widely available, the limitations of availability due to class have been eroded. In other words, digital natives share *part of their habitus* due to being socialized similarly by using MCT. To speak with Goffman (1956), this means that all digital natives know the script of online interaction and are able to act out their role in the virtual world correctly, because the internet is a familiar stage to them. The case becomes even stronger when one acknowledges that Islam as a cultural feature is also part of the *habitus* and shapes rules of interaction on the stage. As Maher writes:

“Islam is still the basic criterion of group identity and loyalty. It is Islam that distinguishes between self and other, between in and out, between brother and stranger (...) there is a recurring tendency in times of emergency for Muslims to find their basic identity and loyalty in the religious community – that is to say in an entity defined by Islam rather than by ethnic or territorial criteria” (Maher 2016: 114).

Muslim digital natives share not only one part of their *habitus* but two social dispositions of Islam and digital socialization, and therefore they can relate to each other intuitively in the online realm. A shared *habitus* helps to make the Muslim identity salient and therefore increases the mobilizing force of a narrative based on the membership of this particular group. This is important for radicalization, because as Atran writes: “people don’t simply kill and die for a cause, they kill and die for each other” (Atran 2010: ix). In other words, radicalization can be sparked not by the desire to fight for a political cause, but for the identity-giving group one belongs to and shares a *habitus* with.

This line of argumentation has implications for how we understand the process of online radicalization. In the following, three interrelated factors of how digital natives may form communities of belonging and thereby come to radicalize are examined, namely 1) familiarity, 2) trust and the resulting 3) identity construction.

#### TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF DIGITAL NATIVES’ RADICALIZATION

1) Familiarity can be seen in three distinct ways: familiarity of space for the interaction, familiarity of ways of interaction and familiarity of content. Firstly, it is easier for digital natives to navigate the virtual world as it constitutes familiar territory for them. They grew up using it and it has become part of their *habitus*. Secondly, and more importantly, there is the familiarity of interactions with other digital natives online. Due to their shared *habitus*, they are able to intuitively play by the same social rules and therefore communicate with each other in a way digital immigrants (Prensky 2001a; 2001b) cannot. Because shared social dispositions develop through a shared *habitus*, this form of interaction cannot be learned by those who are not digital natives. For instance, a common use of language, made possible by a shared *habitus*, produces feelings of familiarity among digital natives. Bourdieu said the shared *habitus* guarantees the “correctness of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (Bourdieu 1994: 279). This is the reason why someone with a different *habitus* can never reach the same level of intuitiveness in communication. It is not

only about learning the rules of interaction, it is more than what can be formalized in explicit norms – a feeling for the interaction.

Thirdly, there is familiarity of content. Coming from a similar background means that it is more likely that larger parts of the *habitus* are shared. For instance, the German Salafist preacher Pierre Vogel communicates with his audience in German and makes references to local, German issues. Speaking the same language, coming from the same country and making credible claims about local conditions leads to greater identification of German internet users because Vogel shares a larger part of their *habitus* than, for instance, a preacher from Yemen would. In addition, an increasing number of interactions involve reference to Western popular culture, which at hindsight may seem of minor concern to preaching jihad. Sheikh Abdullah Faisal dedicated space to argue against the Disney story Snow White stating:

“this story was to preach white supremacy (...) to promote female promiscuity, that ‘look this woman, she has seven midgits underneath her charm’. [Women are] classically conditioned by this story towards white supremacy and to practice female promiscuity” (Brandon 2008: 7).

While probably not a digital native himself, Faisal sparks discussion between digital natives in the West on a topic they are likely to have real-life experience with: popular movies. The internet provides space for interactions on seemingly less important issues such as Disney movies, which creates greater familiarity of the content of the interaction and therefore increases the chances of identifying with the claims.

For any internet user, “the forums turned into virtual town squares, where people met, bonded and talked to each other” (Neuman 2012: 16), but for digital natives, this has a different connotation of familiarity and identification than for digital immigrants (Prensky 2001a). A familiar environment and familiar, relatable content, which is framed in familiar terms like only those sharing a *habitus* are able to do, constitutes an environment in which individuals may be more susceptible to radical ideologies. It is easier to identify with the claims of someone sharing one’s social dispositions than with someone with a very different *habitus*. While not necessarily constituting a reason for radicalization, it may be argued that this environment creates a cognitive opening (Wiktorowicz 2005: 85) in digital natives to the content brought to them by their peers. If this happens to be radical content, then the chances of radicalization may be increased.

2) Due to this familiarity, there is an increased trust of digital natives in their peers online. Younger generations tend to report positive feelings when engaging in online interaction (Page/DK/Mapstone 2010) and generally display more trust online than older generations (Durante 2011). Sageman writes that “online feelings are stronger in almost every measurement than offline feelings” (Sageman 2008: 114). There are two strains of argumentation in relation to trust: unlimited access and the echo chamber (Winter 2016: 7) increase normalization of the ideological claims and therefore possibly generate trust in the message. Furthermore, sharing a *habitus* leads to more trust due to familiarity in interaction, which impacts beliefs.

The internet allows potential supporters of extremist ideologies to access and navigate the content at their own pace. If they choose so, they can re-read anything as many times as they want and at any time during the day. It is not necessary to attend sermons of radical preachers or study groups, which only take place at specific times. Online, a large amount of content can be stored and accessed whenever one chooses to do so. This is an advantage for radicalization, because potential recruits do not rely on physical events and contact. They can facilitate their own radicalization through a normalization of violent content by constant repetition. In other words, virtual ideological networks overcome the physical constraints of space and time. The internet allows constant repetition, and therefore normalization, of ideology. In the virtual world, jihadist ideology is available for consumption 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and not restricted to specific time frames as previously, which enables engagement with radical sources unrestrictedly.

Normalization is especially facilitated by the online echo chambers (Winter 2016: 7) or virtual bubbles (Musawi 2010: 18) created by ideological groups. In general, our online activity on social media platforms creates biases. Facebook, for instance, only shows us the content of our friends and pages we ‘liked’. We are not exposed to any other content or any other opinion than those we choose to be exposed to, which creates an echo chamber of enforcing existing biases through constant demonstration that our social network thinks in unison with us. While it is correct that this does not explain why someone chooses to ‘like’ or access these pages in the first place, it explains how, once in this circle, one is constantly exposed to radical ideology, which can lead to an identification with the claims constantly repeated. Normalization through repetition (Neumann 2012: 17) or, as some scholars argue, a frame alignment<sup>1</sup> (Benford/Snow 2000:

624) takes place, which leads to a higher likelihood of accepting the repeated claims for one’s own system of belief.

A shared *habitus* means familiarity in interactions, but it can also increase the trust between those sharing these similar social dispositions. We are generally more inclined to favor those who are similar to ourselves (Ben-Ner/Kramer 2006) in appearance, education or taste. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a shared *habitus*, which by default creates some similarities between members of the same socialization group, also increases levels of trust to a group similar to oneself. One could argue that this combination of almost natural trust born out of familiarity and positive feelings of online interaction causes a cognitive opening (Wiktorowicz 2005: 85) in digital natives, who are then more susceptible to the ideas brought forward in this environment. This is important for radicalization not only because it increases trust in the messenger and in the message verbalized in familiar terms. In addition, in a network of people similar to us and which we trust, certain attributes can spread simply because members belong to the same social network. For instance, obesity has shown to be correlated to friendship networks. Even if our friends live far away from us, we are more likely to become obese when they become obese too (Atran 2010). Atran writes that that the difference between terrorists and ordinary people lies not in “individual pathologies, personality, education, income (...) but in small group dynamics where the relevant trait just happens to be jihad rather than, say, obesity” (Atran 2010: 223). In other words, social networks facilitate the spread of certain traits in a friend group. Because digital natives intuitively relate to each other online and form emotional bonds of trust, one may argue that this also facilitates the spread of ideas within that virtual network.

Digital natives debating radical ideologies online may not replace physical interaction, but one may argue that the virtual ideological networks, bound together by familiarity and trust, have consequences for susceptibility to radical ideas. Because of the echo chamber (Winter 2016: 7) attribute of the online world, messages are validated by others in the network, which may lead to radicalization when the messages are about jihad rather than any other topic. Sageman’s characterization of small, self-organizing terrorist cells as a ‘bunch of guys’ (Sageman 2004: 108), it could be argued, is replicated online by digital natives replacing the familiarity of friends with a familiarity due to a shared *habitus* and the echo chamber replacing the group dynamics of radica-

1 Frame alignment refers to aligning one’s world view with the narrative of a particular group. It includes adopting the group’s ideology and rhetoric as one’s own after accepting it as the truth.

lizing each other due to the normalization of the messages. In other words, familiarity in communication plus trust in the messenger coupled with the echo chamber and the spread of ideas in friend networks increases the chances of online radicalization in digital natives.

3) All of this creates the basis for a higher likelihood of digital natives to construct their feeling of belonging based on a virtual group. Identity construction in the virtual world has been explored in other circumstances (Kavakci/Kraeplin 2016; Pinto et al. 2015; Ruelle/Peverelli 2016; Cook/Hasmath 2014) and it is reasonable to assume that a process of identity adaption is also part of the online radicalization process as the individual undergoes an alteration of existing beliefs. Due to their shared *habitus*, digital natives are able to relate to each other in an intuitive manner by using similar communication behavior. Despite its global nature and diversity of members, ISIS and other radical Islamist groups are able to invoke identity construction based on a virtual imagined community (Anderson 1991: 41) of Muslims around the globe due to their similarities in *habitus*. For instance, utilizing foreign fighters to report back to the virtual community is a very effective propaganda tool (Berger/Morgan 2015). Many of the foreign fighters engaging in online interaction with possible recruits are from the UK, France or Germany (BBC 2014) and ISIS uses already recruited Western women to promote the caliphate to other women in the West (Peresin/Cervone 2015). These are young Westerners and therefore probably digital natives, who can approach other digital natives like nobody else can by building on their similar socialization and *habitus*. In other words, not only the message itself, but also the delivery of the message is crucial. The internet enables radicalization of digital natives, partially because it provides the space for interactions between digital natives already radicalized and those, who could be radicalized.

This effective messaging, however, is not the only factor to consider in virtual identity building. Digital natives cannot radicalize each other simply by passively passing on propaganda to their peers. The internet enables digital natives to engage not only in frame alignment (Wiktorowicz 2005: 130), but frame construction or development<sup>2</sup> (Benford/Snow 2000: 623). More access and more equality in voicing one's thoughts online flattens the hierarchy of frame constructions and now more members can take an active part in it.

The internet enables digital natives to digitalize the framing activities. With Facebook, Twitter, Instagram

and other platforms, digital natives are able to comment on the thoughts of friends, on news items, pictures and other content their network disseminates. Ideology as well as certain actions such as attacks are debated in chat rooms and online forums (Musawi 2010; Brandon, 2008) and a large number of people can engage in framing activities due to the easiness of access from around the globe and the transcending of space and time the internet provides. When ideology becomes subject of debate, more than frame alignment takes place. Digital natives engage in frame construction (Benford/Snow 2000: 623), negotiating and re-negotiating both the beliefs of the group and the collective identity. The equality of voices in an online realm and the possibility to take an active role in the construction of ideology are important factors to increase perceived ownership of the beliefs constructed. This, in turn, leads to a higher likelihood of constructing one's identity based on the ideology one adheres to. Online, there is more space for these construction activities, which facilitates radicalization as it encourages engagement and therefore involvement. Digital natives are active negotiators of collective identity in the online realm and create personal ownership of the ideology. This together with familiarity and trust enable emotional bonds to be formed virtually and therefore make collective identity construction more likely.

#### CAUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This analysis should not lead to the belief that all digital natives radicalize the same way or that the internet is the only factor in modern, homegrown radicalization processes. For instance, nothing has been said about the root causes of what may lead an individual into a particular virtual network. Root causes were not addressed in this essay, only the process of radicalization which follows from root causes. The internet may facilitate exposure to radical ideologies and, through its interactivity and users being unconstrained by space or time, it may also facilitate radicalization. Again, this is not to suggest that the internet alone is always the sole explanatory factor for radicalization, only that it plays a part in the expansion of ideological networks. In this sense, the preceding analysis does not seek to substitute any theory of physical interaction in radicalization such as Sageman's 'bunch of guys' (2004: 108), but to complement existing theory and practice in radicalization research. It seeks to shed light on one specific aspect of modern radicalization processes and how identity and belonging are constructed in the online realm rather than through physical interaction. It is not reasonable to treat the internet per se as causing radicalization. Causation rather than corre-

2 Frame construction refers to the process of developing particular parts of a narrative and corresponding frames to convey a particular worldview. For example, while jihadism may be considered a worldview based on narratives of holy war and paradise, corresponding frames are more specific such as propagating suicide missions against soft targets in the West as part of the broader narrative of holy war.

lation is difficult to establish in social sciences in general, and especially when making assumptions about dynamic internal processes such as identity construction.

#### **CONCLUSION: SUSCEPTIBILITY THROUGH FAMILIARITY**

The analysis showed, however, that a discussion is needed on how the use of the internet may alter our understanding of radicalization and the difference between members, supporters and bystanders in relation to terrorism. When membership becomes fluid resulting in varying degrees of commitment, the dichotomy of member versus non-member becomes blurred. How should we conceptualize different types of commitment, especially online? How do we distinguish clicktivists from real supporters and how can we reach clarity about the role of online radicalization as opposed to physical contact? The cases of pure online behavioral radicalization are rare, but may increase in the future. Yet, currently the internet may trigger deeper involvement in a movement and help the recruit transition towards physical membership as well. Academics and practitioners alike benefit from engaging with these new processes and from re-examining existing hypotheses about the acquisition of radical beliefs.

It can be said that the internet facilitates digital natives' susceptibility to radical ideology, because it enables their interaction through a familiar medium. Shared social practices of communication lead to trust, which in turn leads to a higher likelihood of a rise of feelings of collective belonging. Digital natives, who share part of their *habitus*, are able to construct their identity based on a virtual community and, if that community is radical, the shared *habitus* as well as properties of the internet such as the echo chamber increase the risk of coming to espouse radical ideas. More research is needed to better understand how online radicalization processes work, who is most susceptible to these processes, how digital immigrants may differ in their online radicalization and how this knowledge may impact counter-terrorism measures generally and counter-radicalization efforts specifically. The internet is constantly evolving and so are its users, whether they are terrorists or not and academic research can be integral to understanding, limiting or even reversing the appeal of radical content. In addition, a discussion on the notion of membership is needed to be able to distinguish between different types of actors within an online terrorist network. Studying the online activities of terrorist organizations must be accompanied by a discussion on definitions of types of mobilization, types of participation, radicalization processes and where the boundary between supporter and actual terrorist should be drawn. One needs to be careful not to over-

estimate the power of the internet, but academics and practitioners alike benefit from understanding the specific properties and processes of the online environment in order to tailor their response accordingly. Effective counter-radicalization is only possible after understanding the facilitating environments of radicalization.

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