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HOW DO THE TALIBAN USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO PROMOTE ITS AGENDA AND INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION IN AFGHANISTAN?

Essay

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As part of its research programme, the Centre focuses on "Media and Public Sphere in Afghanistan", exploring the dynamics of communication, structures and transformations in the Afghanistan media landscape and its diaspora. In the area of education, the Centre offers seminars and lectures in communication and media studies with a focus on Afghanistan. For knowledge transfer, the Centre organises a variety of programmes including conferences, workshops and interactive spaces for dialogue and exchange of ideas.

Afghanistan Media and Communication Insights

The Afghanistan Media and Communication Insights series is an important part of the research programme. It presents key findings from the Centre's research as well as other prominent studies on media, communication and the public sphere in Afghanistan and its global diaspora.

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INTRODUCTION

It is important to “recognize that social media are not good or bad, helpful or unhelpful, black or white, and bright or dark. [...] but simultaneously have both bright and dark sides” (Bacarella, Wagner, Ketzmann & McCarthy, 2018, p. 432). Social media, as being mostly uncensored, gathers information that is considered “a great source of power” (Bahar, 2020, p. 35 quoted from Castells, 2010). Therefore, social media is also used for propaganda purposes, especially when considering how important it is to influence public opinion (Scriver, 2015, p. 395). Due to the security and political situation in Afghanistan, the networked public sphere is at risk of being manipulated by various actors such as the state and non-state entities like the Taliban (Bahar, 2020, p. 37). Hence, the neo-Taliban movement began to use social media and other online communication forms to promote their agenda, including sharing real-time updates from the battlefield (Drissel, 2014, p. 112). By lowering the entry barriers to terrorism, bridging the gap between recruiters and recruits, and hastening the decentralized spread of information, the internet and social media have revolutionized terrorist propaganda (Basit, 2023, p. 9). In 2011, during the surge peak, the Taliban leadership opened a new front in their battle against the international coalition by posting English Twitter posts instead of traditional warfare methods (Bernatis, 2014, p. 25). But how exactly is the Taliban using social media to promote its agenda and influence public opinion in Afghanistan? Are they exploiting their full potential?

MAIN PART

Propaganda on social media might be different and cheaper due to the decentralized nature of its application and utilization compared to mass media (Bahar, 2020, p. 36). Thus, even though the Taliban are weaker than the government¹ in Afghanistan in terms of resources, they are equal or better at spreading information, especially through social media (Bahar, 2020, p. 36). It is estimated that over 90% of Afghans have access to telecommunication services through mobile phones, which unintentionally provide a crucial medium for the Taliban to disseminate their messages (Khitab, 2014). All major social media platforms are freely available in Afghanistan (Bahar, 2020, p. 37). Therefore the Taliban are intensifying their use of social networks to disseminate and propagate war-related information and disinformation to capture the attention of internet users and mainstream media (Bahar, 2020, p. 38). So, the initially anti-modern Taliban are becoming more conscious of the importance of shaping and influencing Western public opinion (Bernatis, 2014, p. 31). Now the Taliban are increasingly utilizing a variety of media to convey messages that support their goals of “removing foreign military presence and returning the country to their own unique interpretation of Islam” (Foxley, 2010, p. 79). The Taliban no longer seems reluctant to participate in the media war (Bernatis, 2014, p. 31). Taliban leaders now communicate with many of their followers and prospective supporters on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and other social media websites (Drissel, 2014, p. 94). From Twitter they seem to be seeking to mobilize new support from the so-called ‘Twitter Generation’, which includes younger individuals who extensively use social media – they are connecting with modernity through what is referred to as “the Twitter Revolution” (Boone, 2017). Additionally, they use emails, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, short message services, their own established underground radio station, and currently at least six major Taliban websites that consistently publish and distribute militant propaganda (Sediqi & Jain, 2019; Drissel, 2014, p. 113). Significantly, Taliban communication methods have adopted both traditional techniques, such as fax or landline, and modern approaches, utilizing a growing variety of media and communication resources (Foxley, 2010, p. 81). The purpose of that is to recruit new members, conduct training and mission preparation, and engage in fundraising efforts for insurgent and terrorist operations (Wilson, 2008, p. 3). That is why they publish posts, that are meant to inform, persuade and influence a target audience (Knopp et al., 2023, p. 75).

¹ This refers to the now former government since the Taliban took over control in 2021.

In addition, the former Afghan government either lacked or chose not to exercise the ability to censor social media, resulting in no restrictions on online media, yielding to the fact that both warring parties post unverified information that mainstream media do not confirm (Bahar, 2020, p. 41). Twitter and Facebook are thereby used by the Taliban to convey their attacks on security forces, make statements and spread propaganda (Bahar, 2020, p. 38). On Twitter the Taliban generate a steady flow of alternative identities, where Afghans, who for example serve in the security system are neither patriots nor true Muslim but “puppets” (Bernatis, 2014, p. 31). Plus, they post Twitter updates with exaggerated and often false claims of specific attacks on so-called ‘Christian invaders’, Western ‘crusaders’, ‘infidel forces’, ‘Afghan puppets’, and the ‘Karzai puppet regime’ (Drissel, 2014, p. 114). In contrast, their own soldiers are addressed with ‘mujahidin’ for fighters (Bahar, 2020, p. 40). Resulting that foreigners are seen as invaders, while the Taliban present themselves as a moderate force aiming to provide a “sovereign and Islamic Afghanistan to its people” (Bernatis, 2020, p. 25). Ultimately, the overall trends demonstrate that the messaging campaign is chiefly aimed at demoralizing the Western audience (Bernatis, 2014, p 29).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the Internet's decentralized structure is ideally suited for the dissemination of identity-based Islamic movements and networks like the Taliban (Drissel, 2014, p. 110). Within cyberspace, the Taliban managed to create a "strategic hinterland" or "virtual sanctuary" (Kilcullen, 2009, p. 488) that is largely out of reach for counterinsurgent forces or neighboring governments, making it challenging to contain its effects. No longer being technophobic, the neo-Taliban movement has adapted its communication strategies to incorporate underground radio, music CDs, websites, Twitter, streaming videos, text messages, and other innovative technologies (Drissel, 2014, p. 122). This significant shift in communication strategies reflects the Taliban's strategic goal of attracting new, younger followers globally while conducting dis-information campaigns (Drissel, 2014, p. 122). With these options, they have the potential to misguide the public opinion (Bahar, 2020, p. 42). Yet Knopp et al. could not find an overall strategy underlying Taliban social media usage; there is little evidence to suggest that their online activities are coordinated at a high level (Knopp et al., 2023, p. 54). According to them, there is no strong indicator of an effort to systematically shape policy messaging or to consistently influence a target audience through repeated customized communications. This means that the Taliban have the potential to do much better and this should be of great concern and should be studied precisely in the future.

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