

Thank you, Chairman Meehan, Ranking Member Speier, and members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the ways al-Qaeda supporters use social media.

Our understanding of how the Internet creates al-Qaeda supporters is limited by where we look. With few exceptions, most of the research on the subject is confined to discussion forums, an older form of social media that allows users to comment on topics that interest the group. Al-Qaeda forum users are usually anonymous, the links between them are unknown, and the administrators heavily moderate the discussions. Everyone on these forums is either a stalwart supporter of al-Qaeda or analysts who passively watch. There are just a handful of these forums, and the most prominent of them only numbers 50,000 members, many of whom have multiple accounts or are researchers like me. Participating on the forums may harden the views of al-Qaeda supporters and push them into taking action but no one is being radicalized. They are members of the choir singing to one another. For those of us watching, we see only the finished radicalized product and not the process that produced it.

So where and how are al-Qaeda supporters initially radicalized online? The where question is easier to answer than the how: Sometimes recruiters fish for susceptible youth on mainstream websites. Sometimes youth find the content by themselves on sites like YouTube, led to it out of curiosity or by following the trail of their convictions. They then share what they find with their acquaintances on social networking sites like Facebook. In the so-called "Five Guys" case, there is a mix of both trends. Young men in the D.C. area watched al-Qaeda videos on YouTube and shared them with one another. A Taliban recruiter contacted them through YouTube and facilitated their travel to Pakistan.

As the Five Guys case suggests, al-Qaeda supporters use a mix of social media to watch and spread the organization's propaganda online. Some of these sites, like Facebook, are a goldmine for analysts because they show the users' connections. But they can also be more difficult to penetrate compared to the anonymous discussion forums. A friend request from a stranger is unlikely to be answered in the affirmative. Because these more-closed social networking sites are effective at transmitting propaganda, we may yet see the day when an al-Qaeda video is solely distributed peer-to-peer without announcement on the anonymous discussion forums, thus eluding the media and researchers but nurturing the radicalized.

Thankfully, the vast majority of youth who watch and read al-Qaeda propaganda are either unaffected or choose not to act, as attested recently by one anonymous online recruiter. He posited that if you post al-Qaeda propaganda to all of the mainstream websites, only 10% of the people will likely look at it. Of those, only 10% will like what they see. Of those, only 10% will embrace the idea of jihad. Of those, only 10% will propagandize for it. Of those, only 10% will go out to fight in a jihad. And of those, only 10% will seek martyrdom. By his reasoning, ten thousand people out of a population of one billion Muslims, or 0.00001%, would go out to fight for al-Qaeda and even fewer would carry out a suicide operation. Those numbers might be a bit off but not by much. We are talking about a relatively small number of people.

Because the number of people is so small, it is difficult to say why some become active supporters of al-Qaeda and others do not. What we can say is that the vast majority of people who watch and read al-Qaeda propaganda will never act violently because of it. Put metaphorically, the material may be incendiary but nearly everyone is fireproof. Since that is the case, it is better to spend our resources putting out the fires and issuing warnings about the dangers of fire rather than trying to fireproof everyone or remove incendiary material.

Extending the fire metaphor a bit, how do we know where the flames are? We look for smoke. In this case, the smoke is the distribution and celebration of al-Qaeda propaganda. People who celebrate al-Qaeda propaganda online and who distribute large amounts of it on mainstream websites for the purposes of recruitment should be watched. Chances are that a few of them will decide to do something stupid, like Zachary Chesser, a recent Muslim convert from the D.C. area who was active in online recruitment and was arrested while trying to go fight for al-Shabaab in Somalia.

As you might surmise from my testimony, I do not put much stock in closing online user accounts that do not violate our laws. I also do not put much stock in intervening with well-meaning outreach programs or removing propaganda. There are too many downsides to these approaches. They are also unnecessary. The FBI and local law enforcement in the United States have done an excellent job in finding al-Qaeda supporters online and arresting them before they hurt anyone. They have gotten very good at following the smoke trails and putting out fires.

I would be willing to revise my approach to online radicalization if the data warranted it. But there is little research to go on, which is striking given how data-rich the Internet is. In hard numbers, how widely distributed was Zawahiri's last message? Did it resonate more in one U.S. city than another? Who were its main distributors on Facebook and YouTube? How are they connected with one another? This sort of baseline quantitative research barely exists at the moment. Analysts are either focused on studying the content of the propaganda or absorbed in stopping the next attack by known militants.

Until this research is done and demonstrates conclusively that al-Qaeda's online propaganda is persuading large numbers of people to act on its behalf, I believe the conservative approach I outlined is best, particularly since we have not seen a great increase in foiled plots and arrests. The U.S. government should focus on watching those people who are actively distributing and celebrating al-Qaeda propaganda online, looking for criminal behavior or attempts to connect with active militants. Conversely, the U.S. government should put much less emphasis on stopping people's exposure to al-Qaeda propaganda since it is not creating many supporters and it is difficult to stop its distribution. In other words, focus less on fireproofing and removing incendiary material and focus more on following the smoke and putting out fires.

Thank you for your time.