



Digital Media and Freedom of Expression: Experiences, Challenges, Resolutions

May Chidiac¹ and
Mireille Chidiac El Hajj^{2*}

Abstract

The advent of the digital media has brought new challenges and opportunities. It has flattened the hierarchies of communication and reshaped the relationship between the authorities and the wider public in society. Access to all sorts of new technologies has made it possible for anyone to engage in public debate. As a result, although it may be perceived differently, threats to freedom of speech are becoming increasingly apparent. Based on interviews with prominent political and social figures, this qualitative study found out that the existing structures of communication are challenging democracy and the human rights. The findings shed the light on some of the tools used by certain malevolent actors whose objective is to silence free media, create a threatening environment for journalists, and use democratic digital platforms for violent behavior and infiltration. Discussions focus on social media threats in a hostile and divided environment. Some strategies and policies are therefore suggested as they can be useful to increase awareness, control and prevent the influence and extent of e-violence while promoting freedom of expression. The spiral of violence is to be remedied by the spiral of Action and non-silence.

Keywords: Digital media; Freedom of expression; E-violence

- 1 Department of Media studies, Faculty of Humanities, Notre Dame University-Louaize, Lebanon
- 2 Department of Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

***Corresponding author:**

Mireille Chidiac El Hajj

✉ mireillehajj@hotmail.com

Department of Management, Faculty of Business and Economics, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon

Tel: (+961) 5 463 624

Received: February 08, 2019; **Accepted:** February 27, 2019; **Published:** March 08, 2019

Introduction

The Internet has changed our culture significantly and has found its way straight to our homes and into our personal lives and everyday habits. Social media in particular has offered opportunities for figures such as political candidates, media scholars, business owners and regular citizens to express their views about any emerging topic. In other words, social media outlets allow people's thoughts to be available to a wide and diverse audience. However, even though it can constitute for many people a great opportunity to foster democracy and the freedom of speech; it can be detrimental when used by forces that long to suppress opposition or spread their retrograde agendas. Therefore, the issue of the internet and the rise of advanced technologies are controversial. Over the past few years, for instance, intolerant and extremist terrorists are driving all forms of racism in society, causing terrible harm to a number of families around the world, be it through hate speech online or online calls for infiltration and violent campaigns. It comes as no surprise that Isis's and Daech's, for instance, main tool for recruitment was through their online platforms and e-magazine such as Al Dabiq, in an injurious effort to recruit both men and women to their global war of beliefs, which led to negative behaviors.

In this paper, we discuss the dimensions of digital media and its effects on the freedom of expression. Relying on different

interviews, conducted from March 2012 to November 2017, we explore how far digital media has aided malevolent forces to attain some of their objectives and how "Modern freedom of expression" is helping them appropriate new ways to reach their target audiences and spread their values and beliefs. In this respect, the research question that guided our search was the following: What is the role of social media in the process of violence and extremism?

While discussing the present conditions of the effects of social media on freedom of expression, this research will also suggest some recommendations that can be useful for the fight against terrorism.

Literature Review

The new field of Journalism

The U.S. Department of Defense publication defines terrorism as "the unlawful use of -- or threatened use of -- force or violence against individuals or property to coerce or intimidate

Citation: Chidiac M, Hajj MCE. Digital Media and Freedom of Expression: Experiences, Challenges, Resolutions. Global Media Journal 2019, 17:32.

governments or societies, often to achieve political, religious, or ideological objectives."

In today's environment, terrorism, violence and crimes are facilitated by the use of digital media; as it is a cheap, easy and faster way to communicate and spread terrorist groups' ideological thoughts and propaganda [1]. Its online effect can be considered as the extension of extremist groups' military methods [2] or the equivalent of the off-line effect, as it can promote identity formation and can help build communities [3].

Shutting down the criminals' ability to communicate may seem the solution to control it. Yet, it should be recognized that closing them down, would have consequences on the freedom of expression, as controlling the internet interferes with it. This issue creates a dilemma, which leads us to define freedom of expression, as elaborated in article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It reads:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises...The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime".

Nevertheless, while some observers see in freedom of speech the revival of democracy, others find in it a platform to arise risks and controversies [4]. Nowadays readers are exposed to different types of blogs and social media platforms including but not limited to Facebook, twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, YouTube and others. They are animated by three philosophical rationales: search for truth, self-governance, and self-fulfillment, as argued by Feldman [5]. The author hence suggests that people like to exchange ideas to identify truth and false issues. Free discussions of political issues are a prerequisite for democracy. Self-fulfillment identifies a person's potential and ambitions. Searching for the truth is therefore the main objective for journalists. However, the word "journalism" is changing dramatically. The profession is shrinking, since everyone, without even being a journalist, can express his or her ideas on any social media platform in what is essentially a form of self-expression [6,7]. In addition, any ordinary citizen journalist can send pictures and videos to broadcast media, or any other media outlet to be broadcasted to the world. In this context, extremists do not lack ideas that can serve their extremism. "One innovation, noted by terrorism expert JM Berger, was an app designed for Twitter called The Dawn of Glad Tidings, which allowed Isis to build up huge surges of re-tweets around particular topics" [8]. To note that new waves of propaganda had prompted debate about the degree of the media itself and its role in providing the "oxygen of publicity" needed by certain groups who exploited the latest technologies for unprecedented purposes [8]. In parallel, they also prompted another debate about people's reaction and the way they

perceive medieval propagandas. The question here is whether the public react or just stay silent.

The spiral of silence in the digital media sphere

Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann [9] sheds the light on the theory of "the spiral of silence". She stressed that the "Cumulation, ubiquity and consonance of mass communication combine and produce powerful effects on public opinion" [10]. As a matter of fact, humans need a sense of fellowship but they fear isolation. Therefore, they always try to determine whether they belong to the majority or the minority, when they sense that public opinion is changing. If they sense that they belong to the majority, they will speak up their opinions; if not, they will not express it. In the same context and according to Seitel [11] attitudes towards any subject are positive, negative or neutral. Studies confirm that most people tend to be neutral. They are called the silent majority. While the theory of cognitive dissonance suggests that people seek information that supports their points of view and avoid that which challenges their opinion, most people, especially the neutral majority, have latitude of acceptance within a range of opinions concerning any particular issue of public interest. It is within this range that social media can operate to sway people's opinion in order to gain more support of whatever is advocated.

Hence, the objective of the spiral of silence theory is to explain how the media can influence opinion expression and how the "spiraling" effect of the majority can silence the minority opinions, in new digital interactions [12] and incorporate user-generated content into their offer.

In an increasing digital world, people can connect with each other, no matter who they are or where they are, as smartphone data allows identifying users' specific location. The Internet is allowing people to create new platforms where they can publish their stories. And here is the problem. The vast quantities of Data generated by digital platforms contain information and details about the context of the user. This can be translated for some, as "a modern freedom of expression". Yet it reveals users' behavior, which can simply mean a "good hunt" in some cases. Predators are in search for isolated souls. They hunt them and offer them similar platforms and communities to share their lives with. Ability to capture their target is becoming easier, as individuals are poor judges of their own interest [13] but also because social media and all technology companies are openly permitting a 24/7 Networking.

Poor judgment in the face of danger

People do participate in the production of news, of messages and of information. They "report news, expose wrong doing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom." Yet those same people do not always know what is right for them and do not depend on the entities that have had countless years of experience in facing security threats. They just go with the flow, as they are afraid of the "isolation effect". Therefore in an extremist world, democracy fighters may use the Internet to change democratic countries into authoritarian ones.

Islamic terrorism¹ for instance follows three different steps to tighten the grip on the neck of young people. The process to push the young to join their ranks is as follows: Firstly: they use the Internet as a first tool to radicalize. Secondly, they move on to face-to-face encounters. They use a method called Dawa to proselytize and extend their reach beyond borders [14]. Dawa is their tool to inspire, indoctrinate, recruit, finance and mobilize the youth; which forms the biggest challenge the United States faces in combating political Islam. "As agents of Dawa can exploit the constitutional and legal protections that guarantee American citizens freedom of religion and freedom of speech— freedoms that would of course be swept away if the Islamists achieved their goals" [14]. Thirdly, they establish a spirit of "Us" against "Them". Their mentality is therefore incompatible with our freedoms [14], as they seek to replace freedom with "strict Shariaa".

The first component of Dawa is Tarbiyyah. Its targets are the educational, political and legal systems of a country. Hiding their activities through humanitarian aids and NGOs such as the notorious Holy Land Foundation in Washington DC, fundamentalist extremists launder millions of dollars to fund their activities. A corporate example is eBay, the online commercial platform that was recently condemned for unknowingly aiding in the funding the Islamic state. Fake eBay transactions were moving money, according to the Wall Street Journal [15], through PayPal, after pretending to sell certain products. By using alternatives to banks, extremists raised enough terror funds and made huge sums of money through means of money laundering [16]. The Wall street journal also reported that "some of the cash was spent on a laptop, a cellphone, and software to set up a virtual private network that can mask a user's internet usage, which the FBI believed was so he could communicate with Isis operatives overseas".

All efforts are used by Jihadists, Ikhwan, Isis and others to disseminate hate against the western ideology, to destroy the political institutions of the West, and replace them with extremism and strict sharia'a. To do so, they deploy the Internet and all its tools to seduce the youth and hunt "Non-believers". This brings us back to the fact that digital media, via its vast reach and inherently democratic and borderless essence is being accused of being the ultimate tool for extremists to insure the right networks as a means to facilitate reaching other potential recruits. By referring to the wassatiyya², they deploy all efforts in order to conquer the West not by "The sword or armies, but by preaching and ideology".

Methodology

This qualitative research is largely based on data gathering,

¹We call them extremists Islamic groups after Moore (2016) who described them as follows: "In the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., the threat of militant Islamic terrorism -- rooted in the Middle East and South Asia -- has taken center stage. While these extremely violent religious extremists represent a minority view, their threat is real. As pointed out by RAND's Bruce Hoffman, in 1980 two out of 64 groups were categorized as largely religious in motivation; in 1995 almost half of the identified groups, 26 out of 56, were classified as religiously motivated; the majority of these espoused Islam as their guiding force".

²According to Ali (2017), Wassatiyya is the strategy to Islamize the West and implement strict shariaa law through dawa and other nonviolent means. The strategy has been pursued by Islamic groups in Western countries for the past three decades thanks to generous funding from Middle Eastern individuals, NGOs, and governments (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and—until recently—the United Arab Emirates) (p. 81)

supplemented by interviews with people who recognized similar situations and had to deal with the dark side of networking, in a way or another. The methodology used in this paper is concentrated on two different axes. Firstly, a web search allowed the researchers to ensure that the database was as complete as possible. Secondly, in depth-interviews, some through panels, enabled the researchers to get access to large and diverse data. Baker et al. [17], referred to the panels that can serve this type of data collection as "one of the most compelling stories of the last decade" (p. 175). Those who passed through similar experiences showed the strong effect of digital media on the society. Interviews that were recorded during different gatherings, conducted from March 2012 to November 2017, helped reveal untold stories and events that took place in the aggressive environment of the Mediterranean region. They helped exploring how far digital media has aided some forces to attain their objectives and how "Modern freedom of expression" is helping those, appropriate new ways to reach their target audiences.

The Findings

This section is divided into three main parts: the interviews, the panel and the so-called free space where chaos reigns, which is partly related to our web search concerning the tech companies' impact on spreading and/or restricting extremists' beliefs and ideologies. Interviews were conducted separately with eminent figures from different countries, while the panel gathered 5 mothers whose sons followed extremist groups.

The interviews

For the purpose of this study, different interviews from different panels conducted between March 2012 and November 2017, were gathered, analyzed and discussed to shed the light on the effect of the digital media on freedom of expression. These in-depth interviews were the major source of data for this paper, as they served to describe the discussants' opinions. Two distinct approaches were detected, one related to the bright side of the social media while the other explored its dark side:

When interviewed in 2012, former British ambassador to Lebanon, Mr. Tom Fletcher stressed that people could use a "super power" such as social media in political campaigns in Lebanon to discuss what Lebanon can be or become in the year 2020. While Alec Ross, former senior advisor for innovation office of secretary of state Hillary Clinton argued that social media did not instigate the revolution by itself. He stated that social media tools could be powerful in an electoral context. He gave the example of former president of the United States Barack Obama who technically had less money than his competitor Mitt Romney during the 2012 elections to spend in media campaigns. Yet he masterfully used specific information about people through social media in order to have conversations with target audiences.

In controversy, our interview with John Carlin, assistant attorney general for national security at the Department of Justice of the United States, revealed that terrorists are using social media to target young people at a frighteningly alarming rate. 29 years old Omar Mateen who opened fire in a gay nightclub in Orlando was inspired by online jihadi materials to murder apostates

and members of the gay community, basically anyone who is considered to be a Kafir (Kafeer) or unbeliever. Isis is capable of recruiting hundreds of young men and women from France, Canada and other nations, he said. Yet it was mostly able to target Egyptians, Tunisians, Yemenis, and Libyans who were either quelled under their respective government suppression or influenced by numerous mosques calling for the campaigns for global Jihad. As a result, Isis's attempt to use social media for propaganda and recruitment is successful.

It is essential to mention that although Isis is defeated today, it was growing in terms of number and influence everywhere, but especially in the Middle East. Although current armed struggles against them have stripped them of a large swath of their territory and income, to many, the damage has already been done and has infiltrated the Internet and global networks of influence. Their highly visual and professional means of communications allows them to master content and messaging on social media, which others have emulated with a high rate of success. Although many argue that the Jihadi threat- Isis, Al Qaeda and beyond- is but one of the many facets of fundamentalism appearing on global scale to quash freedom of speech, as countless online campaigns of accusations labeled under islamophobia and racism are undermining the space for real debate and criticism of extremism under the banner of Islam. This phenomenon is extremely dangerous and has negative consequences for users and practitioners of journalism.

In the same context, Benoit Thieulin, Founder and CEO of Netscouade, in France stated - that two months before the revolution in Tunisia, hundreds of people started registering on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in order to speak out concerning the political situation and the Ben Ali's regime, yet the real revolution was executed in the streets.

Yet when it comes to the gap left by users online, which only journalists and media professionals can help fill, Ali Jaber, Group TV Director of MBC, revealed that traditional media does not provide a platform for everyone to express her/his own views. Media outlets in the Middle East are not independent. They follow a previously set agenda by politicians, businessmen and other influencers. He also stressed that under the guise of security, social media is passing through a dark phase, because smart phones used by the people in the Middle east and North Africa (MENA) are subject to the authorities' surveillance. Hence, social media can effectively be used to also topple dissenters and critics.

According to Ghassan Hasbani, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health of Lebanon, journalism can be practiced either through traditional media or through social media. What is even more important, he said, is to provide people with the tools to judge the accuracy of news pieces and therefore to choose which journalists, channels or bloggers to trust.

Elias Abu Saab, Former Minister of Education of Lebanon, argued that sometimes people can create fake news or incite a rumor then spread it like wildfire through social media and websites. This would render fact from false news difficult to discern. Moreover, according to Abou Saab, social media is not journalism.

As witnessed by several incidents involving organizations such as CNN, New York Times, and the Washington Post, due to the fast paced revelation of information online, practitioners are not given the luxury of checking the facts for fear of being overridden by competition. Yet the more evident incident attributed to this reality is the Hilary Clinton email scandal and Russia's alleged interference in the elections through fake news. This shows how powerful a tool social media can become in the hands of a state or governing entity that has the power to manipulate the masses. Although websites have arisen, such as Project Veritas founded by New York Times Bestselling author James O'keefe, to negate fake news, they are essentially considered biased in their investigations. Hence, the role of newspapers that have stood the test of time is still a positive force in discerning the fact from false and are still heavily depended on through traditional print media or their respective social media platforms. They are the cushions of concerned citizens. In the MENA region's case, social media and their respective daring media outlets are considered the cushion against fake news propagated by their governments and online corresponding loyalists.

An interview with Julian Assange, Founder and editor in chief of Wikileaks, in 2016, revealed that Wikileaks never reveals the source of its information, which is always factual and accurate. According to Assange, Wikileaks got it right 100% in all times. It's an art to get it right over the last ten years, and they are proud of this accomplishment. Assange said that his work is noble, as by increasing transparency, governments can be forced to act in more accountable ways.

Thus, while people have the ability to participate in upholding beliefs and values, gathering information and evidence to either negate or support an event on social media, the role of traditional journalism cannot be overridden by social media and the people's collective power cannot be overrun by online platforms. All is dependent on the political status of the country and the freedom of its citizens, not to mention the cultural and social forces, to express their opinions and beliefs freely and not a logical fallacy that applies all models to all. It can safely be said that social media is not the new field of journalism as there are still so many practices that govern the internet community which intend harm and manipulation to users, contrary to the mission that numerous news outlets have successfully proven to have upheld.

Given that the Internet is a rapidly evolving phenomenon, rules that govern networks are also in constant need of change, which also contributes to the supposition that social media cannot form a new field of journalism since the latter is depended on for the ends and not the means. Thus in relation to social media, journalism and laws, there are certain inherent attributes that are considered a breach to the integrity of society.

Another interview that was conducted with Korieh Duodu, Advocate with Bentsi-Enchill Letsa and Ankomah (Accra, Ghana) and trustee of the Media Legal Defence Initiative, revealed that traditional laws require modifications when it comes to the Internet and the crimes committed online. She argued that the Internet is a reflection of the society, thus everyone has to think of the primary issues related to the social behavior and the social

interaction; and of the ways that allow organizing the process of sharing ideas and thoughts.

Alison Bethel Meckenzie, Executive Director International Press Institute explained and we quote: “When we say the freedom of speech must be protected, we have to provide freedom for everyone. We have laws related to hate speech; therefore crimes of the Internet can be condemned under those laws”.

Converting as many people as possible is their ultimate objective. The movie “Heaven can wait” shed the light on the effects of Facebook on the youth. Extremists try to find, exploit and convince young isolated women, to turn into extremist Islamism. Succeeding in brainwashing them, they push them to commit suicide bombing, as they will be heavenly rewarded above all ordinary mortals.

The panel

For the purpose of the study, we gathered in the year 2016, a number of women from Lebanon and Jordan, of whose sons joined extremists groups. For privacy reasons, we will keep them anonymous, and instead will refer to them as case numbers. Their testimonies depicted the sons’ characteristics, the channel through which sons contacted mothers, the channel through which the mothers knew about their children’s death and the way they reacted.

Table 1 shows the reaction of jihadists’ mothers and how they reacted to the death of their sons. It is of value to add that these mothers suffer as they cannot bury their sons. There is no death certificate. They received the “Bad news” through a Whatsapp or via Facebook.

Trasher [18] interpreted this phenomenon, saying that it is

already hard and painful enough to learn about someone’s death, but to learn such information through digital media is even more harmful. Scrolling through the feed to discover the death of someone, and causing pain and grief deliberately cannot be interpreted as freedom of expression.

The free space where chaos reigns

Our web search revealed that “the social media platforms are offering significant advantages to extremist groups that may otherwise have stayed marginal in terms of communication means” [19]. It also revealed that some technology companies, namely Twitter, Facebook, PayPal and others were accused of not investing enough resources to stop terrorist and discreet pages from spreading their beliefs; and that many organizations and corporations did not attempt to deter extremists that are under the guise of another identity or mission from using their platforms, but are doing so willfully.

However, later on and after several urgent calls to drop racist sites, some of them such as PayPal and Discover Financial Services (DFS) took action and actively monitored the use of their network to ensure that their services were not used to promote hate and racial intolerance. They even stopped extremist organizations from receiving payments and donations for their activities [20].

Yet companies like YouTube reverse and undermine efforts by other organizations when they restrict and ban videos that might drive a large swath of subscribers to swear off YouTube and start indignant campaigns against it. Videos such as “What Isis wants”, presented by Tom Joscely, senior fellow at the foundation for defense of democracies; “why don’t feminists fight for Muslim women?” prepared Ali Ayaan hirs; and “Radical Islam: the most dangerous ideology” prepared by Raymond Ibrahim; were

Table 1 Testimonies of women whose sons joined extremists groups via the social media platforms.

Case number	Son’s characteristics	Movement son followed	Communication	How mothers got the news of sons’ death	The reaction : How mothers fought back
1	Young jihadist in Syria: 18 years old; autistic-isolated boy.	“Call to Islam”. Objective: to do something with his life	Firstly through Viber messages. Then: messages stopped with no response.	Through a Facebook private book that posted a photo of him.	It was through “Sons and Daughters of the world” Network, to share the public of Denmark her personal story and other stories of other parents who experienced same tragedy.
2	Young jihadist in Syria: 22 years old. Shifted from Catholicism to Islamic religious practices	Salafist	Unknown GSM numbers	Through whatsapp message	None
3	Young jihadist in Syria: 26 years old. Shifted from Islam to extremist Islamic movement out of poverty	Isis	No communication.	Through social media	None
4	Young jihadist in Syria Age: 20 years old. Used to be a rapper, enjoying life.	Islamic group, radical recruiter	No communication.	She doesn’t know if he is alive or dead.	None
5	Young jihadist in Syria: 20 years old.	Joined an Islamic radical group		Social Media	Founded the counseling organization “Families for Life” to share personal journey on National and international media platform

banned for fear of inciting public anger. The objective of such videos was to create awareness and openly discuss the extremism objectives, yet fear of labels stopped the outspoken critics from expressing their views. Therefore, it could be said that restricting these videos restricted the positive face of freedom of speech in favor of the bad one.

In controversy, the video that exhibited how men can have sex with female prisoners of war to 'humiliate' them was widely shared on social media and websites rather than being banned. It brought a lot of revenues and views as it showed how women were transformed into slaves, even though it is known that rape and sexual violence are not permitted in Islam [21]. The story of the yazidi girl Bafreen Oso, an Isis survivor, invited to WOFL³, revealed that when Isis invaded Iraq, it victimized a huge number of Assyrians and Yazidis including her and her parents. She was captured, raped and tortured for two years. She was also forced to give up her yazidi religion and was brainwashed by militants. Except for a small number of girls who were able to get away from the massacres, all others were caged, stabbed, killed, and even burned for refusing to have sex with Isis fighters. After running away from her kidnappers, Oso deployed the same strategy used by her enemy. She accessed social media for precise purposes and was able to transform its platforms into a tool to speak out her experience and share it with the global community.

Pictures of the massacres were widely shared on Facebook and other media outlets. Photos of burned babies on Facebook showed small infants being eaten alive by the ensuing flames. It is known that in democratic structures, social media is regarded as a tool for encouraging 'social participatory governance' [22].

Preventing e-violence before it happens

This study investigated the effects of digital media on freedom of expression. Concerned by the demonstrations of the destruction of democracy and human rights, this paper invites to a deep thinking on how collecting data from different sources can help analyzing the ongoing situation in an attempt to find some remedies. We depicted the following:

The interviewees accused the social media in general from allowing terror groups to explicitly sustain their presence in cyberspace, despite their full awareness that the online presence of the latter constitutes powerful political tools that help them mobilize recruiting, marketing and propaganda. Hence, it sounds that the spiral of violence is not to end soon as even though extremists may seem to be losing land or to be battered on battlefield; they are still alive, according to Rasmussen's [23] report in the Wall street journal. Meanwhile, in their message of words and videos, extremist positions are backing up the spiral of violence and the social transformations, while demolishing democracy and freedom of expression. And in the same line as above literature review, predators are in search for isolated souls while the target is becoming easier.

Traditionally, the newspapers editors' job was to decide what should be cut in space or what could make page one. Instead,

space does not constitute a scarce resource nowadays, as social media and all technology companies are openly permitting a 24/7 Networking. The public and especially the youth is shifting from passive to active agents, creating a new wave of journalists pretenders, who gather data that best suits them without even waiting for news organizations to filter and deliver. Therefore, instead of following the internet society's global report 2017, which argues that: "the future of the internet is inextricably tied to people's ability to trust it as a means to improve society, empower individuals and enable the enjoyment of human rights and freedoms"; the amount of exposure to any filter of their choice is presenting an important risk factor for youth's behavior that is currently leading to aggressive thoughts and attitudes.

In this line, it can be said that exposing violence on u-tube, twitter, facebook, skype, blogs and chat rooms has short and long effects on the viewers, especially the youth, who prefer to leave their homes, families and parental supervision for the need of a sense of belonging to a particular group, to a kind of affiliation, to more freedom to design and mold their place in new special interest groups of their choice, to make more money and to gain power. By facilitating more points of contact between people in a virtual context, friendships, acquaintances and interactions between people who never met are strengthened; serving the virtual world to becoming an easy platform that helps spreading threat against human security and rights.

These people are participating in the production of news, of messages and of information. They "report news, expose wrong doing, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom". Yet those same people do not always know what is right for them and do not depend on the entities that have had countless years of experience in facing security threats. They just go with the flow, as they are afraid of the "isolation effect".

More, in an extremist world, democracy fighters are using the Internet to change democratic countries into authoritarian ones, while targeting a global audience anywhere and anytime [24]. Gathered in the 3rd edition of the Mediterranean Dialogue, Rome 2017, political Leaders admitted that four key "M" pillars govern the Middle Eastern countries: Money, Military, Media and Mindset. While one "M" affects the other, Media and Mindset seem to be the most influencing ones. Russia's minister of foreign affairs, Mr. Sergey Lavrov, argued that Isis was defeated in Syria and Iraq; yet it can always make a comeback if it stays well connected. Saudi minister of foreign affairs, Adel Ben Ahmad Al Jubeir stressed that there is a need to enhance the ability to perceive extremism threats whether digital or not, and to support changes in the Mindset, in response to it. Professor Jeffrey Sachs, from Columbia University stressed on the importance of investing in peace and in education in the MENA region. He said that in a digitizing world, strategies should be integrated and efforts should be tailored to get rid of wars and violence. Some strategies and policies should therefore be implemented as they can be useful to increase awareness, control and prevent the influence and extent of e-violence while promoting freedom of expression. This leads us to:

³WOFL stands for "women on the front line". It is an annual conference held by the MCF (May Chidiac Foundation) that hosts influential figures of influential women who have inspired leadership, change, and sustainability in their respective fields.

Educating: According to Ali [14], the only way to remedy the e-violence is through educating the public through an anti-Dawa strategy⁴. This cure would help stop harming peaceful believers. For it seems, that the open society is allowing more “unlimited tolerance that will eventually lead to the disappearance of tolerance [25].

Controlling and sharing information: Controlling information must be put in place in governments such as in Syria, Iran, Tunisia, Egypt and other countries in the MENA region, to identify and detain dissenters as well as to gain access to their location at all times. In this context, Wikileaks stated that public information can hurt citizens and thus selecting information must be revealed for the good of all.

Spreading awareness through movies and series: In 2017 Ali Jaber, Group TV Director of MBC, stressed on the importance of media counter-propaganda to fight “terror” groups. The TV series such as “Hur al Ayn” (The Maidens of Paradise), “Irhab Academy” (Terrorist Academy), “Sina’at al mawt” (Death Industry), “the Black Crows” or “Gharabeeb Soud” forecasted on MBC and on Arabia, which is part of the MBC group, pointed out to the challenges and to the threats that shake the course of communication and politics in general. Despite the terrible truth about the cruelty used by extremists, the TV series showed ways to deal with the current problem of Jihadists. The purpose of such series was not to entertain people, as Ali Jaber argued; but to send messages through soft communication, telling extremists that TV series or “musalsals” in Arabic, that are generally produced in Saudi Arabia, by Muslim producers and Muslim actors, are calling for moderation and hope in societies. Far from the usual family entertainment, their objective is to show the cruelty of those who ‘die for jihad’, and of men who are slaughtering men in inhuman ways.

Applying new technologies: That can classify the language of

⁴Islamic terrorism follows three different steps to tighten the grip on the neck of young people. The process to push the young to join their ranks is as follows: firstly, they use the Internet as a first tool to radicalize. Secondly, they move on to face-to-face encounters. They use a method they call Dawa to proselytize and extend their reach beyond borders (Ali, 2017, p.15). Dawa is their tool to inspire, indoctrinate, recruit, finance and mobilize the youth; which forms the biggest challenge the United States faces in combating political Islam. “As agents of dawa can exploit the constitutional and legal protections that guarantee American citizens freedom of religion and freedom of speech—freedoms that would of course be swept away if the Islamists achieved their goals” (Ali, 2017, p.19). Thirdly, they establish a spirit of “Us” against “Them”. Their mentality is therefore incompatible with our freedoms (Ali, 2017, p. 2), as they seek to replace freedom with “strict Shariaa”. All efforts are used by Jihadists, Ikhwan, Isis and others to disseminate hate against the western ideology, to destroy the political institutions of the West, and replace them with extremism and strict sharia a. To do so, they deploy the Internet, and all its tools to seduce the youth and hunt “Non-believers”. The first component of Dawa is Tarbiyyah. Its targets are the educational, political and legal systems of a country. And one way to hide these efforts is through humanitarian aids and NGOs such as the notorious Holy Land Foundation in Washington DC that was proven to have laundered millions of dollars to fund fundamentalist extremists. A corporate example is eBay, the online commercial platform that was recently condemned for unknowingly aiding in the funding the Islamic state. Fake eBay transactions were moving money, according to the Wall Street Journal (2017), through PayPal, after pretending to sell certain products. By using alternatives to banks, extremists are raising enough terror funds and are making huge sums of money through means of money laundering (Szoldra, 2017). The journal also reported that “some of the cash was spent on a laptop, a cellphone, and software to set up a virtual private network that can mask a user’s internet usage, which the FBI believed was so he could communicate with Isis operatives overseas”. Therefore, digital media, via its vast reach and inherently democratic and borderless essence is being accused of being the ultimate tool for extremists to insure the right networks as a means to facilitate reaching other potential recruits. By referring to the wassatiyya, they are deploying all efforts in order to conquer the West not by “The sword or armies, but by preaching and ideology” (Ali, 2017, p.41).

extremism to be able to remove its dangerous content while improving and developing some practical solutions. In this line, the development of new technologies to automatically detect terrorist content on any online platforms was announced on February 13, 2018, with 99.99% accuracy. Developed by the Home office and ASI Data Science, this new technology helps analyzing the audio and visual contents released by Daech. However, small platforms don’t have the same level of resources to develop such technologies, as mentioned by the UK government⁵. Helping them developing innovative methods can be the desired solution to prevent spreading fear in our society. Platforms must be aware of the viral content that is being shared despite any gains from amassing a large number of viewers.

Uniting Actions and efforts to awaken the silent majority: A task force should join the civil society groups, the government and the private sector. In a context of solidarity between all three parties, seeds of discord in society should be removed to reinforce propaganda against hatred, grievance and lies; and to awaken the silent majority. A solid call to the youth is to be administered to convince them to return to their lives and abandon the fight against democracy. A new model of shared responsibility and liability is to be hold at pace and scale to share freedom of speech and the right for privacy and security; especially between the West and the Middle- East regions. It is noteworthy to mention that the PayPal and Discover Financial Services (DFS) moves were taken after the West was targeted. They immediately followed the violence that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia, at the white nationalist rally. Such moves should also be taken when threats are perceived in the Middle-Eastern countries.

Setting and implementing Laws: On another level, there is a need to legislate for further interference with Article 10, of the European Convention on Human Rights as it includes a limited number of media but not the plurality of sources of information that is available nowadays. Laws addressing the challenges that are met online must be introduced to protect the inherent spirit of social media and that is freedom of speech. Legal research must be conducted in order to define the finer points attributed to criminality, social media, and fundamentalism. It also must categorize laws for companies and other entities that may be held responsible for inciting or allowing online criminal activity under the guise of freedom of speech.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the relationship between digital media and freedom of expression. The internet allows networking between people and creates new platforms for everyone to publish their stories to the global audience. However, participating in the production and diffusion of information has changed the ways people understand freedom of expression. According to the European Commission study [26], Media technologies and communications are undergoing a profound transformation; as new technologies have the power to transform how we realize the freedom of expression (p.5). Currently, the power to communicate is not solely in the hands of elites, but rather in

⁵To refer to Gov.UK: New technology revealed to help fight terrorist content online. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-technology-revealed-to-help-fight-terrorist-content-online>

the hands of a wider public, including extremists and terrorists. The explosion of the digital media is serving citizens to engage in public debate, but it is also allowing them to engage in extremely dangerous conversations and debate. Did this public observe silence, as aforementioned by Noelle-Neumann? It seems not, as he is showing reaction on digital media, by posting and twitting.

Still, actions are not speaking louder than these simple tweets, and more is to be done. For, if for some, posting is better than doing nothing; for others, the creation of a unified strategy and unified mechanisms for social media is essential. New approaches should be created to confront prevailing consensus. The spiral of violence is to be remedied by the spiral of Action and non-silence.

References

- 1 Hussain MdS (2015) Social media and terrorism: Threats and challenges to the modern era. *South Asian survey* 22: 136-155.
- 2 Rasmussen SE (2018a) Online Propaganda Builds Islamic State Brand in the Face of Military Losses. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- 3 Postmes T, Brunsting S (2002) Collective action in the age of the Internet mass communication and online mobilization. *Social Science Computer Review* 20: 290-301.
- 4 Fisher W (2001) Freedom of expression on the internet.
- 5 Feldman SM (2017) Postmodern Free Expression: A Philosophical Rationale for the Digital Age. *Marquette Law Review* 100: 1123-1192.
- 6 Taylor DG (1982) Pluralistic ignorance and the spiral of silence: A formal analysis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 46: 311-335
- 7 Neuwirth K, Frederick E, Mayo C (2007) The spiral of silence and fear of isolation. *Journal of Communication* 57: 450-468.
- 8 Burke J (2016) How the changing media is changing terrorism. *The Guardian*.
- 9 Noelle-Neumann E (1984) *The spiral of silence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 10 Severin W, Tankard J (1997) *Communication Theories: Origins, methods and uses in the mass media*, 4th edition. Pearson new international Edition.
- 11 Seitel F (2014) *The practice of public relations*. Pearson new international edition.
- 12 Ho SS, Chen VHH, Sim CC (2013) The spiral of silence: examining how cultural predispositions, news attention, and opinion congruency relate to opinion expression. *Asian journal of communication* 23: 113-134.
- 13 Edward A, Purcell Jr (1973) The Crisis of Democratic Theory 103. In: Harold D (ed.) *Lasswell, Psychopathology and Politics*.
- 14 Ali AH (2017) The challenge of Dawa. Political Islam as ideology and movement and how to counter it. *Stanford University: Hoover institution press*.
- 15 Maremont M, Stewart C (2017) FBI says ISIS used eBay to send terror cash to US. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- 16 Szoldra P (2017) ISIS operatives allegedly used eBay to fund terror operations. *Business Insider. Military and defense*.
- 17 Baker R, Brick JM, Bates NA, Battaglia M, Couper MP, et al. (2013) Summary report of the AAPOR Task Force on non-probability sampling. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology* pp: 90-143.
- 18 Trasher S (2016) The death of a friend is always hard. What if you find out on Facebook?
- 19 Alava S, Frau-Meigs D, Hassan G (2017) Youth and violent extremism on social media: mapping the research.
- 20 Berr J (2017) PayPal cuts off payments to right-wing extremists.
- 21 Hakim M (2016) The truth about Muslims and sex slavery-according to the Koran, rather than Isis or Islamophobes. *The Independent*.
- 22 Islam M (2017) Freedom of expression in social media. *The Daily star*.
- 23 Rasmussen SE (2018b) Battered on battlefield, ISIS alive online. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- 24 Schils N, Laffineur J (2013) Comprendre et expliquer le rôle des réseaux sociaux dans la formation de l'extrémisme violent. Belgique: université de Gent et université catholique de Louvain, BELSPO.
- 25 Popper K (2013) *The Open Society and Its Enemies, the Spell of Plato*. United Kingdom: Routledge.
- 26 European Commission (2011) *Freedom of expression, Media and digital communications. Key issues*.