

The Internet and self-radicalisation

By FABIAN KOH and
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MARINE operations executive Shio Kumar thought little of his children's activities on the Internet until news broke that a 16-year-old had planned to carry out terror attacks in Singapore after being radicalised online.

The father of five – aged three to 24 – said his children had free access to devices but now questions the decision.

"Instead of doing simple, fun activities like riding bicycles as in the past, children like the 16-year-old had planned an attack. It's frightening," said Kumar, 46, who plans to monitor his children's Google and YouTube watch history from now on.

Singapore's Home Affairs Ministry (MHA) recently announced that last December, it had detained a Protestant Christian boy who planned to attack worshippers at two mosques near his house.

According to the republic's Internal Security Department, the youth's self-radicalisation journey was one that took him through the darkest corners of the Internet, with him frequenting websites and forums specialising in gory material from 2019.

The teenager found propaganda videos by the so-called Islamic State (IS) militant group, including those showing the group executing Ethiopian Christians in Libya, from which he wrongly concluded that Islam taught its followers to kill Christians.

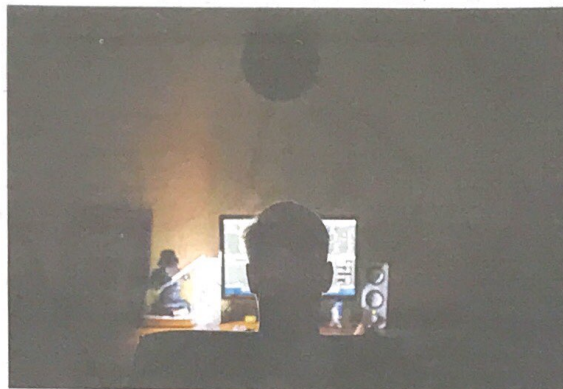
After he decided to carry out the attacks, he trawled online marketplaces for weapons and watched YouTube videos to learn how to attack his targets by using a machete to slash at their neck and chest areas.

But is the Internet to blame? Dr Carol Soon, head of the society and culture department at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that while technology does exacerbate unhealthy habits and anti-social behaviours, it is too easy to paint the Internet as the bogeyman when things go wrong.

She said online behaviour, such as cyber harassment or consumption of radicalised content are likely linked to issues experienced in the physical world.

"Most of us do not turn from Dr Jekyll to Hyde when we go online," said Dr Soon, who is also vice-chairman of the Media Literacy Council.

News that a Singaporean teen had planned to carry out a terror attack has parents worried about their children's activities online.



Convenient bogeyman: Online behaviour, such as cyber harassment or consumption of radicalised content, are likely linked to issues experienced in the physical world. — Pixabay

Parents and educators should look out for physical signs, such as an obsession with the Internet and inexplicable changes in mood, as indicators of potential exposure to harmful content online.

The family of a then 22-year-old terror suspect in Singapore detected changes in the way the woman behaved. They also knew of her online activities two years before her detention in 2017.

MHA said then that if her family members had alerted the authorities when she was younger, she could have potentially been turned back from the path of radicalisation.

That would entail intervention, something 17-year-old student Ethan Han said needs to be balanced with privacy concerns.

"I feel that everyone deserves their own online privacy, but I can understand if the government does regular screening for suspicious activities to ensure such things do not happen again," added the first-year financial informatics student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Bonding with children

Communication and technology professor Lim Sun Sun said parents have to set aside privacy needs to detect and prevent their children from imbibing extremist content online. But that does not mean spying on them.

Parents can speak to their children to understand who they are interacting with online and offline, and the types of technology platforms they are using.

"It really is a matter of relationship building between parents and children that maintains open lines of communication," added Prof Lim, who is head of the humanities, arts and social sciences cluster at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

But Dr Soon noted that physical and personal spaces are particularly valued by youth, as they are at an age where they are discovering and developing their identity.

"They are also at the stage of life where figures of authority are distrusted," she added.

They will not welcome restrictive access to the Internet and it might even worsen instead of resolve the issue of trust, said Dr Natalie Pang, a senior lecturer in the communications and new media department at the National University of Singapore.

"Restrictions can sometimes drive people to find alternatives, which can result in youth ending up in even darker corners of the Web," she added.

Speaking to the media after a meeting between Christian and Muslim leaders at the Yusof Ishak Mosque in Woodlands, one of the two sites targeted by the 16-year-old, he said there are no easy

options in tackling youth self-radicalisation and the spread of far-right extremism on the Internet.

"You can block some of the more egregious stuff, but there are ways to getting round to look at things that people want, just like pornography," he said.

"You can't completely block it, even though we take down sites. Others will spring up, including child pornography, and lots of bad things go out too."

And when the authorities do intervene, it may end up sowing distrust.

Muhammad Faizal Abdul Rahman of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies' Centre of Excellence for National Security said: "Events in other countries, driven by geopolitics or local issues, are causing sentiments that frame law enforcement agencies as a threat (instead of as a solution) to spread."

Should online platforms police material that can lead to radicalisation?

Dr Pang said a multi-stakeholder approach to the governance of the Internet is "urgently needed".

This would create a specific set of standards and filters on the types of content and communities existing online, especially those that promote violence and extremist ideologies.

Faizal, who specialises in terrorism studies, said online hate speech, although problematic with real-world consequences, may not openly espouse violence even though it may inspire followers to act offline.

"It is not possible to monitor or block every site, hence the need for more digital literacy and cross-cultural understanding," he added.

Education and regulation

Dr Rohan Gunaratna, professor of security studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said a mix of regulations and education is needed to counter online self-radicalisation.

He called for the government to work with technology companies, such as Facebook, to remove content related to terrorists and extremists, but also for the religious space here to be regulated to ensure and maintain religious harmony.

This, he said, will prevent any animosity from breeding between any of the different faiths.

Dr Gunaratna said the government should also work with the education sector to raise youth awareness of online radicalisation.

He added that while privacy is precious, youngsters should be educated both formally and informally about the need to strike a balance between freedom and security.

Dr Gunaratna said youth have to understand that when there is a credible threat such as online extremism and radicalisation, the public should accept a trade-off and "surrender a degree of freedom to the State to protect the public".

Assoc Prof Jason Tan from the National Institute of Education, whose research focuses on education reform, noted that the Ministry of Education's move to enhance its Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum this year is a "step in the right direction".

The move was announced in March last year by then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

To help students cope with the new pressures that arise from the prevalence of social media and smart devices, schools here are spending about 50% more time discussing cyber-wellness issues.

At the secondary school level, contemporary issues such as online media and race and religion are discussed in CCE lessons at least once a fortnight.

Prof Tan noted that under the new programme, teachers are pushed to facilitate discussions on those issues, which is increasingly important given the massive amount of information students sift through online daily.

Junior college student Kareena Natasha, 18, was shocked that a teenager just two years younger than her could plan a terror attack here.

"I am also worried. If a young boy can get wrongly influenced by online content, there may be others," she said.

"Thank God he was caught quickly before he could execute his plan... intervention and counselling can perhaps help him change his mindset and behaviour." — The Straits Times/ANN