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Social media changing demographics of terrorism

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Social media changing demographics of terrorism; Potential extremists now younger, experts say

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Social media has changed the demographic of potential jihadists but its impact was far less prevalent in propelling the Arab Spring and last year's London riots than previously thought, according to experts at a major scientific conference here.

U.S. scientists, speaking Saturday at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, discussed the use of web surveillance in the fight against terrorism and infectious diseases.

This year's AAAS meeting, being held in Vancouver, has drawn more than 7,000 scientists and educators.

Some symposia are looking at how technology has enabled researchers to home in on specific events or keywords based on Internet use. One discovery found that use of social media has lowered the age of someone advocating "jihad."

Before 2004, those advocating jihad were 26 years old on average and most interaction was face to face. After 2004, the average age dropped to 20 and social media became the chief form of interaction.

"They're young people reinforcing each other. It's so easy to play it out among themselves; they can get younger and younger," said Hsinchun Chen, director of the artificial intelligence lab at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

"They don't have to be so big and macho," said Chen. "They can be young kids but the image they are able to portray via social media is of someone who is older."

Chen's lab created the terrorism informatics research known as Dark Web, which was funded by the National Science Foundation and other U.S. government agencies, including the CIA.

The Dark Web project has generated one of the largest databases in the world about extremist and terrorist-generated Internet sites, blogs and forums.

Though social media is credited with lowering the age of potential terrorists being monitored by intelligence agencies, its influence on young people in the London riots and during the Arab Spring was much less than

thought.

Kathleen Carley, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University, said the most common message in the London riots on Twitter turned out to be simply: "OMG they're rioting in London."

Carley's research areas include text mining and the impact of telecommunication technologies in disaster or crisis situations.

Less than 2 per cent of the tweets in London during the riots were related to Twitter users needing help. As for the Arab Spring, Carley said use of Twitter increased but the notion that the social media drove protests proved false.

"It did not cause the Arab Spring. It was used to tell people where to go, but whether or not they actually went depended on their own predilection and what their friends were doing," she told the Star.

Another speaker, Eduardo Jezierski, said researchers have found that keywords in Google provide an early indicator of outbreaks of infectious diseases such as the flu.

By monitoring keyword searches in Google, public health officials could learn two weeks sooner that a flu outbreak resulted in increased hospital and clinic visits, said Jezierski, chief technology officer with InSTEDD, a California company that designs technology tools to better deliver critical services to vulnerable populations.

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