

STATEMENT OF RANKING MEMBER JACKIE SPEIER (D-CA)

“Jihadist Use of Social Media: How to Prevent Terrorism while Preserving Innovation”

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I would like to thank the witnesses for being here today and look forward to gaining insight on terrorists' use of social media and how the power of social media can be used for both countering the narrative used by terrorists and effective information sharing of potential terrorist activity.

Social media is the #1 activity on the world wide web, accounting for over 22% of all time spent online in the United States. For instance, twitter averages almost 200 million tweets per day, while Facebook has more than 800 million active users throughout the world. Social media spread messages to several users at one time, and their power has proven to be remarkable.

When it comes to looking at the power of social media, look to the Arab Spring. As the Arab Spring ensued, social media spread messages to which the world subscribed, followed, tweeted, and retweeted. For instance, the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's resignation, the total rate of tweets about political change in Egypt ballooned ten-fold. The top 23 videos featuring protest and political commentary had nearly five and a half million views.

More than 75 percent of people that clicked on embedded Twitter links about the Arab Spring were from outside the Arab world. Social media became a "megaphone" that disseminated information and excitement about the uprisings to the outside world.

The users of social media in the Middle East caused the world to take notice and witness a revolution. Social media enabled these revolutionaries, change agents in their own right, to spread their messages beyond national borders to all corners of the world.

Knowing the power of social media and its reach, it is quite natural that terrorist groups and cells would try to use social media to their advantage. For example, we know that a former Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula leader, Anwar al-Awlaki was known to some as the “bin laden of the Internet”

The late al-Awlaki used various social media, such as Facebook, blogs, and You Tube videos to try to recruit and develop a cadre of terrorists in the United States. We know that al-Awlaki used online videos to praise those who not only perpetrated violent acts against people in the United States, such as Major Nidal Hassan, but also those who waged unsuccessful attacks such as the attempted Christmas Day bomber Umar Farok Abdulmutallab.

We also know that attempted Times Square bomber Faizal Shazad was in contact with al-Awlaki via email. What we do not know is how many people have actually been radicalized by viewing blogs, newsfeeds, and tweets by al-Awlaki and others like him that espouse violent ideology.

At what point do those influenced by terrorist ideology over the internet become real life terrorists?

Terrorists' acts, by design, are intended to create fear or draw attention to their message, regardless of whether the message is hatred for a particular group of people, a government, or a policy.

Terrorists, through their actions, also have the agenda of causing economic disruption. Just their being menacing and prompting the government to take action and extend its financing can sometimes be a win for them.

Hence, who is the real audience for terrorists on the internet? Is the government, which terrorists may feel will spend its money and energy chasing what it finds potential leads? Or is it for those that terrorists really feel may be led to espouse their ideology and eventually act upon it?

Since we understand the power of social media, as effectively used in the Middle East, what can we do to empower users of social media to counter the message terrorists spread?

I am eager to learn today how people can be encouraged to use social media to spread the message that America is not a nation that is fearful but a nation that is abundant with ideas, expression, and innovation.

We know that a vigilant public can provide essential information to law enforcement that thwarts terrorist activity. For example, the attempted Times Square bombing by Faizal Shazad was prevented by law enforcement who received tips of suspicious activity in the area.

Are there ways that social media providers can partner with the government to mitigate terrorist activity on their sites without the fear of strict regulations and censorship? How do we encourage the public to utilize these platforms to act as our "eyes and ears"?

Since social media are such valuable information sharing tools, is it possible for law enforcement to use social media to share trends and concerns that may threaten our communities, educate the public on how to report suspicious activity, and develop new partnerships with the community?

Is it possible for social media to be used on levels that would actually affect the scope of our intelligence gathering? For example, a few months ago, the Afghan Taliban exchanged Tweets with NATO in Kabul during an attack. Could social media present unique opportunities for counter-messaging and direct engagement with terror groups that our government is currently overlooking?

I am eager to hear from the witnesses how social media can be used to counter the message espoused by terrorists. I am also looking forward to hearing how social media can be used to share information, and how users can be assured that by sharing information, they will not give up their Constitutional rights.

With social media being such powerful tools, what steps are companies, users, and law enforcement taking to effectively thwart terrorist activity? What more should they be doing?

Innovation on the internet, particularly in the emerging social media field, moves at a far more rapid pace than innovation in government. How can the US government keep up with rapidly evolving technologies enough to keep pace with tech-savvy internet criminals?

What other robust actions can the government take? What actions is the government taking now? Since social media are so widespread, it is unfathomable to think that the government is not using it to its advantage. I regret that there is not a government panelist here today that can speak to that, hopefully we can have someone from the government speak to this subcommittee about this in the future.

I would once again like to thank our witnesses today and look forward to hearing from them about how social media, which is being used by terrorists and non terrorists alike, can be effective partners in preventing terrorism without stifling innovation.