

PUT AN END TO ONLINE HATRED

THE Islamic State (IS) militant group has been using social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram, to romanticise “saviours” in their “jihad” to free the oppressed and establish an “Islamic” government. The group posts graphic images, videos, magazines such as *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, on social media platforms to propagate their cause.

In 2015, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee estimated that 30,000 foreign fighters travelled to Syria and Iraq due to being influenced by the propaganda. The question is, how do normal men and women become radicalised and eventually adopt violent extremism online?

White supremacist groups also use online platforms to radicalise others. The attacker responsible for

the shootings that occurred in El Paso, Texas, last year had posted his hateful manifesto online, as did other shooters before him.

While it is true that violent incidences of domestic terrorism in Malaysia are not the norm, they have occurred in the past and may continue to happen if we are not proactive in standing up against hatred. This cannot be addressed if we fail to recognise the dangers of online hate speech, which not only grooms people into becoming extremists but also play a part in the recruitment processes of militant groups.

In a research collaboration with Dr Ahmad El-Muhammady, we analysed the discourse of terrorists via private Telegram groups administered by one of Malaysia’s most notorious terrorists, Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi. We discov-

ered that Wannady had a meticulously planned process, and a pivotal part of it was influencing people through the normalisation of violence.

This is not a new method. Hateful rhetoric, such as the one used by the Nazi leadership, continues to be utilised by extremists. Similar hateful propaganda had facilitated the massacres in Srebrenica, Bosnia, and the ethnic cleansing of the Tutsis by the Hutu in Rwanda.

This is where we need to reflect on our actions as a community. It has become commonplace to resort to ethnic slurs and insults of a religious nature particularly when a problem occurs, for which we feel another group is to blame.

This was seen during the nation’s battle against Covid-19. The rising number of Covid-19 cases, fear of the virus and the anxiety due to

economic uncertainty have made us worried. This may have contributed to postings of hate and anger online as many people look for something, or someone, to blame.

In the beginning, we saw blame was directed at Chinese nationals, which also impacted Chinese Malaysians. Later it was attributed to the Tabligh cluster and anyone linked to them. Then, it moved onto migrants and refugees, before the public recently pinned the blame on certain groups post-Sabah elections.

If we are not careful with our words, they can lead to discrimination, hatred and hostility towards an entire group of people. Case in point — the hate directed at refugees amid the Covid-19, considering the sympathy and contributions of Malaysians towards their plight before the virus

hit our shores.

Without realising it, some Malaysians showed signs of extremism through the hateful language used to attack migrants and refugees.

It is naive to think that the saying, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is true. The impact of hate speech can often be worse, as its effects can be devastating.

We must reflect upon our choice of words and our actions when it comes to online expression. There is ample evidence to indicate that online hatred can turn into a reality, endangering life and limb.

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