
You Too Can Be Awlaki!

JARRET M. BRACHMAN AND ALIX N. LEVINE

“But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.”

— JEAN BAUDRILLARD

“There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman; some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me: only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable... I simply am not there.”

— PATRICK BATEMAN, *American Psycho*

INTRODUCTION

A search for the name “Anwar al-Awlaki” on YouTube pulls up thousands of results. He is in the company of half-naked pop icons and family pets defying gravity. But in al-Awlaki’s videos, a bespectacled man sits alone, reflectively musing for long periods of time. His quirky look and soft-spoken voice can easily mask the fact that al-Awlaki has become one of the most lethal and popular arrows in al-Qaeda’s quiver; the “most dangerous man in the world,” according to an NYPD counterterrorism official.¹

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Al-Awlaki, an American-born cleric now hiding in Yemen, managed to become the most likeable terrorist among Western supporters because of his ability to combine religious doctrine with colloquial Western references. His English-speaking audience can easily understand his message without a deep knowledge of Islamic history or complex theological arguments. By using the Internet to brand himself as a user-friendly al-Qaeda personality, al-Awlaki has repackaged al-Qaeda's convoluted and inaccessible message into something that his followers are not only able to understand, but can replicate on their own.

America's counterterrorism establishment is acutely aware that a growing number of individuals have moved beyond consuming extremist content online and now yearns to reproduce this content in new online social media. What is lacking, however, is an explanation for why and when this process becomes a security concern. Is uploading a photo of Anwar al-Awlaki as your Facebook avatar a cause for concern? Or is this just a way to blow off steam? Could it actually be therapeutic in that it helps individuals release the frustration and anger they hold in the real world? These, and many other questions, have yet to be asked—and are still inadequately answered—by counterterrorism researchers inside and outside of the government.

This article develops a new model for understanding the process of online al-Qaeda mobilization. Although some work has been done on the issue of homegrown mobilization, very little has focused on the interplay between Internet-based mobilization and physical mobilization. Reports that a terror suspect used the Internet in his or her process of becoming more radicalized is usually *post hoc*, almost an afterthought. This article finds that it is, in fact, at the heart of the overall mobilization process today.

Take, for instance, recent reporting on the young Portland man who sought to detonate a bomb at a Christmas-tree-lighting ceremony. Using the online moniker of Ibn al-Mubarak, this teenage would-be terrorist stayed busy in 2009 by researching and writing articles for the online pro al-Qaeda magazine, *Jihad Recollections*. After publishing three articles in that online magazine, Mohamed Osman Mohamud sought, unsuccessfully, to publish in the al-Qaeda English-language online magazine, *Inspire*. His jump from cyber-terrorism to real-world terrorism took off in 2010, as he strove to live up to his online success by going "operational" in a mass lethality attack.

Whereas conventional approaches to homegrown radicalization would treat Mohamud's cyber participation as one element of his overall mobilization, the approach taken in this article seeks to understand online

participation with more granularity. A dynamic model, one that can embrace the interactivity of various states of mind—in this case the online and the physical—offers more analytical traction over this increasingly pervasive issue of online extremists trying to live up to themselves in the “real world.”

This article will use this theoretical framework to walk the reader, step-by-step, through the mechanics driving the interplay between online and physical al-Qaeda mobilization. Al-Awlaki’s original content is objectified, repackaged, and even commoditized in al-Qaeda’s virtual economy. Fans have been transformed from passive consumers into active reproducers of al-Qaeda content: anyone can now be an al-Qaeda propagandist.

WHY AL-AWLAKI?

The conventional explanation for al-Awlaki’s broad appeal is his folksy stylizing, accessible messages, and colloquial Western references. Not only is his message accessible, but until he became a wanted terrorist, he himself was easily reachable through e-mail. Nidal Malik Hasan, for example, asked al-Awlaki for “religious guidance,” according to U.S. authorities, before he allegedly shot and killed thirteen people at the Fort Hood Army base in Texas.

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Al-Awlaki’s accessibility can be attributed to the way he has styled himself as a caricature of previous generations of hard-line Salafi clerics. He has replicated all of their surface attributes: he carries himself like them, preaches like them, and addresses

similar issues. But the difference between al-Awlaki and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, for example, is that al-Awlaki lacks depth, both in knowledge and expertise. He is a replica that, ironically, sells precisely because he is perceived as being more authentic.

Two decades ago, formally trained religious scholars like al-Maqdisi, Abdallah Azzam, and Hamoud bin Uqla as-Shuaybi dominated the extremist scene. Their followers widely disseminated their books, articles, published interviews, and recordings of their lectures. They were intellectual heavyweights and their writings now form the ideological backbone of the al-Qaeda movement.

The intellectual prowess and perceived clerical legitimacy of the next generation of hard-line sheikhs was a noticeable step down from the

previous generation. Figures like Abu Hamza al-Masri, Abu Qatada, and Omar Bakri Mohammed rocketed to stardom during the 1990s because they were viewed—at least by Western, English-speaking hardliners—as more accessible facsimiles of legendary Arabic-language sheikhs. These “lite” versions resembled the previous incarnation closely enough, even though they may have lacked the same level of intellectual horsepower or religious legitimacy. The “lite” sheikhs were more effective in speaking to Western hard-liners precisely because their message required less baseline knowledge to understand.

Until al-Awlaki’s personal website was shut down in the aftermath of the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, the website hosted a discussion forum that was popular with hundreds of English-speaking, hard-line adherents. One online al-Awlaki supporter posting to that forum illustrated the way that his followers refuse to think about the quality of al-Awlaki’s credentials and choose the accessibility and emotional resonance of his message over his pedigree:¹

There is no need to find out if he is at par with true scholars or is he just an “imam”. He is a leader whose message is very, very relevant for today’s Muslims. So, listen to him. You can’t go wrong, *insha’Allah*.²

For his followers, al-Awlaki is a conduit for the unadulterated word of God, something critically important for Salafi Muslims, the most puritanical of Sunni Muslims who believe that truth can only be found in the unfiltered teachings of the Qu’ran, Hadith, and the Sunnah, or way of the Prophet. An online participant explained this sentiment:

Anwar’s interpretation of God’s will is so close to the book of Allah (swt) [the most glorified, the most high] and that is the reason why the believers feel its impacts on their hearts. Shiekh Anwar does not hide the ayah’s of Allah (swt) and may Allah protect him and give him *Shahada* [martyrdom] at the end *insha’Allah* [God willing].³

Al-Awlaki helps to distill only the most meaningful and relevant teachings from this already back-to-basics approach, in a way that impacts his followers on an emotional, not intellectual, level. Online participants are eager to sing his praises and explain what they appreciate about al-Awlaki based on their emotional admiration of him:

* The article faithfully transcribes the comments from online users in their original syntax, meaning that all spelling, grammar, and other mistakes made in the original postings are intact. This unvarnished presentation is an important representation of the online community being discussed in this article. Where appropriate, translations are provided.

[Al-Awlaki] speaks the *haqq* [truth] and when we hear it... it tastes so sweet, doesn't it? For the most part, we are deprived of scholars/*da'ees* who speak such truth without fear of the blame of the blamers.... so when we hear it, it immediately goes to the heart and impacts us like nothing else can.⁴

To his followers, al-Awlaki offers the unvarnished truth and his words cut to the heart of issues that matter in his fans' daily lives. He is authentic yet comprehensible, religiously legitimate and Americanized. Rather than just merely attracting the most radical of extremists, like Osama bin Laden's following, al-Awlaki's audience also includes individuals that have followed him since he was considered a mainstream spiritual advisor in America, before he was propagating such radical messages as he does today. With his online accessibility, as well as his easily comprehensible messages, al-Awlaki is the new and improved version of Osama bin Laden.

CELEBRITY STATUS

Al-Awlaki can be best understood as a replica of a long line of replicas. And like any copy of a copy, the quality and nuance is continually reduced with each replication. Al-Awlaki has not only stripped away the tedious religious proofs and extensive theological arguments that once characterized the work of the senior sheikhs, but he has actually embraced this abridgement.

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Only a handful of individuals possess the level of gravitas and religious expertise to role-play a heavyweight sheikh. But al-Awlaki's approach, predicated on making maximum religious knowledge openly accessible to as many people as possible, allows followers the chance to do more than just consume his ideas: they can actually be him.

Al-Awlaki's accessible model can be replicated far more easily than that of a senior sheikh. Al-Awlaki seems to understand the benefit of balancing himself as an accessible celebrity. He is both an abstract symbol as well as a populist man of the people. In February 2009, al-Awlaki wrote the following entry on his blog:

Today in the West there is a growing "Celebrity Shaykh" culture, where many young brothers and sisters are willing to hand over their collars to Shuyukh [most revered religious teachers] to "guide" them

to wherever the shaykh in his infinite wisdom sees fit. In such an environment the truth needs to be proclaimed and when a scholar or da'ee makes a mistake it needs to be pointed out and retracted. I do not see this celebrity Shaykh culture as being a healthy thing for anyone; not the students and not the Shuyukh. We all make mistakes and when we do they need to be corrected and if we make them public they should be corrected in the public sphere.⁵

In this case, al-Awlaki—a man who helped to engineer the contemporary understanding of a celebrity sheikh—is, ironically, defining the concept further by rejecting it. In other words, to preempt any criticism of being a celebrity sheikh, he drapes himself with the flag of populism. By implying that his popularity is a product of his humility, not his quest for celebrity, al-Awlaki seems to be positioning himself so that he can leverage all the positives of celebrity status while avoiding the criticism.

It is precisely because al-Awlaki is not Osama bin Laden that he has been so successful. Since there already is a bin Laden, each al-Qaeda figure needs to adapt, innovate, and stylize himself and his brand differently. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian physician who seems to manage al-Qaeda's day-to-day operations, is serious, well-read, and long-winded, and he appeals to common sense. The late Mustafa Abu al-Yazid also played this stoic card, which may lend gravitas but is not conducive for a sixteen-year-old to role-play. Libyans Abu Laith al-Libi, who branded himself as a commanding general in the trenches with his men, and Abu Yahya al-Libi, the fighting sheikh, were more accessible but still not easy for the urban, Western, English-speaking child to emulate.⁶

Youth who are seeking role models need someone who is easier to emulate, a figure that they can become without too much work or thought, and who makes them feel as if they are producing something meaningful and relevant. For example, one online poster expressed frustration at having only audiotapes and posted the following on al-Awlaki's blog on August 4, 2008:

[Shaykh Anwar] may allah reward you are the best imam by far. but sheikh you have to have something where we can see you. something like posting a video on youtube and you answering questions from e-mails something in that nature. allah being my witness i always listen to one of your lectures everyday and i just finished the battles. MY TEACHER MY IMAM I LOVE YOU FOR THE SAKE OF ALLAH.. AND on the day of resurrection i hope allah well put me with you b/c i love you for the sake of allah...⁷

Seeing al-Awlaki in video form allows his fans to better comprehend the difference between who they are and who they want to be—embodied

in him. Consider the thousands of teenagers profiled by the reality singing competition, *American Idol*. Many of those who are profiled are obviously bad singers, but they seem to believe that they have a real shot at becoming superstars. The show frequently takes viewers into the lives of these aspiring singers, showing the contestants singing earnestly into their bedroom mirrors or emulating their favorite pop star down to the minutiae. The dissonance between their mythic delusions and the judges' harsh reality checks makes for great television.

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into their bedroom mirrors, however, these contestants perform each day on their computers by posting news, information, and other content to extremist websites. Others go as far as to record their own videos, stylized with the same kinds of logos and soundtracks that have become associated with official al-Qaeda productions.

These individuals perform a role that they have learned through repetitive viewing of others similar to al-Awlaki. The more they see it performed and the easier that celebrities like al-Awlaki make it for anyone to act like them, speak like them, and preach like them, the more these individuals begin to identify as celebrities themselves. The line between their physical self that is performing and the virtual self that they have constructed in the image of their favorite caricatures begins to blur.

Take, for example, Abdel Hameed Shehadeh, an American citizen arrested in Hawaii in October for making false statements about his alleged attempt to join the Taliban and fight against American troops. According to the criminal complaint, Shehadeh operated several websites that "advocated violent jihad against the West," including statements and recordings from al-Qaeda leaders. Shehadeh told federal authorities that one of his sites was "designed to mirror and reformat the teachings" of al-Awlaki. In a post on al-Awlaki's blog, Shehadeh discussed his own website's support for al-Awlaki:

[My site is] 100% supporting you, *yaa Imam Al-Gharb* [Imam of the West]. *Yaa Imam* please come out with a new lecture. The Muslims of the west need a push.⁸

Shehadeh also posted comments in support of other extremist bloggers, including Samir Khan, a North Carolina man known for distributing

terrorist propaganda online and more recently for aligning himself with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. "I am with you 100 %...I will support you with my new website," Shehadeh wrote on Khan's blog.⁹ In essence, Shehadeh is publically professing his desire to replicate al-Awlaki. His personal websites and comments on other blogs become, in many ways, his version of role-playing al-Awlaki in the virtual world.

LIVING A DOUBLE LIFE

Thanks to the rise of social media sites, which make it easy for anyone to project virtual and meaningful versions of themselves online, individuals who support the global al-Qaeda movement can live two lives simultaneously: one in the physical world and one in the virtual world. One user of a hard-line Islamic discussion forum said:

Islam is not all about big talk, those who engage in it in life and esp. online without backing it up are deficient in one sense or another, you can see it clearly when people say things so extreme you have no doubt that this is just an outlet for their frustrations. Oh you who believe why do you say that which you do not do? It's easy to live a double life these days - a virtual life and a real one.¹⁰

Both of these lives are "real" to the individual in that they consist of meaningful friendships and the production of intellectual content, which can be read and disseminated and can even have an impact. But given the flexibility of creation in cyberspace, an individual can imitate attributes and replicate content much faster than in the real world. There is a lower barrier for entry to becoming a practicing extremist on the Internet than there is in the real world.

The following model synthesizes three bodies of thought to exemplify how individuals live a double life. The first is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's theory of alienation and self-consciousness. The theory provides useful insight into how individuals come to understand who they are (and are not) by interacting with the world around them. The second idea comes from Jean Baudrillard's writings on replication in cyberspace. Embodied in the concept of the simulacra, Baudrillard helps make better sense of the complex interplay between reality and simulation, between the real world and the virtual. Finally, this article draws on Judith Butler's work on the performativity of social roles. Butler's research focuses on the social construction of identity and the ways in which individuals come to understand those identities by role-playing social roles. According to Butler, humans come to learn how to act by "doing."

Step 1: Alienate Yourself

Before individuals can mobilize themselves in the physical world, they must first achieve some degree of self-awareness about who they are in an extremist context. In other words, they need to assess their current level of mobilization. While this process is not straightforward, there is an underlying logic to how aspiring online extremists come to realize the disconnect between their virtual and physical levels of mobilization. As these individuals use the Internet to create user profiles and update their online statuses, build blogs and upload content—as they join the virtual extremist world—they gain a better sense about where they stand compared to others and in relation to their own aspirations. It is in the process of creating and deploying a virtual self into the online sphere that these individuals come to realize how different their physical selves are from the mobilized online extremist that they purport to be in the virtual world. In a sense, their online activity helps them to feel alienated from themselves, at least their virtual selves.

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German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argued in *Aesthetics* that a human interaction with his or her environment—referred to as “labor”—is a conscious process of production.¹¹ An individual, according to Hegel, “draws out of himself and puts before himself what he is and whatever else is. Things in nature are only immediate and single, while man as spirit duplicates himself.”¹² Through this process of conscious labor into an environment, an individual turns the product of his labor into a virtual extension of himself, one that is him but also removed from him.

For Hegel, because man “represents himself (his own essence) to himself,” he is able to alter the world around him in his own image. He can have what Hegel calls the “external realization of himself.”¹³ Art, for example, is the process of “self-production” that Hegel most emphasizes. As the product of human labor, art—much like making a blog or designing a composite Photoshop graphic online—is what Hegel might call a product of human self-creation through labor.

As online al-Qaeda supporters invest themselves into these virtual environments by creating their own avatars, profiles, content, and more, they are self-producing in a virtual space. They construct themselves in the process of laboring in their online world, and therein achieve self-consciousness.

Replication includes reproducing more than just content; it can take numerous forms, depending on whether the replication occurs in the physical or virtual world.

Cyberspace allows al-Qaeda to mobilize faster and to a higher degree online than in the real world. On the Internet, one is not bounded by

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the same kinds of social limitations and legal constraints. Individuals can openly and loudly cheer for al-Qaeda's ideology by replicating its content in the form of videos, audio files, composite images, and monographs.

Beyond replicating content, users can actually replicate themselves, or at least virtual projections of themselves. They can register an unlimited number of accounts on social networking

websites. They can start as many blogs as they want and tweet without constraint. They can create avatars and post quotes in their e-mail signatures, gain "reputation points" in forums, build up their "radicalization scores" on websites, and tag themselves in an infinite number of photos. The Internet allows individuals to replicate themselves *ad absurdum*.

This process of ongoing self-replication becomes, as Hegel might say, an alienating force in that it helps to illuminate the difference between who an individual is (in the physical world) and the ideal attributes he or she aspires to embody—attributes that he or she can only manifest in the online world. As individuals build themselves online, they come to understand the dissonance between their virtual and physical selves. The dissonance that one feels between the physical self and the idealized, stylized, online archetype of the self often leads to the individual trying to reproduce his or her avatar in the physical world through smaller, innocuous actions, exemplified by "Ibraheim" who posted the following on al-Awlaki's blog:

I have listened to the story of Musa on Anwar's prophets series and was so impressed with his life I name my newborn son after him... I feel very inspired to help this *ummah* [Muslim community] lately but do not know which direction to go into. I try my best to help the widows in my family and I try my best to support my own family but I really feel like my life is being wasted unless I give this *ummah* something back...I am tired of feeling guilty and depressed because I give no benefit to this *ummah*...¹⁴

After enough online labor, one begins to see the difference between

the *mujahid* that one could be (the avatar) and the disappointment of one's real-life self. Consider how the following participant on al-Awlaki's discussion forum, "Majed," tried to resolve that difference between alienation in the physical world and the virtual world:

i wish there was an Anwar i could take as an example and learn from in real life. unfortunately all there is where i live is *shaitan* [devil]. I still try to learn as much as i can from you *mashallah* an excellent example to learn from and listen to. your brother *majed*. (cant wait for your new series)¹⁵

Another participant, "Umm Abdullah," posted the following message to another online friend, "Umm Umar," on the al-Awlaki forum:

umm umar i wish i knew you in real life we would have been great friends. We think exactly the same.¹⁶

Individuals, according to this theory, come to understand themselves by recognizing what they are not. But
 it is only in the process of creation, in this case by participating in the online extremist world, that people can gain awareness about who they are (the real) and who they are not but want to be (the ideal). "Um Abdullah" provided an excellent example of this longing to use the virtual world as an imperfect replacement for a longing in the physical world:

"umm umar i wish i knew you in real life we would have been great friends. We think exactly the same."

I haven't been to the beach since I was about 10 yrs old (in my home country), but I do miss the beach, so beautiful. I found an image website to write text on images, so I saw the animated beach one and thought it was just perfect, and wrote the word "Extremism" on it.¹⁷

Online al-Qaeda supporters eventually want to become their avatar because it embodies all of the hopes, dreams, and goals that they are unable to actualize in the physical world. The question is whether they will take real steps toward reconciling that difference.

Step 2: Copy a Copy

The iconic cartoon starlet, Betty Boop, came to define the flapper era in American history. Her pin-up stylizing, piercing voice, and hallmark "Boop-Oop-A-Doop" catchphrase helped rocket Betty into pop sensationism virtually overnight. Often forgotten, however, is that Boop was cari-

captured on a real person, Helen Kane. Kane, a novelty actress, had achieved a modest following by parodying another, more well-known actress, Clara Bow. In other words, Betty Boop was a mimeograph (cartoon) of a copy (Helen Kane) of an actress (Clara Bow).

Over time, the legacies of both Kane and Bow faded. But Boop, this replica of a replica of an actress, remains seared into the American collective consciousness. We may not know anything about Boop other than her performance; she has no depth beyond the surface attributes, largely because what she referenced no longer holds social value. Betty Boop has become a reference without referent: a copy of a map of a land, but a land that no longer exists. She is what French theorist Jean Baudrillard would call a simulacrum.¹⁸

Philosophical discussions about mimicry date back to Plato's allegory of the cave and Aristotle's concept of mimesis. The most influential contemporary thinker on the simulation of reality in a world shaped by the Internet and instant communication is Baudrillard. It was Baudrillard who advanced thinking of this notion throughout his career by developing a framework for understanding how humans replicate themselves into hyper-reality. According to Baudrillard's framework, the world has become riddled with Betty Boops, references to real things where those real things are now absent. These phantoms of the real, however, have replaced the real because we give them meaning and we accept them as real.

Zachary Chesser, a 20-year-old Virginian who came to fame for threatening the creators of *South Park* and who recently pleaded guilty to attempting to join the terrorist group al-Shabaab, understands the importance of replication. He wrote:

There are four basic mediums through which one can transmit information effectively: video, audio, still-images, and writing. In addition to this there are two fields through which one can spread this information: the real world and the virtual world. Every single method needs to be used and used well.¹⁹

It is through the replication of two things—ideas and content—that Chesser made his online alias, Abu Talhah al-Amrikee, a recognizable name to individuals who frequent these types of websites.²⁰ Chesser's online activities demonstrated his eagerness to propel himself into online superstardom, like the notorious al-Qaeda magazine editor Samir Khan, or the infamous al-Qaeda hacker "Irhabi007." It was in the process of distilling and reproducing content into accessible, catchy, and easily read sound bites that Chesser seemed to believe that he too would have his name added to

this growing list of al-Qaeda legends.

For Baudrillard, humans now live in this confused state of blurred boundaries between the real and the self-referential. Movies like *Avatar*, *The Matrix*, and *Inception* evoke the notion of uniting two worlds; the real and the simulated collide in unpredictable and often violent ways. Humans want to be famous, often just for the sake of being famous. They lose sight of the depth behind the reason for which figures like al-Awlaki gain legendary status. They see only the symbols and the references to the fame, and hope that they, too, can gain such recognition. An online user named “salaam” provided a prime example in this post:

I don't know about you guys, but I want to be the Abu Bakr or Umar of this Ummah. Who do you want to be?²¹

In November 2009, Yousef al-Khattab, the founding member of a New York-based Islamic extremist group, launched a thread on the hard-line Internet discussion forum, *Islamic Awakening*, entitled, “Re: Who do you think could be the next Major Nidal Hasan?” Echoing the same desire as those profiled above, users enthusiastically responded to the question. Their answers, however, also reflected a lack of consensus about whether Hasan was even the appropriate archetype to replicate. One of those posters, Abu Abdallah al-Bulghari, wrote:

I have a better question. Who of them will be the next [Chechen rebel leader] Dudaev? For those who does not know: Dudaev used to be a general in a Kaafir [Non-Muslim] Russian army, until he joined a secessionist movement [the Chechen resistance movement affiliated with al-Qaeda] that had never stopped since Russia “conquered” [conquered] Caucasus.²²

Selecting the heroes that a community idolizes in order to replicate them is a socially contested process. Another point made by al-Qaeda supporters is that, in the process of replication, the quality and sophistication of the resulting products diminishes. For example, on July 17, 2009, the online participant “Suhail” wrote:

Then stop posting one-liners without backing it up. If you really want people to take you seriously than post something that has some substance rather than one-liners.²³

Despite the virtual nature of their participation, online al-Qaeda supporters are both aware of and concerned with the law enforcement implications of their online activities. In the course of replicating a thread on October 29, 2008, one user raised a curious point about being arrested

for the way in which people replicate themselves online. “Soldier of Islam” posted the following on a thread entitled, “Could your avatar get you arrested?”:

Salaam, I saw this post on another forum, thought I would see what you think. Since the new terror laws were brought in, 2006; it has now become illegal to condone or promote terrorism in any way; including being in possession of terrorist material, so does this include avatars, which sometimes include pictures of *mujahideen*, and pictures of the 9.11 burning towers, should we be worried.²⁴

“Umm Ahmed” responded to the question:

I wouldn't worry unless that's you in your avatar.²⁵

“Soldier of Islam” countered:

“P.S. My avatar is fine, it is a man going out pigeon shooting”²⁶

Without any depth, one becomes a one-dimensional cartoon—a Betty Boop. While mass producible, audiences come to forget to what referent the reference ever referred. While this characteristic certainly diminishes one's originality, there are times when a copy of a copy can rise in the ranks of a terrorist group precisely because it has become who the group wants it to be. Take the case of Samir Khan, a North Carolina man who went from blogging in his parents' house to the principal author of al-Qaeda's online English-language magazine issued in the Arabian Peninsula. Khan's transformation from an online al-Qaeda supporter to a key member in the al-Qaeda roster occurred when he moved to Yemen, following in the footsteps of al-Awlaki and others like him, and became a “traitor to America,” as he referred to himself in the online magazine *Inspire*.²⁷

Step 3: Role-Play

According to social theorist Judith Butler's pioneering research on gender, each social identity, or role, that an individual assumes carries with it certain behavioral expectations. Men, for example, walk or talk in a certain way. Through iterative interactions, humans come to intersubjective agreements about acceptable ranges for each kind of social construction. An individual seeking to be seen as a “man” by those around him performs actions that fit within those ranges of acceptability or normality. In a very real sense, the world is a stage and all of us perform: we play ourselves, or at least the selves that we want people to see.

The same can be said for online supporters of groups like al-Qaeda.

As these individuals register on Internet discussion forums and build avatars on social networking sites, and as they upload content and create blogs, they become “real” within the virtual context. For some, these online personas, or avatars, are close mirrors of their physical lives. Individuals may use their own images on their profile pages or openly discuss things that happen in their physical lives. Others, however, create stylized personas that differ significantly from the physical lives they lead. These personas are generally bad replicas of stylized caricatures of their heroes, such as al-Awlaki.

According to Baudrillard, individuals begin interacting within certain online environments and try to replicate identities and attributes that they find ideal. In the process of registering, programming, uploading, and interacting with others by posting, tagging, and instant messaging, Hegel might say that individuals thereby gain self-awareness. But, importantly, they also gain a sense for the behavioral norms and expectations within that context. They gain an understanding for the kinds of social markers—attributes, accoutrements, and vernacular—that are common and acceptable among their peers.

According to Butler, individuals begin to develop their identities by doing. As people play certain roles, they begin to assume that identity. They come to recognize the “right way” to be that character, adorning themselves with the proper attire, vernacular, or behaviors. It is in the process of learning how to authentically play a role that people become those characters. Within the al-Qaeda movement, the social structure is built by expressed desires to destroy Western forces and to create a global Islamic Caliphate. It is colored by a persistent hatred for Jews, homosexuals, Shi’a Muslims, apostates, and anyone who defames the Prophet Muhammad. These are dynamic social boundaries and may shift over time. Within the immediate context, an individual’s deviation from those core beliefs results in peer discipline. They may
 They may be scolded or banned from a forum. They may be exposed as frauds and mocked. Role-playing is a critical part of building one’s identity as an online al-Qaeda supporter: one learns how to be who he wants to be by being it. Introducing himself on the Islamic Emirate Community Forum on May 29, 2009, “*Nussrah*” said:

Role-playing is a critical part of building one’s identity as an online al-Qaeda supporter: one learns how to be who he wants to be by being it.

i am br. nussrah. a male. NOT a sister. living in USA. I enjoy eating, sleeping, photoshopping and bashing jews.²⁸

This post elicited instant approval from Colleen LaRose, more commonly known as her online alias “Jihad Jane,” an American woman who allegedly recruited potential terrorists online. She responded:

LOL@ bashing *yahoods* [Jews]...don't have ALL the fun *akhi* [brother], save some for others to terrorize....BAAHAAHAAHAA!²⁹

In the act of role-playing, one constructs his or her identity. Over time, viewers aspire to play performative roles because of a yearning for a more authentic experience. Whereas al-Qaeda supporters clamor for authentic experiences, they embrace what Randall L. Rose and Stacy L. Wood refer to as the “ironic mixture of factitious and the spontaneous.”³⁰ Online al-Qaeda supporters have created a world premised on aspiring to the authentic but they do so in the most inauthentic of places: the Internet. Achieving real-life authenticity online is, by definition, not authentic at all. Rather, it is a fictionalized, stylized version of authenticity that online participants can believe is authentic because it is as close as most of them will ever come to living up to their virtual selves.

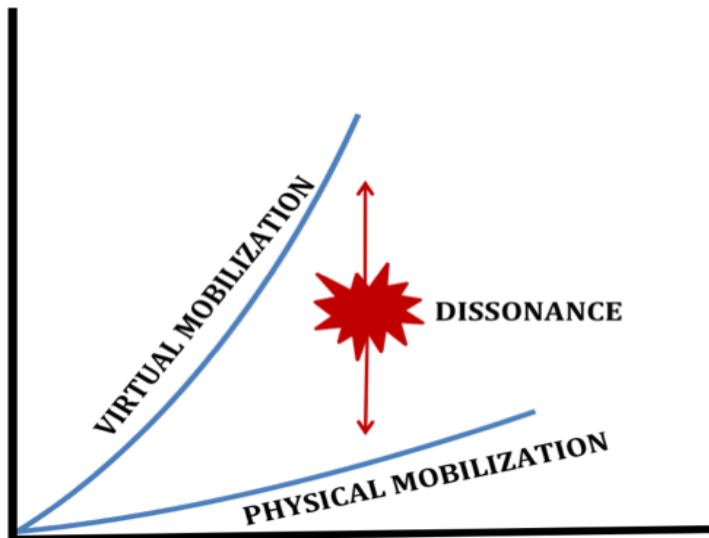
Authenticity, however, takes time, particularly when so many users are anonymous. Because the Internet allows for the virtual construction and projection of personalities that may or may not be accurate reflections of the physical lives controlling those avatars, al-Qaeda supporters find it difficult to immediately trust each other. The online world is rampant with charges of unauthentic or disingenuous behavior. What users are actually referring to when they accuse others of inauthenticity or disingenuity is a perceived dissonance between one's virtual identity and one's physical identity.

As a proxy for actual knowledge about a person's physical life, online al-Qaeda supporters have developed measures of virtual authenticity by establishing reputation scores and radicalization indexes in the forums. Similar to recommending a colleague on the LinkedIn networking site, a member of the *Islamic Awakening* forum, for instance, can give a positive, negative, or neutral reputation to another user, which controls that user's “reputation power.” One poster wrote:

As a side-note, you should probably compile all your arguments into articles that are well-organized. Or maybe someone else should do this. Also, you should consider ‘revealing’ your true credentials, because—whether you like it or not—nowadays this kind of thing matters to the average layperson. You might oppose this idea itself (and you might be right), but it's a fact. When I'm debating others, and I quote you, I lose a bit of ‘credibility’ due to the fact that you are still just an online persona. Wallahu Aalim.³¹

Role-playing is not just about performance; it is quite real for the participants. Through the process of “doing” online extremism, one gains a sense for the available cast of roles to perform. In the act of performing, individuals further entrench those roles within their social context, making the roles all the more real. Recalling Baudrillard, as online al-Qaeda supporters construct and further entrench specific roles through their performative behavior, their endless replication takes on a caricature-like quality. The roles themselves are increasingly devoid of depth and nuance. That emptiness is actually an accelerant for mobilization in that it requires less knowledge and less work. Online mobilization is inherently stylistic: it is about adorning yourself with the proper regalia and playing the part sufficiently well to become what you most aspire to be.

Step 4: Become Your Avatar



At some point, after recognizing the gap between their avatar’s mobilization and their own physical mobilization, many online participants begin taking steps to reconcile the gap. One participant, “WM,” showed the reflexive thought that many online participants begin to exhibit on this issue:

I think we are more mild-mannered in real life than online—or do I speak for myself?³²

Many online users will look to increase their outward signs of religious piety in an effort to substitute for real action. Take the example of “Sharif,” a participant on the *Islamic Awakening* forum who started a thread enabling people to post about injustices against Palestinians. The

purpose was not necessarily to convince people to physically go help the Palestinians, but rather to pray for them. In the introduction, Sharif wrote:

I intended to start this thread a long time ago. This will be the sister thread to 'Videos and Articles Concerning Injustices Against Palestinians.' The objective is similar - to provide an index for candid and informative materials that will appeal to the conscience of its viewers, Muslim or non-Muslim, especially to be used for *da'wah* [spreading God's word] to those who may not be informed.³³

This kind of posting helps avatars feel more relevant and less constrained by their virtual worlds. But a select few users, for whatever reason, will try to live up to their virtual, extremist, and pro-violent selves in the real world. Consider an online extremist, Abu Abdullah as-Sayf, who launched the website, "*Sawt as-Sahwah*" (*Voice of the Awakening*), as a way to explicitly articulate the goals to which he aspired in the physical world. He wrote:

For how long will we continue to sleep? Sawt as-Sahwah's mission is clear. To seek the pleasure of Allah and then *Jannah* [paradise]. In order to do this we seek to see the religion of Islam to be established into land on a global scale. This is a common call that we hear being made in our day and time but who really is living up to these statements?³⁴

This gap between online participation and real-world action is a source of discontent and even pain. Consider one of the most famous online al-Qaeda supporters, Abu Dujanah al-Khorasani (the pen name of the Jordanian physician-turned-Khost-suicide-bomber, Himam al-Balawi). Abu Dujanah's decision to transition from online pundit to physical actor became a *cause célèbre* for the global al-Qaeda support movement. In his pundit days, Abu Dujanah frequently chastised himself for the gap between online participation and real-world action. In one of his online essays, Abu Dujanah wrote:

[Abu Musab al-Zarqawi] lived as he wished - as I wish to live - free, brave and he never feared human or spirit - he only feared Allah. While I'm still living like everyone else, my hatred for my own blasphemy builds inside my heart... My brothers, ask Allah to free me of my agony and give me the courage to live as I wish. Only then will I love Abu Dujanah al-Khorasani...³⁵

The online al-Qaeda movement has created an expectation—particularly given the influence of Abu Dujanah—that Internet participants will try to live up to their virtual selves in the real world. Abu Dujanah's rage and depression about the dissonance he saw between his legendary virtual self

and his mundane physical self became unbearable. He had to blow himself up in order to set the balance right. In essence, his act of suicide bombing was the only way he knew how to relieve
the pain of that dissonance.

The structural expectation of living up to one's virtual self is captured in the following post from Internet user "melo061," who chided a fellow online participant for the gap between his online and physical actions:

Abu Muwahid, you sound tough. Besides calling other Muslims defeatists on Islamic forums, what exactly have you done for the Muslims?

Which Muslim have you defended and honored on the battle field? You talk the talk but can you walk the walk. I am not trying to act like i'm this Jihad type of Guy. I don't have a online persona on this forum like you do. You talk the talk but i guess you can't walk the walk. At least i could handle the brothers in Iraq, Afghanistan etc saying the same stuff. At least they're in the the frontlines and are putting their words in practice. You just parrot things, night and day about the Goodness of Jihad and the evil of the 'defeatist' Muslims.³⁶

The online al-Qaeda movement has created an expectation—particularly given the influence of Abu Dujanah—that Internet participants will try to live up to their virtual selves in the real world.

CONCLUSION

Anwar al-Awlaki, with his charismatic demeanor and simplified approach to the issues he discusses, has strategically and systematically painted the notion that joining al-Qaeda is a natural progression after becoming more religious. He has lowered the expectations of what it means to be a member of al-Qaeda. Today, anyone can be an al-Qaeda propagandist, and al-Awlaki's job is to narrow the distance between non-violent propagandist and violent al-Qaeda activist. More people than ever are being called to al-Qaeda, not through the clenched fists of Ayman al-Zawahiri, but through the open arms of Anwar al-Awlaki. The question now is: "What's next?"

Since 2005, al-Qaeda has tried to transform itself from an elitist, exclusive, hierarchical organization into an inclusive global movement. Populist figures like Abu Yahya al-Libi helped engage much of al-Qaeda's Arab audience, but the Western, English-speaking part of the movement fell behind. Al-Qaeda needed a role model that it could call its own: someone who instinctively understood the challenges of being Muslim in the West.

Al-Awlaki has been so successful in winning the hearts and minds of

Westerners because he made his path to al-Qaeda look like a step-by-step program that anyone could emulate. Although he may not have known in the beginning that his end goal was to be a key al-Qaeda figure, he has been able to show Westerners how to emulate his process of radicalization. Western Muslims have listened to his audio recordings over and over. Many have heard him preach in person and some have even taken him out to lunch. When al-Awlaki joined al-Qaeda, he took the next step. Now his droves of supporters face the same choice: should they keep emulating their hero? Should they too be al-Awlaki? Or should they hide behind their online aliases, waiting for someone else to take charge? The question remains, at what point does someone's avatar catch up with their real life? At what point does an online al-Qaeda supporter mobilize and become an al-Qaeda militant?

The problem is that al-Awlaki has now become the devil that we know. Governments across the West have now made him the archetype of the new al-Qaeda. But what is the devil that we do not know? Should governments be hunting for the proverbial "next al-Awlaki" before it is too late? Or has al-Awlaki's existence fundamentally changed the context of homegrown mobilization?

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When al-Awlaki joined al-Qaeda, he took the next step. Now his droves of supporters face the same choice: should they keep emulating their hero? Should they too be al-Awlaki?

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Because of the theoretical concepts and insights discussed in this paper—alienation, replication, and performativity—al-Qaeda has found success in helping push their online movement into operational roles. They have proliferated the avenues of participation by functionally differentiating what it means to be al-Qaeda. In fact, you can be al-Qaeda by not even being al-Qaeda anymore. Simply doing something in the spirit of al-Qaeda's

overall goals can bring the individual into the fold.

The biggest challenge for governments is the increased difficulty for law enforcement to distinguish between legitimate security threats and those who may be undertaking legal activities in the name of al-Qaeda, such as making graphics, videos, or websites. By over-policing individuals who may not be operationally supporting al-Qaeda, governments may actually be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, where their search for terrorists is actually the catalyst for the emergence of operational terrorists, not just virtual fantasy ones. However, the al-Qaeda organization will face its

own challenges in steering and guiding this movement. By appealing to the lowest common denominator in making al-Qaeda so open and accessible, individuals operating in the name of al-Qaeda will invariably do things that are actually counterproductive to its overall strategic objectives.

Al-Qaeda has taken a gamble by flattening its movement. In the short term, thanks to charismatic personalities like al-Awlaki, it has created an influx of individuals who can now envision themselves jumping over a lower fence to al-Qaeda's side. But in the long term, it may actually dilute that which made al-Qaeda exclusive and alluring to individuals in the first place. ■

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