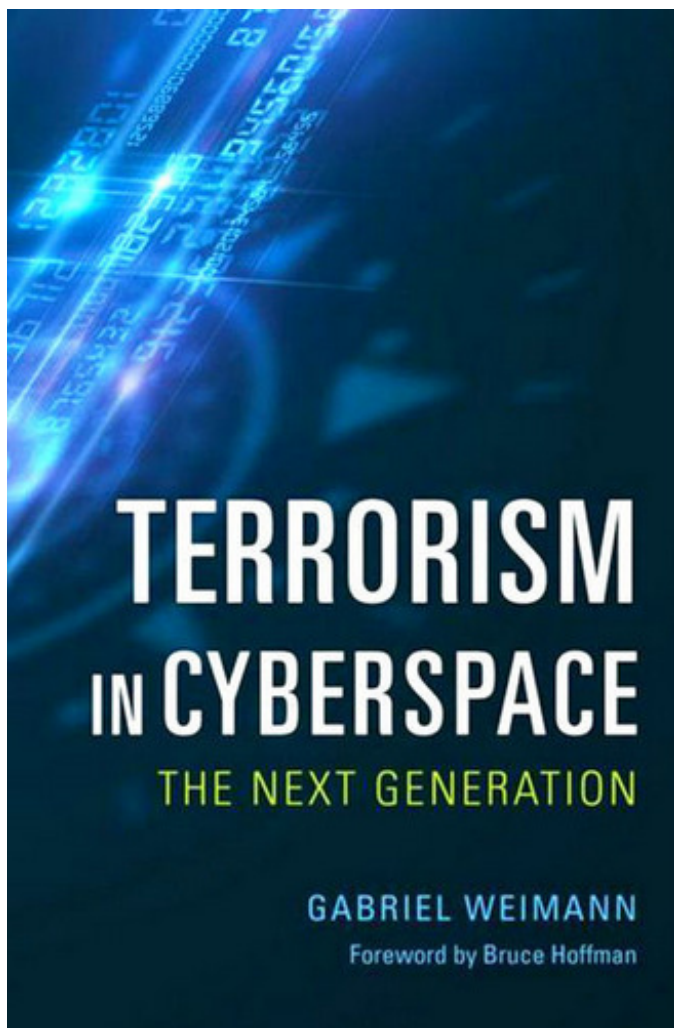


# ‘Cyberspace’ a very scary read

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*“Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation,” by Gabriel Weimann. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, 344 pages, \$30.*



“A critical distinction between the struggle in Afghanistan during the closing decades of the 20th century and in Syria and Iraq in the early 21st century is the evolution of information technology and communications that has unfolded since ‘Terror on the Internet’ was published in 2006,” Bruce Hoffman writes in the forward to “Terrorism in Cyberspace: The Next Generation,” the latest book by scholar and prolific author Gabriel Weimann.

“The growth and communicative power of social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr and WhatsApp have transformed terrorism: facilitating both ubiquitous and real-time communication between like-minded radicals with would-be recruits and potential benefactors, thus fueling and expanding the fighting and bloodshed to a hitherto almost unprecedented extent,” he continues. “Government counterterrorism efforts must adjust and recalibrate existing strategies and tactics to meet the immense challenges presented by these new communications and propaganda platforms.”

Let me cut to the chase: This was a very scary read. Most of us are aware of the awesome power of the Internet to fundamentally transform virtually any enterprise or endeavor – for good or evil. For those using the technology to help those in need, it can provide tremendous benefits. On the other hand, for those whose aims are more nefarious, it can increase the potential devastation they often seek to inflict exponentially. And at the present moment, it is unclear whether those charged with staying ahead of extremists intent on using cyberspace for sinister motives are succeeding.

“The growing presence of modern terrorism on the Internet is at the nexus of two key trends: the democratization of communications driven by user-generated content on the Internet, and the growing awareness of modern terrorists of the potential of using the Internet as a tool for their purposes,” the author explains in “Terrorism Enters Cyberspace,” the inaugural chapter.

“Decentralized and providing almost perfect anonymity, it cannot be subjected to control or

restriction, and allows access to anyone who wants it. Large or small, terrorist groups have their own websites, and through this medium they spread propaganda, raise funds and seduce potential newcomers. Additionally, terrorists radicalize audiences, recruit and train members, communicate and conspire with each other and plan and launch attacks online.”

Weimann is a professor of communication at the University of Haifa, Israel. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Hofstra University, the University of Maryland, American University DC, Lehigh University, the University of Mainz (Germany), Carleton University (Canada) and the national University of Singapore. He has a B.A. and a M.A. in sociology from the University of Haifa and a Ph.D. in communications from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A Former Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, his previous books include “Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New Challenges” and “Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality.”

The book consists of an introduction and 11 chapters arranged in three major sections: “Part I: Terrorism Enters Cyberspace,” “Part II: Emerging Trends” and “Part III: Future Threats and Challenges.” Weimann does a fairly balanced job of describing the full extent of the problem as well as proposing measures he feels would enhance our effectiveness in dealing with it. If nothing else, the primer provides a good overview of the complexity of the world in which we live and how, in a very real sense, the old rules no longer apply. The changes precipitated by the Internet are substantively different than those brought about by the telephone or network television. Cyberspace didn’t just change the tactics for fighting terrorists; it transformed the entire playing field in a much more strategic manner.

One of the many features I liked about this book was the care Weimann takes to explain the methodology he employed when conducting the research that forms the foundation of his exploration into the murky world inhabited by online terrorists. What distinguishes “Terrorism in Cyberspace” from much of the ever-expanding catalog of similar efforts is the evidence-driven nature of his work. Whereas similar forays into the subject matter at hand tend to be grounded in political and/or cultural ideology, this addition to the canon is built on solid data acquired through decades of intense observation and analysis.

Witness the following explanation of those methods outlined in the Introduction: “To locate the online terrorist sites, frequent systematic scans of the Internet were conducted using the various keywords and names of organizations in the database. First, the standard search engines (e.g., Google, Yahoo! and Bing) were used. The Internet is a dynamic arena: Websites emerge and disappear, change addresses or are reformatted. Years of monitoring the terrorist presence online has provided information on how to locate their new sites, how to search in chat rooms and forums of supporters and sympathizers for the new ‘addresses’ and how to update existing lists. This was often a Sisyphean effort, especially since in certain instances – for instance, al-Qaida’s sites – the location and the contents of the sites changed almost daily.”

One of the issues Weimann addresses in some detail is the evolving perception of civil liberties in relation to the growing threat posed by terrorists’ increasingly proficient use of the Internet. Definitions of privacy and the corresponding lengths to which societies are willing to go to ensure greater security have undergone a rather significant metamorphosis in recent years. To what degree are we willing to accept more intrusion into our personal lives in order to pursue those who aggressively seek to do us harm? This is a question Weimann explores in considerable depth. I believe most readers would find his proposed means of making these kinds of determinations fascinating. Highly recommended – but don’t expect this one to help you sleep any better at night.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.