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# Evidence of Online Radicalization Mechanisms in ‘X’ Platform during the Death of Indian CDS Bipin Rawat

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## Abstract

*The sudden and tragic demise of General Bipin Rawat, India’s Chief of Defence Staff, triggered discussions, and emotions on social media platforms, with Twitter (now X) emerging as a prominent battleground for public discourse. A sentiment analysis was done, to assess the discourse on Twitter during this critical period and revealed that Twitter became a polarized space, with both supportive and critical voices, expressing their views on the deceased General. The study discusses how the microbloggers were radicalized by extremist ideologies and political motivations and exploited the situation to amplify their agendas. To understand this process, the 12 mechanisms of political radicalization stated by McCauley & Moscalenko is used as a tool for analysis. Understanding the process of online radicalization during Bipin Rawat’s death is crucial for policymakers to counter the spread of extremist ideologies on online platforms. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of social media and radicalization, emphasizing the importance of propagating facts and peace journalism to counter fake news and hate speech.*

**Keywords: Online Radicalization, Group Radicalization, Qualitative Research, Radicalization Mechanisms, Sentiment Analysis, Social Media**

## Background

The Indian Chief of Defence Staff, General Bipin Rawat, and 13 others died in a chopper crash in Tamil Nadu on 8, December 2021. The military chopper Mi-17 V-5 crashed at Coonoor in Nilgiris, and the Indian Air Force believed that the pilot’s visibility affected due to mist was the reason for the crash. This chopper crash stands out from other mishaps because it took place in the era of social media. Twitter, now known as X, emerged as a central battleground where emotions, opinions, and narratives clashed and intertwined in the wake of General Rawat’s passing. Before the official announcement of the death, the online communities were praying for the crew’s safety. Soon after the news was confirmed, the hashtags #BipinRawat #IAFChopperCrash were used in Tweets along with the terms ‘CDS of India’, ‘Jai Hind’, ‘Tamil Nadu’ started to trend. His sudden departure not only triggered expressions of grief but also became a catalyst for intense debates fueled by various ideologies and political motivations.

Within the realm of Twitter, the study revealed a polarization of voices—some expressing unwavering support for the deceased General, while others offered critical perspectives on his legacy.

The microblogging platform, intended as a space for open dialogue, transformed into an arena where extremist ideologies and political motives took center stage, exploiting the situation to amplify their respective agendas.

The microbloggers engaged in brawls, hate speech, conspiracies, and propagated extremism. A sentiment analysis was performed as it allows us to track the mindset of the public about a particular entity and can also be used to understand, explain, and predict social phenomena.

### **Social Media, Public Opinion, and Online Radicalization: A Review**

(Gunther) states that journalists depend on public opinion to legitimize their reporting and to know how the audiences think and interpret the events in the news. However, traditional media is no longer the only source that presents and spreads public opinion, as social media has made it easier for citizens to express their opinion and access others' opinion. Analysing them helps the policymakers to monitor the public opinion on pending policies, government-regulated proposals voting, and clarifications of political positions; real-world events monitoring, blawgs (legal blogs), and ITS (Intelligent Transportation Systems) (D'Andrea et al.). To get a qualitative understanding of public opinion, journalists favour Twitter (now renamed as 'X') over other sites (McGregor), and companies and politicians use Twitter as a search engine for public opinion (Vargo et al.). These social media platforms serve as hubs for sharing and discussing radical content designed to be provocative and provide a sense of belonging and support to like-minded individuals. Therefore, analyzing the emotional tone and attitudes expressed in online content contributes to understanding the role of emotions in the process of radicalization.

The second part of this review discuss the role of social media in the process of online radicalization, which in turn shape public opinion. In the words of McCauley & Moscalenko radicalization refers to a change in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours that justify intergroup violence and the demand for sacrifice in defending the own group and enhances the preparation for intergroup conflict.

(Stekelenburg) argues that radicalization is not solely a cognitive process, but is also influenced by emotions and affective experience, and suggests that understanding the role of emotions in radicalization can help in developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. This, in turn, heightened their exposure to violent extremist ideologies and extremist groups promoting violence. (Özerdem and Podder) suggests that, to disarm the radicals (here, child soldiers and youth combatants) and prevent them from re-recruitment, a holistic and political approach should be called for. The root causes of their recruitment into violent extremism, such as poverty, education, and social marginalization, should be addressed. Also, macro level dynamics like community-based support structures, effective border monitoring, and the creation of political and social leadership opportunities for youth to prevent re-recruitment should be emphasized. However, this is possible only if the radicalized individuals are physically present. When the process of recruiting or propagating extremism is active in virtual world, prevention and intervention becomes challenging in terms of identifying and monitoring anonymous individuals who participate in such discourse. Even with identities, the distinction between a genuinely radical individual and a mere supporter is hard to make.

(Sageman) argues that by gaining a greater understanding of how social networks are used within radicalizing social groups, appropriate defences can be developed to protect against the terrorist threat. According to him internet functions as a meeting ground for radicalization. The continuous growth and usage of these technologies by people across the world, especially by the youth population worldwide, has gotten the attention of many extremist groups to propagate their ideologies. The internet plays a significant role in radicalization towards violence, primarily by granting unrestricted entry to community of individuals who shared their beliefs (Gaudette et al.). The rise of the Internet and social media has allowed individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, and opinions to communicate with one another in an unstructured way. Online communities play a significant role in facilitating extremist ideologies and the spread of propaganda

(Winter et al.) since internet itself is a potentially dangerous propaganda tool allowing to send a content even to millions in one go (Jowett and O'Donnell). Here, apart from the radicals, social media influencers also have a huge part to play. They promote ideologies and amplify extremist content to their followers and become opinion leaders, contributing to shape public opinion. Thus, the consistent spread of homogeneous messages is more powerful and impactful in acting as a catalyst in forming public opinion, even though it carries dangerous and extremist ideas.

Convergence journalism also aids information dissemination which is well-utilized by the individual terrorists and terrorist organizations (Neelamalar and Vivakaran). Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) help the terrorist organizations in facilitating psychological warfare, publicity, and propaganda, planning and coordination, networking, and fundraising. With hate speech and fake news, extremist ideologies are propagated by the social media users who are not a part of these organizations. The absence of gatekeepers in the online medium makes it an effective option to be used for propaganda purposes engaging directly with like-minded people without any geographical constraints (Kaplan). This also gives the common man the power and ability to produce and disseminate content beyond friends and family. Due to this, internet users become both, consumers, and producers of messages (Larson). This dynamic nature of the internet, where users can both consume and produce content, plays a significant role in radicalization due to the ease of exchanging ideas, enabling recruitment, and providing a space for like-minded individuals to connect and reinforce existing beliefs. The role of the internet in the radicalization process can act as an "echo chamber" for extremist beliefs by providing greater opportunities than offline interactions to confirm existing beliefs. The tweets from one of the US Presidential elections suggested that social media platforms can effectively mitigate the spread of conspiracy theories by hyperactive users. (Gallacher et al.) analyzed the online conversations between the protest groups opposing the political spectrum and their rivals, and found that increased hostile conversations online potentially lead to a worsening of relationships and increased physical

violence when the parties met in real world. The study also questions the unstructured nature of online communities by highlighting the role that the Internet might play in wider issues of extremism and radicalization.

Thus, it becomes important for the social media providers, regulators, and policymakers should formulate strategies to counter hate speech along with the circulation of conspiracy theories and fringe narratives on social media. (Thompson) emphasises that policymakers and national security leaders should understand the influence of social media and develop policies to address its potential threats. He further discusses the role of social media in providing real-time reporting and communication capabilities for protestors during the protests of Northern Africa and the Middle East in 2011. His recommendations include: re-examination of intelligence reports, training and awareness for senior leaders, and the need for them to engage in social media to understand its nuances. (Turner et al.), suggest that low self-control is associated with higher levels of exposure to and sharing of hate content among youth. The study highlights the importance of understanding the role of criminological theory in addressing radicalization and countering violent extremism by providing explanations for criminal behavior, identify risk factors, and inform strategies for crime prevention and intervention. Apart from social media platforms, messaging apps such as Telegram also favours the extremist groups by using 'bots' that automate terror. (Alrhoun et al.) used network science to analyze an Islamic State's terrorist bot on Telegram which facilitates content amplification, community cultivation efforts, and connecting people with the Islamic State movement based on common behaviours, shared interests, and ideological proximity. It was found that the bot published content in the format of text, emojis, image files, PDF files, video clips, audio files, and RAR files in Arabic, English, Urdu, and Farsi languages. Luckily, here are emerging studies on the role of bots in manipulation, polarization, fake news spreading bots and how to detect them.

From navigating the complicated interplay of social media, sentiment analysis, and online radicalization, one can understand the internet's

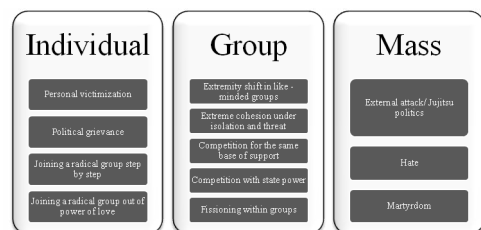
ability to act as an “echo chamber” of radicalized opinion. It is also evident that strategies for countering fringe narratives and controlling the spread of conspiracy theories and fake news, can to an extent restrict online radicalization by impacting the public opinion. Though online interventions for terrorist organization and extremists can seem next to impossible, such strategies can prevent young social media users from getting radicalized or becoming the supporters of extreme ideologies.

**Method**

As mentioned earlier, Sentiment analysis or opinion mining is the computational study of people’s opinions, sentiments, emotions, and attitudes towards entities such as products, services, issues, events, topics, and their attributes. The impact of sentiment analysis on policymaking operates similarly to those of customer reviews on the manufacturers (Karamibekr and Ghorbani). The data was collected by using an unobtrusive method, i.e., the researcher does not interact with the subjects from whom the data is being collected (Lee). Using simple random sampling, the final dataset of tweets was formed and the degree of polarity was categorized as positive, negative, and neutral. The positive tweets displayed admiration, condolences, shock, and sadness towards the passing away of General Rawat and others. It was found that only 38% of the tweets were identified as positive, among which condolences and admiration were the most found sentiment, followed by sadness. While a negative emotion is usually defined as ‘an unpleasant or unhappy emotion which is evoked in individuals to express a negative effect towards an event or person’. However, here, the tweets that celebrated the news was creating negative effect as it is an unexpected emotion for an unfortunate event. 53% of the tweets displayed negative sentiments viz hatred, anger, conspiracies, intimidating, and Islamophobic tones. Negative sentiments were mostly found in the tweets criticizing Rawat and from his supporters who in turn abused those who criticized him. As one side became radical, the other side respond by becoming even more extreme. Thus, negative sentiments were found to be more. 4% of neutral tweets with no display of emotions were found. Such tweets were only a piece of information.

For instance, one of the tweets mentioned that the leaders from various parties have condoled for the departed. Here, how the microbloggers feel about the incident is not displayed. Such objective and factual sentences were classified under ‘neutral’ sentiment. Mixed sentiments were found in 5% of the tweets that displayed both positive and negative emotions. For instance, the microblogger is angry towards the negativity spreading on Rawat, meanwhile he or she also shows their admiration for Israel’s tweet on condoling his death. Polarization between haters and admirers of Rawat was evident with the data. Since people split into two groups with different opinion that displayed extreme emotions. The twelve mechanisms of political radicalization proposed by McCauley & Moscalenko, contribute to the increasing extremity of beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in support of intergroup conflict and violence. The mechanisms emphasize the importance of understanding radicalization as emerging from the dynamics of intergroup conflict rather than individual psychology.

(McCauley and Moscalenko) in their article titled ‘Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways toward Terrorism’, identifies twelve mechanisms of political radicalization which can be divided into three categories: individual, group, and mass levels of radicalization. This study presents evidence of online radicalization on twitter, which is recognized from those twelve mechanisms.



**Levels of Radicalization and their Mechanisms**

**Individual levels of Radicalization**

The individual level mechanisms include personal victimization, political grievance, joining a radical group as a step-by-step process, and joining a radical group through social networks., discuss the individual levels of radicalization.

**Examples of Tweets displaying Individual Mechanisms of Radicalization**

Mechanisms	Tweets
Personal loss	"My most sincere condolences to the Indian Défense families. As a former student at the NDC, I share the pain of your loss and pray for the comfort of those who lost their beloved ones. May my friend Brig Lidder be welcomed into eternal life by God."
Political grievance	"The guy who defended the use of human shields and advocated to put Kashmiri children in concentration camps. Bipin Rawat the truly evil face of the Indian Army."
Joining a radical group step-by-step	"As you sow, so shall you reap. Those who do not show mercy to Kashmiris will have a very cruel fate. India must now realize that these incidents will continue to happen to them as long as they continue to oppress Kashmiris."
Joining a Radical Group out of love	"Shame on all these people celebrating the death of CDS of India, Bipin Rawat Ji! Shame on all those talking about "Karma" and "Divine Intervention" in these times!! Our heartfelt condolences to CDS Bipin Rawat!"

**Personal Victimization:** The personal loss or tragedies of an individual can make them feel a strong indignation towards the injustice. Tweets from colleagues, family and friends can be considered as personal loss and no such tweets were identified to have had radicalized thoughts. However, it was considered insensitive of Lt. General Panag to have shared a rest in peace tweet even before the confirmation of the news. This led to a lot of abuse questioning Pang’s patriotism, paving way for radicalization.

**Political Grievance:** The underlying attachment towards their ethnic groups were evident in few tweets. For instance, one of the tweets mentioned

Rawat as evil, claiming that he advocated putting Kashmiri children in concentration camps, which shows that the individual is radicalized of political grievance. That is, an individual’s radical action or violence is the ultimate response to political trends or events. The individual acts alone or as a part of a radical group. Because of Rawat’s comments on deradicalization camps and the infamous human shield controversy, the tweets displaying hatred and anger against him were from the Kashmiris.

**The step-by-step process** of radicalization is discussed as a part of individual mechanisms which states that joining any radical group does not happen overnight. The individual’s progress into a terrorist group is slow and gradual with many non-violent tasks before striking a serious one. Here the tweets themselves become an example of how the individual moves from being a sympathizer to an activist due to the influence of similar discussions on the social media platform. Since both, the haters, and the admirers of Rawat were involved in the brawl, tweets threatening and intimidating tweets against each other were found.

**Personal Connections:** Both romantic and comradely love with the terrorists help individuals join radical groups. The recruitment happens through the network of friends, lovers, and family. The tweets displaying condolence and admiration towards Rawat also displayed anger and hatred towards the microbloggers who criticized him. This shows their devotion towards the CDS. Though they are not directly related to him, the projection of Rawat as a hero with similar ideology facilitates extreme thoughts and actions.

**Group Radicalization**

The following four mechanisms are discussed under group radicalization: extremity shift in like-minded groups, cohesion under isolation and threat, competition for the same support base, competition with state power, and within-group competition.



### Examples of Tweets displaying Group Mechanisms of Radicalization

Extremity shift in like-minded groups	"Challenging times uniquely expose people's true colours. Haha emojis/rumour gang will have a very bitter memory of their action's consequences. Karma never fails. And neither does the law."
Extreme cohesion under isolation and threat	"Leaders across party lines condoled the death of Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat, who, along with his wife Madhulika Rawat and 11 others, was killed in a helicopter crash in Tamil Nadu, and recalled his service to the nation."
Competition for the same base of support	"As you sow, so shall you reap. Those who do not show mercy to Kashmiris will have a very cruel fate. India must now realize that these incidents will continue to happen to them as long as they continue to oppress Kashmiris."
Competition with state power	"I hope it's not an inside job to put all the blame on Pakistan. UP elections are coming."
Fissioning within groups	Tamil Liberation Army shoots down Indian CDS Bipin Rawat Helicopter. 14 passengers including General Bipin, his family, staff and others on board are believed to have been killed in the attack.

Extremity shift in like-minded groups: (McCauley and Moscalenko) uses Relevant Arguments Theory and Social Comparison Theory to describe the extremity shifts, which is similar to Neumann's theory that suggests, individuals are less likely to express their opinions if they perceive them to be in the minority. Fear of social isolation or reprisal leads people to conform to the perceived majority opinion, where minority voices become suppressed, and majority opinions dominate public discourse (*Noelle-neumann*). This 'spiral of silence' contributes to the risky shift towards radicalization as the role of social conformity and the fear of isolation shape public opinion. The tweets against Rawat were posted with the hashtag #karma. The supporters of Rawat in turn mentioned that karma will hit the haters back. Such tweets were even shared (re-tweeted) with the caption #karma, making it stay in trend for almost 2 days. The individual already has an opinion for or against Rawat and due to the compulsion to take sides he or she contributes to the amplification of certain viewpoints and the creation of echo chambers. This ultimately leads to the polarization of groups with extreme opinions.

**Cohesion:** isolation and threat in a combat group can bring the members closer. Both soldiers and terrorists depend on one another for their lives in fighting the enemy, extreme interdependence produces extreme group cohesion which leads to pressure for agreement among members. Even if someone does not fully agree, they might just go along with the group to avoid conflicts. But for the group

to work well, everyone should also deeply believe in the group's values, even when they are not together. Everyone in the group agrees on what is right and wrong, and this can even lead them to use violence against those who go against the group. Some of the neutral tweets that did not display sentiments could be an example. The microblogger might not have a perspective on the incident, however for the sake of maintaining group cohesion, they had shared a piece of information which suits the idea of the group they belong to. Thus, even when they are not together and have no idea of each other's' identity, the group's values become extremely powerful.

**Competition among the Groups:** A group becomes radical to the extent that it loses support from its base, even though they do it to win support. The group members tend to be violent not against their enemy but against other groups that represent the same cause. A group claiming credit for a particular terrorist attack and killing of suspected informers are some instances of competing with other groups.

**Competition with State power:** The microbloggers who condoled the departed and displayed their admiration for the soldiers also criticized the government for the unfortunate incident. They formed conspiracy theories against their own government. Here, the tweets were not against the haters of Rawat but against the country itself. When the State takes action to squash the group that makes public displays like rallies, protests, and other civil disobedience, some might

give up the action. Others who are not deterred will increase their commitment and escalate their action against the state. This radicalization in competition with the government was evident in this scenario when a YouTuber was arrested for accusing Tamil Nadu’s ruling party of separatism in his Tweet which was shared 300 times before it was deleted. Since the national ruling party backed him, the local leaders escalated their action by gathering to stop the arrest and even protested outside the police station, which was echoed in Twitter as a violation of freedom of expression by the government.

**Fissioning:** Intra-group conflict can lead to multiple splitting of a radical group and that this process can contribute to the radicalization of individuals who are expelled from the group due to pressure for agreement among members. The diversity of India had effortlessly contributed to fissioning in this context. This was the reason for Col. Baljit Bakshi and Lt. Gen Panag trashed and labelled as Khalistanis, even after they removed their tweets, here there was no reason other than misguiding Indians and polarizing them against the Tamil-speaking communities.

**Mass Radicalization**

**Examples of Tweets displaying Mass-level Mechanisms of Radicalization**

Mechanisms	Tweets
External attack	I don't know why Indians are expecting our sympathies they laughed and mocked on civilians' death of Karachi plane crash, train incident, oil incident, at least we are rejoicing death of our enemy. He was so cruel to Kashmiris
Hate	“This monkey said we'll change the DNA of the Kashmir but now Indian authorities had to send a whole DNA lab to find his remains.”
Martyrdom	“Traitors Muslim who are celebrating "KARMA" have to Remember that it is Bipin Rawat's karma. Also that whole INDIA is crying over his death. ***** idiots making fun of a soul who is no more on this earth. Is this what Islam teaches them? Well Karma works both ways. Wait and watch.”

**External Attack:** Cohesion among the group members tends to increase during threats and attacks from outside. In the case of larger groups, cohesion is replaced within group identification, patriotism, or nationalism. The sudden elevation of patriotism will be evident through rallies, flags, and banners. However, the external attack is also used as a strategy to mobilize the sympathizers of the terrorists and achieve more than what the actual terrorists could do. Here, the tweets from Kashmiris and Pakistanis can be considered as external attack which fuelled the Indian extremists and eventually made other nationalists as well to take forward the brawl. Apart from the Indian microbloggers, conspiracy theories were spread by the Pakistani disinformation networks as well. ‘Pakistan Strategic Forum’ blamed ‘Tamil rebels’ for the chopper crash. A tech company revealed that most of these theories were reinforced by Pakistani Twitter accounts (WION Web Team). The post was eventually withdrawn after the Tamil Nadu Crime Branch Central Investigation Department filed a case against this Twitter handle. Such Twitter handles still exist and every time there

is a valid legal demand, such as a court order Twitter is compelled to withhold the original Tweet.

**Hate:** Extreme negative perceptions of one another in a prolonged violence can lead to dehumanizing the enemy. The target is no longer considered as a human. Such hate is a combination of anger, fear, and contempt. For instance, in a particular tweet the departed is referred to as a mere animal. Instead of constructive debates, referring to someone as a “monkey” is a derogatory and dehumanizing term that contributes to hostility and appears to be exhibiting radicalization.

**Martyrdom:** Radical groups try to keep salient the memory of their martyrs. They are often celebrated during death anniversaries, Martyr’s Day activities, rallies, portraits and graffities, etc. It is persuasive to see individuals giving up their life for a cause. Labelling other officers as Khalistanis and being Islamophobic against could be seen as it triggered the nationalists who perceived Rawat as heroic, even though he died out of battlefield.

To prevent radicalization from turning into terrorism, it is important to understand the dynamics

of competition and conflict between these groups; and by understanding and addressing the root causes of radicalization, governments and societies can work to keep it from reaching a point where it becomes more dangerous.

## Conclusion

The paper emphasized how the groups were polarized on Twitter by doing a sentiment analysis of the tweets. Following the sentiment analysis, the evidence of online radicalization from the McCauley & Moskalkenko's perspective of radicalization mechanisms was found. As pointed out by Gallacher et al., since these mechanisms contribute to online intergroup conflict, there are high chances of worsening of relationships and increased physical violence when the groups meet in real world as well. Thus, strategies for countering fringe narratives, abusive speech, conspiracy theories and fake news, that lead to radicalization becomes essential. Also, there were tweets from Pakistan that consoled Rawat and other departed souls. However, it was not discussed much as it was overpowered by the radicalized tweets. Therefore, from a journalistic perspective, promoting more of peace journalism among the internet users also becomes an important approach in countering online radicalization. Further research, specifically in the Indian context should be carried out to validate and extend these findings in a more comprehensive manner.

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