

Valeria Vizcaino, Ana Isabel Carrillo and Romina Pérez

Online Radicalization and Recruitment: Islamic State and The Proud Boys Face to Face

Abstract

Despite emerging from radically different ideological, geographical, and cultural contexts, contemporary extremist movements share technological and communicative patterns in their radicalization processes. This study examines the mechanisms by which digital discourses motivate individuals to take action, focusing on two paradigmatic cases: the Islamic State and the Proud Boys. Through a comparative approach, the ideological objectives, audiences, and symbols employed by each group in their digital narratives are analyzed.

By comparatively addressing these tactics, the study highlights that they appeal to feelings of displacement, particularly among young men. Therefore, the study proposes that beyond doctrinal differences, current radicalization is sustained by common discursive dynamics facilitated by the digital ecosystem.

Keywords: radicalization, recruitment, social media, IS, Proud Boys

Valeria Vizcaino Sánchez, Bachelor's degree in international relations at Tecnológico de Monterrey.
Ana Isabel Carrillo Pascalis, Bachelor's degree in international relations and Law at Tecnológico de Monterrey.

Romina Pérez Barrientos, Bachelor's degree in international relations and Law at Tecnológico de Monterrey.

Received

06/07/2025

Accepted

27/08/2025

To cite this article: Vizcaino, V, Carrillo, A. and Pérez, R. (2025), Online Radicalization and Recruitment: Islamic State and The Proud Boys Face to Face, Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo, issue 15:21-30.

1. Introduction

The Internet has been used as a platform from which terrorists not only seek funding or report on the planning and execution of their attacks and actions but has also been employed to spread propaganda, issue “calls” for recruitment, and promote training. This is achieved through statements and videos posted on social media, forums, and encrypted sites to radicalize and recruit new members, including minors.

Contemporary terrorism has migrated to the digital environment, where social media, with 5.17 billion users in 2023 (Statista, 2024), act as powerful weapons to spread hatred, extremism, and disinformation. Terrorist groups, regardless of their ideology, employ similar digital strategies to manipulate narratives, radicalize, and recruit followers, taking advantage of limited regulation. With this in mind, the study hypothesizes that radicalization is not due to an ideological factor exclusive to one group or another. Instead, in this case study, both the Islamic State and the Proud Boys rely on the same digital strategies to generate a collective identity through narratives and symbolism, which facilitate recruitment and subsequently the radicalization and indoctrination of initiates.

To address this hypothesis, a deductive methodology is employed in both case studies to analyze these methods of radicalization and recruitment. As a theoretical foundation, the concepts of “habitus” by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Ruiz De Elvira, 1998) and “cultural identity” by Hall (Hall & du Gay, 1996) are used to explain ideological formation. In this sense, social media are understood as closed spaces that reinforce extreme ideologies (Tufekci, 2017). Additionally, the definitions of radicalization and recruitment by Neumann and Rogers (2007) are adopted, and a distinction is made between extremist and terrorist groups (Laqueur, 1977; Bötticher, 2017).

Initially, a brief contextualization of the problem and the importance of social media in the recruitment of new members by terrorist groups is presented, along with a brief profile of the two proposed groups. Subsequently, a deeper comparative analysis is conducted. This analysis describes the similarities in the recruitment and radicalization methods of both groups based on the proposed theoretical framework and the information collected and analyzed in the previous section. Finally, the main findings and recommendations for future research are presented.

2. Importance of Social Media in the Context of Terrorism

Social media have emerged as a new element within the terrorist ecosystem, reconfiguring interactions among previously known actors in an unprecedented way. Social media represent multifunctional tools that enable everything from the propagation of ideological discourses to the logistical coordination of attacks. This phenomenon is reflected in the digitization of terrorism, where the virtual and physical realms converge.

From a contemporary perspective, platforms such as Telegram, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube are not only channels for dissemination but true stages where radical groups project power, intimidate, and recruit followers. According to Flores Sánchez (2007), these platforms offer key advantages for terrorism, as they are low-cost tools with global reach, relative anonymity, and resistance to censorship.

Francisco Agra (2022) explains how cyberspace has blurred the boundaries between ideological indoctrination and criminal execution. This new scenario presents an ideal opportunity to maximize presence, as terrorism empowered by social media no longer requires physical travel or direct contact. A YouTube channel or an Instagram account is sufficient to trigger a radicalization process.

This new reality explicitly began in the 1990s with the use of static websites, evolving into social media and encrypted apps following the Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State. Referring to this, Flores Sánchez (2007) notes that the turning point was the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, where “e-terrorism” began to consolidate as a strategy.

The 11-M attacks in Madrid exemplified this initial approach, as the use of digital platforms for logistical planning and ideological justification of attacks was crucial¹. However, this phenomenon is constantly evolving, moving toward a more decentralized direction focused on self-indoctrination.

The appeal of social media for terrorists lies in their ability to disseminate content virally. This, in turn, poses a challenge for all legal and technical frameworks. Content moderation is insufficient, algorithms amplify extremist discourses, and there is no international consensus for regulation². As a society, we have not demonstrated a reactive capacity equivalent to the evolution of this phenomenon. Supporting this argument, Agra (2022) highlights that legal frameworks still lag behind the speed at which terrorism adapts to the digital environment. Anonymity, encryption, and network fragmentation are key factors that hinder the rapid identification of emerging threats, making it necessary for cybersecurity to combine technological surveillance, legal reforms, and preventive strategies on social media.

1 For example, the French case “Public Ministry vs. Arnaud and others” employed investigative methods such as physical surveillance, forensic analysis, and digital surveillance. In this context, Arnaud, alias “Abdallah,” incited jihad and used tools like Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) and WinZip to encrypt communications and protect sensitive files. For instance, PGP offered highly secure asymmetric encryption, while WinZip allowed for compressing and password-protecting documents. These technologies complicate access to evidence. The inciting phrase “hurry to seek martyrdom as soon as possible” was key in linking him to planned acts and justifying his conviction (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013, pp. 57–65).

2 Some digital platforms were pioneers in the dissemination of digital terrorism in the first decade of the 21st century. The vast majority of these platforms have since been blocked or rendered obsolete. Examples include Al Neda, which began operating in 2001 and was a key Al Qaeda site for disseminating propaganda, videos, and instructions. A similar case is Maalemajihad.com, which peaked in 2000, had a short lifespan, and focused on the ideological and tactical training of new members. Another case is Ogrish.com, used between 2000 and 2006. Although not specifically jihadist, it was employed to spread extremely violent videos of attacks and executions (Gutiérrez Gutiérrez, 2012).

3. Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment Tactics on Social Media

3.1. Objective, Structure, Motivation, and Presence of the Group

The Islamic State (IS) is one of the most powerful and extensive terrorist organizations in history. At its peak, it controlled approximately 60% of Syrian territory and 40% of Iraqi territory, allowing it to exert significant dominance over both societies. Since the proclamation of its caliphate in 2014, it operated as a parallel state, wielding greater authority than the legitimate governments in the region (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020).

Economically, IS established itself as a powerful actor on the international stage. Its main sources of funding included bank robberies, kidnappings, illegal oil trafficking, sexual slavery, and other illicit activities. Additionally, the group radically implemented Islamic law or “Sharia,” leading to numerous human rights violations, particularly against women and minors, who were frequently exploited or enslaved under religious justifications (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020).

In the cultural sphere, IS also caused devastation. It profited from the illegal sale of valuable archaeological artifacts while simultaneously destroying historical heritage to reinforce its ideological narrative. These actions served a dual purpose: financing operations and using destruction as propaganda to attract followers, demonstrate power, and promote rejection of religions or identities deemed “infidel”. These practices aim to eliminate any distinct cultural or religious forms, making them a form of symbolic and cultural terrorism (Terrill, 2017).

Regarding its structure, this terrorist organization has operated in a decentralized manner, building a “bureaucracy” somewhat akin to a federal state, with a unifying central command that controls all its regional branches or offices. These branches operate almost autonomously, managing their own operations and finances, allowing the group to adapt more easily to different sociocultural contexts (Al-Azhar Observer, 2023).

3.2. Main Recruitment Channels

The recruitment methods of new members in this organization have evolved alongside the digital society we live in today, though the essence of their methods has remained consistent:

1. Recruitment of followers at a young age, attracting children or adolescents to teach extremist ideas from a young age.
2. Radicalization in prisons, spreading their ideology in correctional facilities to persuade inmates to join their violent cause.
3. Exploitation of social media, using the internet to disseminate propaganda, recruit, and coordinate attacks easily.

Today, following the dismantling of the IS caliphate, which left devastated cities such as Mosul (BBC Mundo, 2017) and the Syrian cities of Raqqa and Aleppo (Luizard, 2015), there has been a shift toward a digital caliphate or “cybercaliphate”. The main recruitment networks now rely on widely used social media platforms such as YouTube, Telegram, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as less common platforms like Twitch, to expand their dominance and presence without borders (Las Heras, 2022).

3.3. Audiovisual Discourse: Narrative, Symbolism, and Target Audience

Today, any ideology requires an audiovisual discourse to attract more people to its ranks, especially when it involves religion and narratives of otherness, in this case, the West. Therefore, IS’s discourse combines images of social harmony with extreme scenes of violence, creating a radical contradiction. It presents an ideal society under the caliphate while showcasing brutal executions and tortures, masking its religious-nationalist delusion under a narrative of order and unattainable social perfection in a globalized and multicultural world. Ultimately, the visual appeal relies on displaying physical suffering as the ultimate proof of power and faith in action (González, 2017).

As a terrorist organization, IS has been characterized since its inception as an extremely violent and grotesque group that openly displays all its violent acts and attacks, using audiovisual content as a global weapon and showcasing executions with a media aesthetic to sow terror. It is an organization that does not hide its crimes but, on the contrary, turns them into a spectacle, successfully merging violence, faith, and power into a normalized communicative strategy (González, 2017).

Its propaganda in the West primarily targets young people disconnected from their family context, emotionally vulnerable, and searching for identity, as its discourse portrays the Muslim world as a victim. It rejects the Western order and offers meaning, belonging, and prestige through closed indoctrination, group control, and a vision of the impending final judgment. This creates an urgency to redeem oneself before Allah, as the “true believers” will be saved and the “infidels” destroyed, justifying violence as part of an inevitable divine plan—a narrative legitimized by a fundamentalist and intolerant ideology toward otherness (Romero Ramírez & Durán Rodríguez, 2010).

4. Far-Right Radicalization and Recruitment Tactics on Social Media

4.1. Objective, Structure, Motivation, and Presence of the Group

Within the spectrum of contemporary extremism, The Proud Boys represent a clear manifestation of the rise of the far-right through nationalist symbols, supremacist discourses, and an aggressive defense of traditional masculine identity. Founded in 2016 by Canadian commentator Gavin McInnes, The Proud Boys are classified by the FBI as a neo-fascist far-right group, notably known for their participation in the January 6, 2021, assault on the U.S. Capitol (Bailard et al., 2024:2057-2056).

The group identifies as “Western chauvinists who refuse to apologize for creating the modern world” (Kutner, 2020:5). While they do not self-identify as part of the alt-right, Kutner (2020)

demonstrates the presence of cryptofascist symbols, white supremacist imagery, and affinity for racist, misogynistic, and homophobic viewpoints in the group's ideology—key elements of the alt-right (Kutner, 2020:5). Under the motto “The West is Best,” the group's objective is to restore a white, Christian, American Western culture that reaffirms the dominant role of white men in society.

Although the group's official structure is unknown, a hierarchy within The Proud Boys can be inferred, with levels of “membership” that outline the path from recruitment to radicalization within the group (DeCook, 2018, p.488; Kutner, 2020:4-5).

4.2. Main Recruitment Channels

Since their inception, The Proud Boys have used various social media platforms for both internal and external communication, serving as a key tool for crucial activities ranging from recruiting new members to planning events and spreading their ideology (Bailard et al., 2024:2058).

From 2016 to 2018, The Proud Boys leveraged major social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to their advantage. However, in 2018, these platforms removed the group's main accounts, including that of its founder (Linton, 2018). This event solidified Instagram as the group's primary platform while prompting a migration to platforms like Truth Social and Parler for recruiting potential members and Telegram for encrypted internal communication (Kelly, 2024, p.4; Bailard et al., 2024:2058).

4.3. Audiovisual Discourse: Narrative, Symbolism, and Target Audience

Through these platforms, the group seeks to attract a specific profile of recruits with “a defined list of identities: white, libertarian, anti-feminist, and anti-modern” (Kelly, 2024:9). The group targets young, marginalized men who express a perception of losing their “rightful social place” due to the prominence of progressive ideologies.

According to various studies (DeCook, 2018; Kelly, 2024; Kutner, 2020), The Proud Boys have built a provocative identity through the use of narrative and audiovisual tools to create shared symbolism among group members. These include memes, the “red pill” metaphor, conspiracy theories, and the use and display of uniforms and tattoos. Memes are particularly key to the recruitment process.

DeCook (2018) highlights that memes “have become a means to spread propaganda, [being] small fragments of political and cultural ideology that are easily digestible” (DeCook, 2018:485). In this regard, The Proud Boys have become adept at using and crafting memes for recruitment and indoctrination. The main characteristics of these memes include the use of the mantra “The West is the Best” and symbols traditionally associated with American masculinity, such as Uncle Sam and Jack Daniel's whiskey (DeCook, 2018:491-492).

In addition to this visual symbolism, the content of the memes reinforces the group's main narratives of supremacy and justification³. These memes foster The Proud Boys' determination to return to a purely Western, white, and Christian society, far from current multiculturalism (DeCook, 2018, p.500). While they may seem like harmless posts, these memes conceal a powerful form of subconscious and invisible propaganda that reinforces the group's extremist ideology.

The "red pill" metaphor is another critical narrative tool that The Proud Boys consistently employ to recruit new members. Inspired by *The Matrix* (1999), this image suggests that a simulation caused by progressive ideologies must be awakened from to restore Western order and values in society (Kelly, 2024:6). This conspiracy theory appeals to precarity, uncertainty, and social exclusion—key factors and sentiments that The Proud Boys capitalize on for recruitment (Kutner, 2020, p.6). This, in turn, allows the group to construct a new conception of reality based on "precarity as a white, working-class American man at risk of losing his place in society" (Kutner, 2020:6). This discourse serves as a dual tool, facilitating recruitment and justifying the extremist actions that arise from it.

5. Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences

Below is the comparative analysis between the Islamic State and The Proud Boys. The elements compared include each group's motivation and objectives, narrative, target audience, and the symbolism they use or rely on to carry out their actions. For visual purposes, the comparison is presented in Figure 1, with the main findings detailed subsequently.

Element	Islamic State	The Proud Boys
Motivation/Objectives	Seeks to impose a global Islamic caliphate through violence, propaganda, and territorial control, funded by illicit activities. Enforced Sharia, destroyed heritage, and subjugated populations to consolidate power.	Aims to restore a white, Christian Western culture, reaffirming the dominant role of white men through nationalism, violence, and rejection of diversity and progressive ideologies.
Narrative	Combines extreme violence with divine promises, portraying an ideal caliphate against a corrupt world. Attracts vulnerable youth by offering identity and redemption through jihad.	Promotes an anti-feminist, anti-modern, and supremacist vision where white men must "awaken" from progressive deception to restore Western, Christian, and traditional order.
Recruitment Channels and Target Audience	Recruits vulnerable youth through social media, prisons, and child indoctrination. Spreads digital propaganda and promises identity and redemption through violence supported by a radical jihadist ideology.	Recruits primarily through social media platforms like Instagram, Truth Social, Parler, and Telegram. These platforms facilitate the spread of their ideology and recruitment of members, especially young men lacking identity and purpose.
Symbolism	Blends violence, faith, and power in striking images. Uses brutality and an ideal order to terrorize and indoctrinate, portraying physical suffering as proof of faith and dominance.	Includes memes, uniforms, and the "red pill," representing "awakening" from progressive deception, exalting masculinity, white supremacy, and traditional Western values.

Figure 1. *Comparative Table: ISIS vs. Proud Boys. Source: Authors' elaboration.*

³ For example, one of the posts presented by DeCook (2018) features the following text: "- Dad, why are there no Muslims in Star Trek? - Because it's the future, son".

Regarding the motivations of both groups, there is a stark difference, as while both are tied to societal identity, the Islamic State seeks to build a purely Sunni Islamic state from scratch. In contrast, The Proud Boys aim to defend and reinstate a Western culture where cisgender white men dominate, subjugating other social factions through violence.

Secondly, the narrative is an area where both groups converge to some extent, as they target young men lacking a sense of belonging or solid identity. However, a key difference is that IS accepts women in its ranks, giving them a somewhat prominent role, while The Proud Boys have no place for women.

The narrative of both groups undoubtedly promotes an ideology deemed “the best for society” within their respective contexts. Thus, IS promotes jihad as the only path for human redemption before Allah to reach paradise. Meanwhile, The Proud Boys’ narrative posits that returning to an anti-modern, anti-feminist, and androcentric society is the way to preserve the pillars of American society and restore traditional Christian order.

Finally, regarding symbolism, ISIS focuses on perfectly blending violence with faith through traumatic imagery, such as videos of terrorist attacks, public executions of “infidels,” or acts of slavery. These are justified as actions taken in defense of Islam and its ideals for Allah, ensuring redemption and paradise. In contrast, The Proud Boys focus on creating visual content where masculinity, traditional Christian values, and white supremacy are the protagonists, primarily using the soft power of communicative resources.

6. Conclusion

This research, based on the analysis conducted and the comparative study presented, has demonstrated that, despite ideological, cultural, and geographical differences, both the Islamic State and The Proud Boys share relatively similar narrative, communicative, and technological patterns in their digital recruitment and radicalization processes. One of the main findings is the target audience they seek to recruit. Both groups exploit the identity crises of young people, particularly those who feel marginalized or silenced within their current socio-political context. They use discourses that promise meaning, belonging, and a transcendent cause, as well as a digital community space with others who share their conception of reality. While differences in ideology, symbols, objectives, and platforms are acknowledged, both IS and The Proud Boys have adeptly exploited the use of narratives, carefully constructed symbolism, and key audiovisual strategies, such as memes or videos, to achieve their objectives.

The comparative analysis demonstrates the acceptance of the study’s main hypothesis: radicalization and recruitment go beyond ideological content. The effectiveness of both groups in recruitment relies on their ability to instrumentalize the digital environment, generating a sense of belonging and creating a unique habitus for each group. This facilitates the indoctrination process and supports physical manifestations of violence in favor of the group.

Based on the findings, several future research directions can be proposed. First, it is recommended to deepen the generation of primary evidence of both groups' narratives through techniques such as digital ethnography. Second, extend the comparative analysis to other groups within the same categories or conduct the same exercise with other types of groups, such as those on the far-left. Third, explore the role of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, examining their future implications and potential risks. Finally, further research and development of legal and regulatory frameworks for extremist and hate speech are recommended, as these, as demonstrated, employ sophisticated narrative tactics that evade current restrictions.

7. References

- Agra, S. V. F. (2022). La digitalización del miedo: del terrorismo clásico al terrorismo tecnológico. *El Criminalista Digital*, (10), 17–37.
- Al-Azhar Observer. (15 febrero 2023), La estructura organizativa de ISIS: una red global extendida.
- Bailard, C. S., Tromble, R., Zhong, W., Bianchi, F., Hosseini, P., & Broniatowski, D. (2024). “Keep Your Heads Held High Boys!”: Examining the Relationship between the Proud Boys’ Online Discourse and Offline Activities. *American Political Science Review*.
- BBC Mundo. (11 agosto 2017). Los mapas, fotos y gráficos muestran la devastación de Mosul, la ciudad en Irak donde Estado Islámico creó su califato. *BBC News Mundo*.
- Bourdieu, P., & Ruiz De Elvira, M. D. C. (1998). *La Distinción: Criterios y bases sociales del gusto*. Taurus.
- DeCook, J. R. (2018). Memes and symbolic violence: #proudboys and the use of memes for propaganda and the construction of collective identity. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 43(4), 485–504.
- Flores Sánchez, M. L. (2007). Internet como herramienta del integrismo yihadista. *Dialnet*.
- González, J. A. (2017). Paradojas comunicativas en los videos del Estado Islámico. *Cuadernos de Lingüística Hispánica*, (28), 15–34.
- Gunaratna, R. (2003). *Inside Al Qaeda: Global network of terror*. The Berkley Publishing Group.
- Gutiérrez Gutiérrez, A. (2012). Cómo el terrorismo islamista usa internet. *QdC: Cuadernos de Criminología*, (8), 8–13.
- Hall, S., & du Gay, P. (Eds.). (1996). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. SAGE Publications.
- Kelly, M. (2024). Recruiting Terrorists: How ISIS and the Proud Boys Employ Social Media to Gain Followers. *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 48(1), 1–18.
- Kutner, S. (2020). *Swiping Right: The Allure of Hyper Masculinity and Cryptofascism for Men Who Join the Proud Boys*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

Las Heras, P. (21 marzo 2022). ¿Cómo recluta el ISIS a sus miembros? Global Affairs. Universidad de Navarra.

Llobet Angli, M. (2015). Lobos solitarios yihadistas: ¿Terroristas, asesinos o creyentes? Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado.

Luizard, P.-J. (2015). La emergencia del Estado Islámico: Claves geopolíticas, historia y clivajes confesionales. *Nueva Sociedad*, (257), 49–60.

Millington, C. (2024). Bad history: a historian's critique of Rapoport's "four waves of modern terrorism" model. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 17(3), 488–505.

Oficina de las Naciones Unidas contra la Droga y el Delito. (2013). El uso de internet con fines terroristas. Naciones Unidas.

Rapoport, D. C. (2004). The four waves of modern terrorism. En A. K. Cronin & J. M. Ludes (Eds.), *Attacking terrorism: Elements of a grand strategy* (pp. 46–73). Georgetown University Press.

Romero Ramírez, A. J., & Durán Rodríguez, M. del M. (2010). Islam y terror. *Convergencia*, 17(54), 53–68.

Sánchez Medero, R. (2010). Terrorismo y comunicación digital. Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Speckhard, A., & Ellenberg, M. D. (2020). ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment history, motivations for joining, travel, experiences in ISIS, and disillusionment over time – Analysis of 220 in-depth interviews of ISIS returnees, defectors and prisoners. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 13(1), 82–127.

Statista. (2022). Online Extremism.

Terrill, W. A. (2017). Antiquities destruction and illicit sales as sources of ISIS funding and propaganda. Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.