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Fearing Technology: The Islamic State, PlayStation and "Going Dark"

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The thing that keeps me awake at night is the guy behind his computer, looking for messages from IS and other hate preachers. Jan Jambon, November 2015

It is one of the great myths that technology and the savage are somehow distinct. Sophistication suggests encryption devices, or tech abilities. Brave new world technologies will lull us on the pneumatic chair, calming our more savage instincts. But time and time again, the opposite case has been made. Methods of killing can be industrialised; technology can be adapted to the most destructive ends.

The point has already been made that the Islamic State operates within the spirit of terrorism that is very much in the enlightenment tradition of revolutionary France.[1] This will be a shocking statement to those whose feel clear distinctions should be drawn. In spirit, however, the French Revolution, with Dr. Guillotine's decapitating machine and violent inspirations, is closer than many dare admit.

Now, ISIS is being seen in a different light. Not a force purely medieval, with its celebratory beheadings and primordial methods of murder. It is now deemed cunning, inventive, with communications hard to track.

It is ISIS who is now seen as technologically savvy, amenable to "going dark" with its operations, dangerously inscrutable in its cyber digging. It is ISIS and its affiliates who have been coopted by security forces in pushing alarmist agendas for weakening encryption and reinvigorating dispirited, dare one say incompetent intelligence forces.

This reverse idealisation has been given dramatic force after the Friday attacks in Paris. Allegations, which have seemingly shown up as false, have been made that the coordinated attacks took place using unbreakable encryption software. Given that the French police were able to identify the fourth cell and raid it in St. Denis because of un-encrypted messages from an abandoned phone is not a point that has been pressed home.

Another allegation doing the rounds is that ISIS has availed itself of the wonders of PlayStation 4, presumably via its Party Chat feature, which allows players the means of exchanging voice and text messages in groups or between individuals in secure fashion.

The source of the observation was Belgium's deputy prime minister, Jan Jambon, whose comments, it is important to note, came prior to the Friday attacks. "PlayStation 4 is even more difficult to keep track of than WhasApp. It's very, very difficult for our services – not only Belgian services but international services – to decrypt the communication that is done via PlayStation 4."[2]

This claim must be regarded as suspect. According to *Ars Technica* (Nov 17), “there’s no evidence that the feature is actually being used by terrorists, let alone that it played an integral part in the Paris attacks.”

Main papers decided to swallow the suggestion wholeheartedly. “Paris attacks: Terrorists could have used PlayStation4 to plot,” went the *Telegraph*, while the Express decided on pure certitude: “ISIS terrorists used Sony Playstation 4 to plot Paris massacre.”

The *International Business Times* and *Forbes* were the frontrunners in suggesting that ISIS had delved into the weird and wonderful world of PlayStation chatter, feeding off Jambon’s titbit. “The comparatively low-tech system may offer a more secure means of communication than even encrypted phone calls, texts and email” (*Forbes*, Nov 14).

Forbes subsequently had to concede that it had all too enthusiastically taken the plunge: “It has not been confirmed, as originally written, that a console was found as a result of specific Belgian terror raids. Minister Jambon was speaking about tactics he knows ISIS to be using generally.”[3] Nor could it verify “how much access the government has gotten to places like PSN and Xbox Live in the past few years”.

Eurogamer subsequently explained that the slew of stories did not point out “the likelihood that a PS4, a console that has sold just shy of 30m units, would be found at a home in Belgium occupied by a person in their twenties.”[4]

The site also managed to reproduce a statement from Sony, which emphasised that “we take our responsibilities to protect our users extremely seriously and we urge our users and partners to report activities that may be offensive, suspicious or illegal. When we identify or are notified of such conduct, we are committed to taking appropriate actions in conjunction with the appropriate actions in conjunction with the appropriate authorities and will continue to do so.”

Various technological platforms have proven to be friends of ISIS, just as they have been handmaidens of activist groups and protesters keen to cause disruption and change. It is in this field that organisations such as Anonymous hope to gain victories, and where the next stage of this battle will be fought.

Such cyber skirmishes will certainly not be won by a wholesale degradation, let alone ban, of encryption across a range of technologies. Besides, we already have it on good authority that the NSA and GCHQ have been attempting to find ways of joining Xbox Live discussions around “The World of Warcraft.”[5] So much, then, for the element of inscrutability.

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Notes

[1]
http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/09/isis-jihadi-shaped-by-modern-western-philosophy

[2]
http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2015/11/despite-what-the-papers-say-theres-no-evidence-isis-used-ps4-to-plan-paris-attacks/

[3]
http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2015/11/14/why-the-paris-isis-terrorists-used-ps4-to-plan-attacks/

[4]
http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2015-11-16-sony-responds-to-claim-ps4-used-for-terrorist-communications

[5]
http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2013-12-09-nsa-gchq-can-listen-to-xbox-live-chat-communications

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