

The Daily Telegraph

Smith seeking to close websites that promote jihad 18 January 2008

By Philip Johnston, Home Affairs Editor

A new drive to close extremist websites peddling jihadi propaganda is to be launched by the Government.

Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, is to meet internet experts to decide how best to target websites inspired by al-Qa'eda.

Illegal material would be tracked down and removed, using tactics already deployed against online paedophiles, she said yesterday.

Miss Smith conceded that it was difficult to close such sites because they could merely spring up elsewhere.

But she added: "If we are ready and willing to take action to stop the grooming of vulnerable young people on social networking sites, then we should also take action against those who groom vulnerable people for the purposes of violent extremism.

"Where there is illegal material on the net, I want it removed."

The Internet Watch Foundation, which is funded by the electronics industry, runs a website that allows web users to report suspicious sites if they believe they have paedophilic content. A similar system could operate to target jihadi websites.

"It is difficult but that does not mean we should not try," Miss Smith said. "Stopping people becoming or supporting terrorists is the major long-term challenge we face."

She said the evidence of terrorists using the internet to spread messages was overwhelming.

Her speech, at the International Centre for Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence at King's College, London, was her first on terrorism since becoming Home Secretary.

Miss Smith said the threat from terrorism was real and severe but had to be "kept in perspective". Those plotting carnage were a very small minority who were criminals and would be treated as such.

However, there were some who were sceptical of the Government's ability to close websites.

Mark Littlewood, of Progressive Vision, a think-tank promoting classical liberalism, said: "The idea that terrorism can be thwarted by seeking to shut down extremist websites is absurd and dangerous.

"It is easy to host such sites outside of British jurisdiction or to relaunch a website that is closed down within minutes."

The Government is about to publish another counter-terrorism Bill that will include plans to detain suspects for up to 42 days without charge.