AWARENESS BRIEF

Online Services and Violent Extremism

Understanding Online Services

The Internet has been embraced worldwide because of its widespread availability and cost-effectiveness. As access to the Internet continues to spread and the use of social media proliferates, people are spending more time online, connecting with one another and creating virtual communities.

Individuals and organizations are launching websites, and posting and consuming content from a wide array of sources, and joining multiple social media platforms, such as chat rooms and message boards, online dating sites, and online gaming.

How Extremists Use Online Services

Although individuals and organizations worldwide use online services for a variety of legitimate reasons, violent extremists take advantage of the decentralization and the vast number of social media platforms to make tracking and monitoring the full extent of their online activities difficult. These groups complement their use of popular social media sites and traditional websites by using other online services to recruit, plan, and commit crimes:[1]
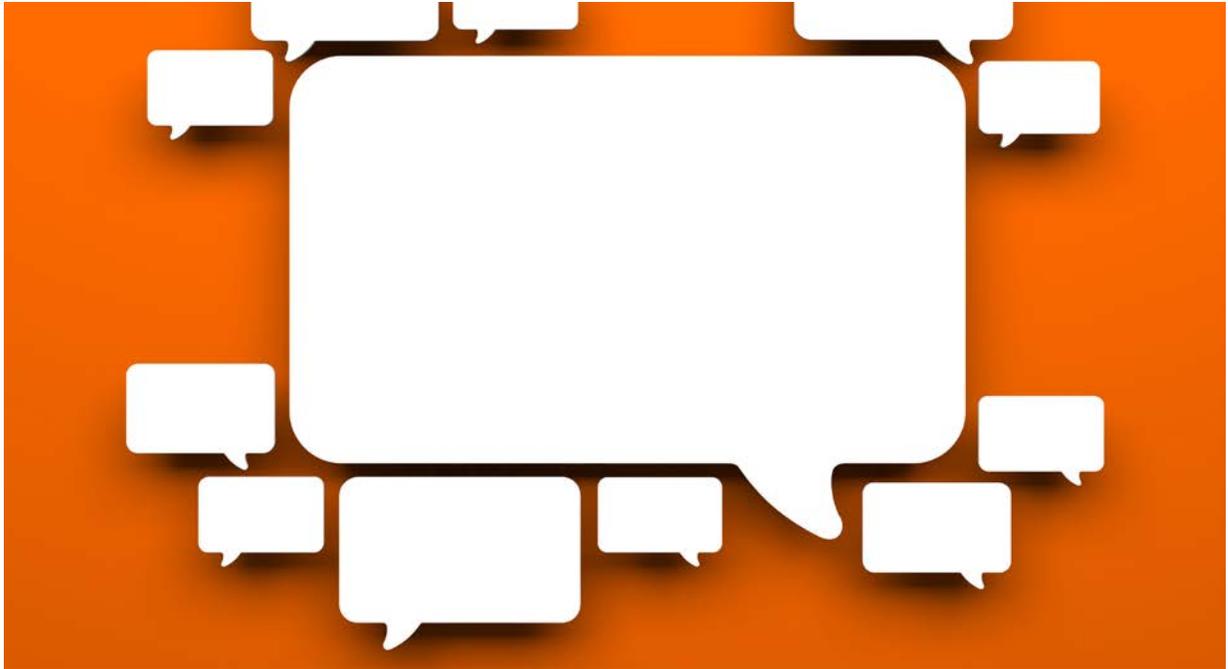
Chat rooms and message boards

Extremist groups use chat rooms and message boards to allow users to post questions and answers about ideological justifications for violence and to show support and encouragement for people who express a desire to launch attacks.

Users post their personal experiences, grievances against enemies, and anecdotes about their path to extreme views, and they comment on the stories posted by others. These interactions with like-minded individuals can effectively reinforce the beliefs of certain individuals and further radicalize others. In some cases, these forums have worked to move individuals from passively discussing violence and attacks to actively plotting with others.

Chat rooms and message boards also allow users to share operational and tactical information. Individuals share knowledge about the chemicals needed and the appropriate proportions for different improvised explosive devices (IEDs), step-by-step procedures for hacking websites and evading firewalls, and methods for ambushing and attacking others using various weapons. Certain chat rooms and message boards have video and voice capabilities that allow users to interact in a more secure way and in real time.

In addition, many sites have no limits on the number of chat rooms and message boards that an individual or group can establish. Therefore, some groups narrowcast their chat rooms and message boards to appeal to specific audiences such as women and children. The rooms and boards for children glorify those who have launched successful attacks and immunize children to violence. Last, most chat rooms and message boards can also be password protected to prevent infiltration.

Online dating sites

Some extremists use online dating sites to meet people with similar views to groom and recruit others. Individuals with radical viewpoints create profiles seeking vulnerable partners who are likely to be sympathetic to the radical individual's views and actions and whom the radical individuals can leverage during different stages of plots and attacks.

For example, in one case the violent extremist Colleen LaRose, also known by her screen name "Jihad Jane," created an online dating profile to meet individuals to learn more about their religion and ultimately radicalized them to the point that they were willing to travel to Europe to commit murder. LaRose also used her profile to try to find suitors whom she

could stay with in Europe.[2] Other extremists create dating profiles to search for people with similar religious or political beliefs and a desire to assist in fighting for a specific cause.

Online gaming

Groups of violent extremists use online gaming to practice operating different weapons and accessories, plan, coordinate and practice launching ambushes and attacks, and commit crimes.

Through first-person online shooter games, players engage in combat and shootouts, using the point of view of the character. In an attempt to provide players with as real an experience as possible, these games use weapons and accessories that are available in the real world. This provides extremists with the opportunity to practice using certain combinations of weapons and accessories and to practice launching an attack. These games also have multiplayer settings that allow a group to conduct a mission together and practice communicating with one another.

Other online games can be used to buy and sell virtual goods, including groceries, land, and clothes, and certain amounts of virtual money can be exchanged for actual money. Extremist groups leverage this ability to launder and transfer money to those in need of financial support to launch an attack.

The Role of Community Policing in Addressing Violent Extremism Online

Community policing promotes the use of partnerships between law enforcement and the community to address public safety concerns. Citizens who are empowered by law enforcement are a valuable asset to any department or agency and can play a large role in countering violent extremism. Internet safety is a public safety concern that many law enforcement agencies are already working with communities to address.

Ways in which law enforcement and the community can work together to help identify, prevent, and counter online messages and activities that promote violent extremism include the following:

Raising awareness

Law enforcement can help raise awareness of the threats posed by online recruiters and the various tactics they use to appeal to different individuals by educating people about how to recognize and report suspicious online activities. Providing this education can also empower the community to work in concert with law enforcement to formulate ideas about appropriate measures to take to ensure their own safety and to create appropriate counter-narratives to the radical views being espoused in various online forums.

Increasing an agency's social media profile

Law enforcement agencies can also use or create their own social media accounts to engage their communities and help keep community members away from radical recruiters on the Internet.[3] Agencies can use social media to conduct virtual ride-alongs in which the department can share information about calls for service. For example, officers can post about the community events and meetings they attend and the people they interact with, and they can encourage followers

to meet them at these public events. Agencies can also use social media to host online community meetings during which community members submit questions via social media, and representatives can answer them.

Increasing partnerships though social media

Agencies can link to the social media accounts of neighborhood watch groups and share these groups' announcements and links on the agency's page or account. Social media partnerships help foster support for crime prevention, generate tips about unsolved crimes, and improve law enforcement and community relations.[4] These same social media strategies and partnerships that are now paying dividends with respect to crime and other public safety issues can also benefit law enforcement efforts to address online violent extremism.

Endnotes

1. Some of the activities and uses mentioned are not necessarily illegal and may be protected under the First Amendment and other civil rights laws. Each site allows users to block individuals from contacting them and to report content and accounts that violate a site's terms of service. A site can remove any content that is determined to violate its terms, and users who post such content are subject to having their account suspended or removed.

2. John Shiffman, "Special Report: From Abuse to a Chat Room, a Martyr is Made—Jane's Jihad," *Reuters,* December 7, 2012, www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/07/us-usa-jihadjane-idUSBRE8B60GP20121207.

3. For more information about how law enforcement can use social media sites, visit IACP's Center for Social Media at www.IACPsocialmedia.org.

4. Of the agencies using social media, 73.1 percent indicated that social media has improved police-community relations in their jurisdiction. See "2013 Social Media Survey Results," (Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2013), www.iacpsocialmedia.org/Portals/1/documents/2013SurveyResults.pdf.

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