

AWARENESS BRIEF

Facebook and Violent Extremism



Understanding Facebook

With more than 1 billion users, Facebook is one of the most popular social networking sites. After users create a personal profile or organization page and add photos, contact information, and additional information, they can search for people with similar interests, create networks of “friends,” communicate by sending private messages or posting comments on another user’s wall, “like” pages of organizations and join “groups” with other users who share similar interests, and post and share content created on Facebook or linked to another website.

How Extremists Use Facebook

Although individuals and organizations worldwide use Facebook for a variety of

legitimate reasons, violent extremists, gangs, and terrorist groups also have a significant presence and following on Facebook.¹ The following identifies the ways domestic and international extremists of all persuasions use Facebook to promote violence:

Recruitment

Facebook provides violent extremists with a vast recruiting ground. In the United States alone, 67 percent of all Internet users have a Facebook profile, and the percentages are even higher for youth and young adults. Moreover, Facebook is one of the top three websites visited by people under the age of 18.²

Extremists take advantage of the fact that parents and law enforcement often are not aware of the dangers that could be present when a young person spends large amounts



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of time on Facebook. Extremist individuals and organizations use this viewing potential to create lines of communication, enabling them to find, recruit, groom, and communicate with young people worldwide. This aids extremist groups intent on attacking Western countries and their interests in creating an international network of followers that can be radicalized to violence.

Radical recruiters also contact users who have liked their wall posts and left favorable comments on posts that express a desire to become involved in the cause. Some recruiters even use names, pictures, and information of attractive young women to engage and recruit young men.³

Radicalization

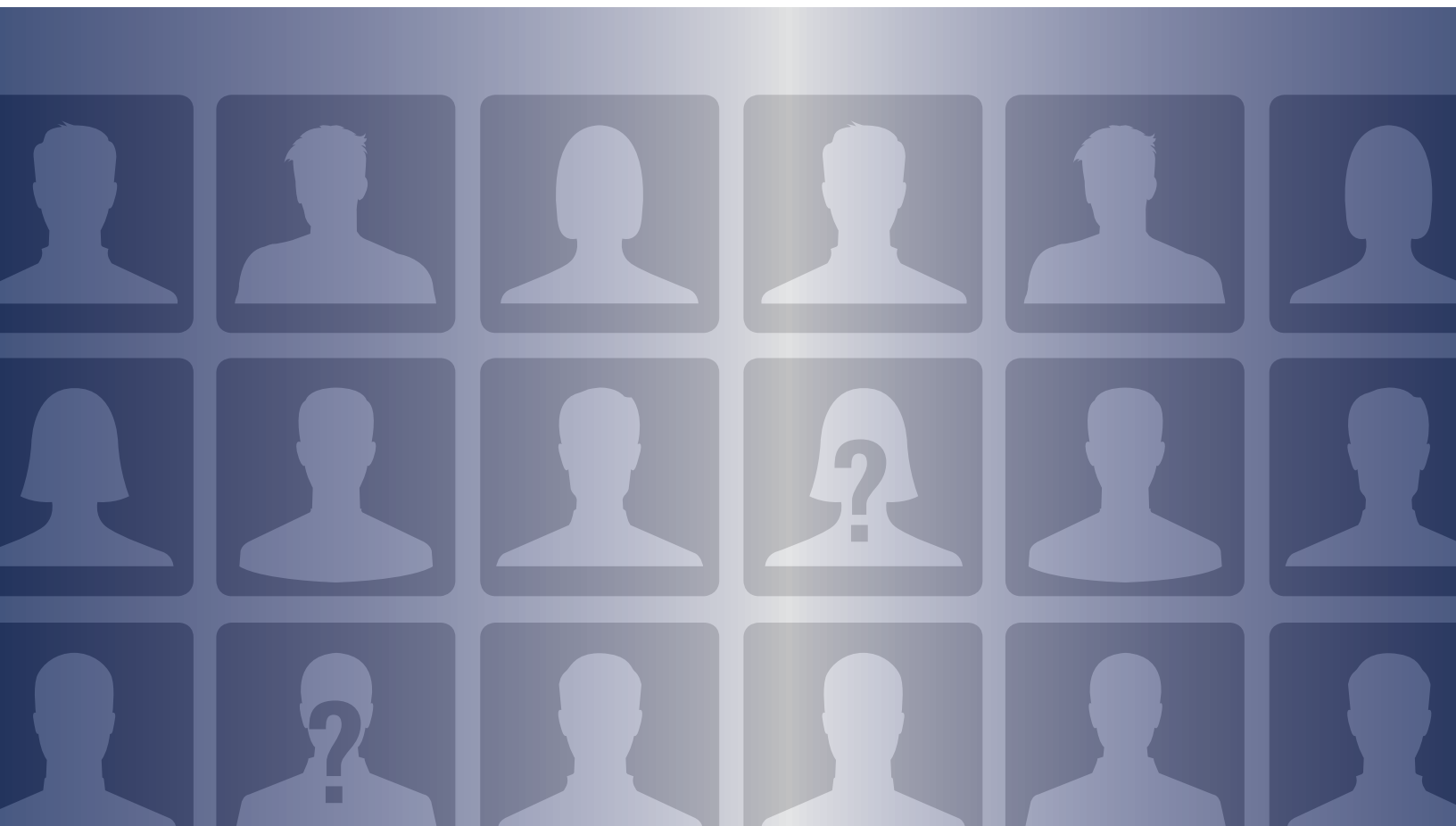
Facebook groups and pages expressing support for violent extremists and terrorist organizations allow anyone to read information, view videos and other propaganda, comment on wall posts or write their own posts, and click on links to content hosted on other sites. These pages effectively

bring propaganda to a wider audience and serve as a gateway to other extremist websites where more radical content is available. In many instances, posts include historical and factual data that is skewed or changed to foster support or empathy to the cause and link to websites with additional information.

Groups and pages also provide a community of like-minded individuals for recruits to interact with and share their extremist ideology, feed off of one another, and further radicalize. In some cases, these groups can foster friendships that individuals may be missing from their physical community. The number of “likes” on a page or members of a group can also make certain organizations appear to have critical mass.

Mobilization

Extremists also post tips and guidance about operational and tactical information, gathering counterintelligence, and coordinating attacks. For example, information about various explosives and commonly used weapons, information about how to avoid arousing



suspicion, videos of successful operations, and links to other websites are the most common types of content these individuals and groups post.

By only posting certain information on Facebook and linking to third-party sites with graphic videos and other violent content, extremists are able to abide by Facebook's terms and policies and still spread essential operational and tactical information to interested parties.

Violent individuals and groups also gather information about law enforcement strategies, tactics, and locations based on content posted on their Facebook pages. In addition, pictures uploaded to Facebook that contain embedded geolocation data as well as status updates posted by individual officers or agencies have been used by violent extremists to modify their tactics and plan attacks. Extremists can also use the chat function to exchange private messages and information and to coordinate attacks in real-time.

Attack

Embedding malicious content and software in applications and hacking into accounts can serve multiple purposes for extremist organizations. Hackers can gain access to accounts of legitimate users and steal personal information that hackers can use to obtain forms of identification and to open new lines of credit to fund additional attacks, which can also generate attention for a certain group or cause.

The Role of Community Policing in Addressing Violent Extremism on Facebook

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. Individuals using Facebook to groom and recruit extremists are 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 use Facebook to help identify, prevent, and counter violent extremism include the following:

Educating the community

Educating youth and parents about how to report suspicious postings and violent content and who to report these incidents to, as well as providing them with general Internet safety tips, helps law enforcement create community members who are well positioned to identify indicators of radicalization and other suspicious behaviors.

Engaging youth

Engagement is another key component of community policing that law enforcement can use to address violent extremists and radical recruiters on Facebook. Because recruiters tend to target youth and young adults that feel isolated or excluded from their physical community, law enforcement can engage these same age groups in positive ways. Police athletic leagues, youth police academies, youth advisory councils, and sponsoring or hosting youth-specific events can help offset the allure of radicalization, provide law enforcement with ideas about the best ways to reach other young people, and encourage youth and young adults to be more active in their physical community.

Creating an agency Facebook page

Law enforcement agencies can create their own Facebook page for free.⁴ Having a page is an easy way to encourage members of

the community to connect with the police department. Agencies can post questions on their page and encourage comments as an easy way to solicit tips and feedback and engage in dialogue with community members.

Departments can also use their Facebook page to share flyers and information about upcoming community events, disseminate information about unsolved crimes and crime trends in the community, and encourage people to report any information they might have. Engaging residents by empowering them to play an active role can impress upon them their importance in the community and proactively counter extremists on Facebook.

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. Facebook allows users to block individuals from contacting them and to report content and accounts that violate the site's terms of service. Facebook 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. For more information about Facebook's terms and policies, visit www.facebook.com/policies/?ref=pf.
2. "Fun Facts," IACP Center for Social Media, www.iacpsocialmedia.org/Resources/FunFacts.aspx.
3. Gabriel Weimann, "Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2010): 45–54.
4. For more information about how law enforcement can use Facebook and other social media sites, visit IACP's Center for Social Media at www.IACPsocialmedia.org.

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The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of this publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s) nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.

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