Social media platforms provide violent groups free access to vast audiences.

Terror groups have weaponized blogs, Facebook groups, news feeds, and tweets to fundraise, broadcast attacks, recruit new members, and provide training.

Social media algorithms fuel division and foster extremism, helping terror groups, white supremacists and violent nationalists identify and radicalize recruits.

THE SPECIFICS

User-friendly, reliable, and free platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter provide direct access to pages managed by banned extremist groups including Hezbollah and ISIS as well as white nationalist groups in the United States and Europe.

Social media provides violent groups with a powerful mechanism to broadcast terrorist attacks, beheadings, instructional videos, and recruitment material targeting potential new members.

Examples of outreach and engagement include a 2019 Hezbollah crowd-funding campaign on Facebook to “Equip a Jihadi” and evidence that the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers learned how to build explosives from online ISIS material.

Designated terror groups including Hezbollah and the Pakistani Taliban have maintained official Facebook and Twitter accounts, which directly link to their websites, and vice versa.

Facebook became so instrumental to Hezbollah’s public outreach that its “Electronic Resistance” actually incorporated the Facebook trademark into Hezbollah’s iconic logo!

In 2017, Google’s stock plunged by 4.5% and advertisers pulled hundreds of millions of dollars after news reports showed ads for commercial products played alongside violent ISIS content on YouTube.

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Terror-related material—including bomb recipes and instruction from virtual coaches—is easily found through simple search functions. It is not even necessary to join a private or secret group to access this content.

Social media sites also enable terror groups to raise funds through the sale of narcotics, looted antiquities, or other contraband.

Platforms even help extremist groups recruit by auto-recommending groups and matching members with similar interests.

Facebook tools sometimes inadvertently make use of terror images in auto-generated material that subsequently gets used by terrorists as propaganda material.

Major tech firms have been accused of failing to adjust algorithms that accelerate violent extremism. Lawmakers have accused executives at social media firms of consistently prioritizing growth and revenue over safety and security.

Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act (CDA230) grants immunity to any provider of “interactive computer service” for user-generated content. This means that social media platforms can host illegal activity with complete immunity, even when they know it’s there.

By reforming CDA230, lawmakers could shift the responsibility for monitoring Internet platforms for illicit activity to tech firms, and regulate firms to hand over evidence of illegal activity to law enforcement. If this reform doesn’t occur, current campaigns to improve user privacy could have the unintended consequence of making the Internet a safer place for violent extremist groups.

90 percent of terrorist activity on the Internet takes place using social networking tools.

According to the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), a full half of 236 interviewees said internet-based recruitment and perusal of social media factored into their decision to join ISIS.

According to a June 2020 report from The Wall Street Journal, a 2016 internal Facebook study found that “64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools” and that most of the activity came from the platform’s “Groups You Should Join” and “Discover” algorithms.

Facebook claims its AI systems identify 99 percent of the terrorist content that is taken down before appearing on its platform.

But studies by ACCO member Counter Extremism Project indicate that terror content from groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda is flagged and removed only about 38% of the time.

The Alliance to Counter Crime Online is a team of security experts, academics, NGO leaders, and citizen investigators who have come together to push organized crime and terror activity off Internet platforms.

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