

AWARENESS BRIEF

Online Radicalization to Violent Extremism



Defining Online Radicalization

Online radicalization to violence is the process by which an individual is introduced to an ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily through the use of online media, including social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.¹ A result of radical interpretations of mainstream religious or political doctrines, these extreme views tend to justify, promote, incite, or support violence to achieve any number of social, religious, or political changes.

In many cases, online radicalization does not occur after viewing one video or reading one online post but happens gradually. The factors that influence a specific individual can change for him or her depending on the time or circumstance. Moreover, while the factors that influence radicalization differ from person to person, so too does the radicalization process itself. Individuals can move back and forth between stages or remain static while factors and levels interact and influence one another.

Generally, as individuals immerse themselves in online extremist content, they begin to develop a skewed sense of reality in which

their views no longer seem radical. Online interactions with like-minded individuals can substitute for an individual's physical community and create an online social environment similar to that of a gang in which deviant behavior and violence are the norm. Consumers of online extremist content can also develop or increase feelings of superiority, moral outrage, desensitization to violence, and willingness to commit acts of violence in furtherance of a particular cause.

How Extremists Use the Internet to Recruit and Radicalize

People and organizations worldwide have embraced the Internet because of its ease and convenience. Individuals and organizations use the Internet to share photos and videos, post news and press releases, raise money, and communicate with others. As access to the Internet continues to spread, more people own Internet-enabled devices, and as the use of social media proliferates, people are spending more time online, consuming content from a variety of sources and creating virtual communities.



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Violent extremists and criminal organizations are also exploiting this easy access to an increasingly broad cross-section of individuals to recruit, groom, and facilitate radicalization to violence. The Internet provides radical recruiters with a more fertile ground for recruitment and more opportunities to interact with people who would not otherwise be reachable by conventional means.

Using a combination of traditional websites; mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; and other online services, extremists broadcast their views, provoke negative sentiment toward enemies, incite people to violence, glorify martyrs, create virtual communities with like-minded individuals, provide religious or legal justifications for proposed actions, and communicate with and groom new recruits.² Extremists post incendiary materials such as educational videos about how to construct explosives and operate weapons, videos of successful attacks, lectures espousing radical views, blog posts, and messages supporting and further encouraging attacks and acts of violence. For example, terrorist groups have used Facebook to exchange private messages and information to coordinate attacks and Facebook pages that individuals can “like” to show their support, have disseminated propaganda and press releases on Twitter, and have uploaded extremists’ sermons and training videos on YouTube.³ They have also used online message boards, chat rooms, and dating sites to meet and interact with one other and spread their messages.

Creating profiles, pages, and accounts on various websites and social media platforms also allows smaller groups to appear as if they have achieved critical mass and are serious groups fighting for their particular cause. The ability to access the Internet from almost anywhere in the world also contributes to these groups amassing large followings and appearing more formidable.

Examples of Online Radicalization to Violence

One such example of how an individual can become radicalized through online services is anti-Islam terrorist Anders Breivik, who in July 2011 at the age of 32 carried out bombing and shootings in Norway.⁴ According to those who knew him prior, he belonged to a normal and resourceful group of friends who considered him caring and sociable.

However, Breivik had another side. In 2006, after failing to manage several small companies and running into some financial trouble, Breivik moved back into his mother’s house and “decided to take a year off to play videogames as a martyr gift to himself.”⁵ He then also withdrew from his social life and began writing about resistance and attempting to unite different factions of far-right political groups. His later writing also included violence and called for an armed revolution that legitimized terrorism against Western elites.

Likewise, Zachary Chesser was an average high school student in northern Virginia. He participated in his high school’s Gifted and Talented program, joined his high school break-dancing team, and worked part-time at a video rental store.⁶

In the summer of 2008, 18-year-old Chesser converted to Islam and quickly became radicalized, solely on the Internet. He began posting views that supported Islamist terrorist groups, watching sermons by Anwar al Awlaki, and exchanging e-mails with the cleric about joining Al Shabab. Within weeks, he had quit his job because he “objected to working at a place that rented videos featuring naked women” and became increasingly hostile to his parents.⁷

By 2009, Chesser committed himself solely to using his computer and graphics skills to contribute to and promote violent extremist

messages. He also attempted to travel to Somalia with his wife—whom he met through a series of comments on al Awlaki’s blog—to join Al Shabab but was unsuccessful when his mother-in-law hid his wife’s passport. In 2010, he uploaded a YouTube video in which he threatened the creators of the television show *South Park* after an episode depicted the Prophet Muhammad dressed in a bear costume.⁸

In July 2010, he attempted to join Al Shabab once again but was held for questioning at the airport. A few days after being questioned, Chesser was arrested for attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization. He pled guilty in October 2010 to three federal felony charges—communicating threats, soliciting violent jihadists to desensitize law enforcement, and attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization—and was sentenced in 2011 to 25 years in federal prison.⁹

The Role of Community Policing in Countering Online Radicalization to Violence

The number of cases of online radicalization is impossible to quantify, and the fact that it occurs online makes it harder for law enforcement to be aware of potential cases of radicalization to violence. In addition, law enforcement officers must remember that becoming radicalized online and posting, possessing, or espousing extremist views are not necessarily criminal activities. Under the First Amendment, individuals are granted freedom of speech, religion, and the press. As long as these individuals do not partake in, conspire to engage in, or facilitate the engagement of acts of violence or commit other crimes in support of violent acts, individuals and groups espousing the most radical of views must be protected.

Therefore, law enforcement agencies should use community policing principles to address and counter online radicalization. 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:

Engaging the community

Law enforcement can be a part of the solution by using one of the key components of community policing, citizen engagement. Traditional engagement has included identifying ways the community can get involved in addressing crime and disorder problems. Engagement also involves building trust, which in the past has included creating police athletic leagues in which community members play sports alongside officers and encouraging residents to attend citizen academies or go on ride-alongs.

Increasing an agency’s social media profile

Law enforcement agencies can also virtually engage their communities by creating their own social media accounts¹⁰ through which they can interact with the community in various ways. For example, agencies can conduct virtual ride-alongs in which the department can choose a certain time to post all the calls it receives, all calls of a certain type, or the activities of a specific officer or unit. Also, officers dedicated to countering violent extremism 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 conduct question and answer sessions during which community members submit questions via social media, and representatives answer them. Agencies can also link to the social media accounts of neighborhood watch groups and share these groups’ announcements and links on the agency’s page or account. This recognition can help foster support for crime prevention, can be an effective way to solicit tips about unsolved crimes, and can improve law enforcement and community relations.¹¹

Educating community members

Community policing also promotes the use of partnerships between law enforcement and the community to address public safety concerns. For example, many law enforcement agencies are already working with communities to address specific public safety concerns, such as online sexual predators, by educating youth and parents about how to recognize and

report suspicious people and online activities. Likewise, law enforcement, through its existing partnerships or through newly established partnerships with potentially affected communities, can help raise awareness of the threats online extremist recruiters pose. An agency can incorporate these warnings into its overall effort to educate communities about all Internet threats to their safety.

Endnotes

1. This definition of “online radicalization to violence” is a combination of the definitions for “Internet-facilitated radicalization” and “radicalization to violence” that can be found in: IACP Committee on Terrorism, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group, *A Common Lexicon* (Alexandria, VA: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2012), www.theiacp.org/portals/0/pdfs/IACP-COT-CommonLexicon_Eng_FINALAug12.pdf.
2. 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.
3. Gabriel Weimann, “Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2010).
4. Helen Pidd, “Anders Behring Breivik Spent Years Training and Plotting for Massacre,” *The Guardian*, August 24, 2012, www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/24/anders-behring-breivik-profile-oslo.
5. Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “A Pre-Trial Profile of Anders Behring Breivik,” CTC Sentinel 5, no. 3 (March 2012), www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-pre-trial-profile-of-anders-behring-breivik, translation quoted from “Les de psykiatriske rapportene om Breivik [Read the Psychiatric Reports of Breivik],” VG Nett (no date).
6. Majority and Minority Staff of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Zachary Chesser: A Case Study in Online Islamist Radicalization and Its Meaning for the Threat of Homegrown Terrorism* (Washington, DC: United States Senate, 2012), www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/CHESSE%20FINAL%20REPORT%281%29.pdf.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. For more information about how law enforcement can use social media sites, visit IACP’s Center for Social Media at www.IACPsocialmedia.org.
11. 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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