

AWARENESS BRIEF

Twitter and Violent Extremism



Understanding Twitter

Twitter has more than 500 million users, making it one of the most popular social media sites. This microblogging site allows users to post short messages or status updates, known as tweets, that are 140 characters or less. Tweets can be viewed immediately by the user's network of followers and other individuals without a Twitter account; thus, the vast majority of content posted on Twitter is openly available.

Tweets can mention another user's account and reply to another user's tweet using the @ symbol, include links to third-party sites, and include hashtags (# symbol followed by keywords or phrases) to categorize ideas for easy searching. Users can also retweet another user's message to their followers and can send direct messages to a specific user or group of users, provided they have a Twitter account.

Individuals and organizations use Twitter to share ideas, opinions, news, and pictures or

videos while following others' conversations. Celebrities use Twitter to connect with their fans, businesses with their customers, and government agencies and services with the residents they serve.

How Extremists Use Twitter

Although individuals and organizations worldwide use Twitter for a variety of legitimate reasons, violent extremists, gangs, and terrorist groups use it to connect with their supports.¹ The following identifies the ways domestic and international extremists of all persuasions use Twitter to promote violence:

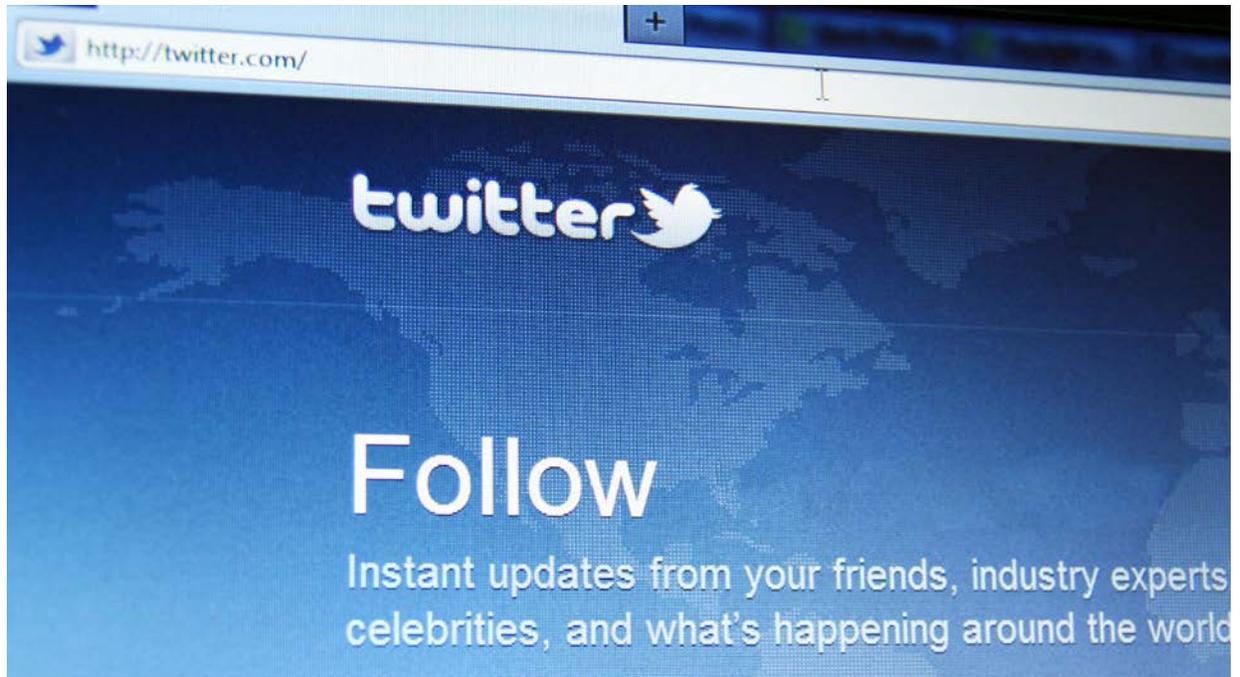
Recruitment

Twitter provides violent extremists with an international recruiting ground. From November 2010 to February 2012, the number of Internet users who used Twitter nearly doubled.² Twitter is available around the world, and the site supports more than 35 languages.³



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Furthermore, more than 75 percent of active users access Twitter on Internet-enabled mobile devices,⁴ which may account for why Twitter is most popular among younger users.⁵ Approximately 26 percent of Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 have a Twitter account, far exceeding the next-closest demographic.⁶

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 of time on Twitter. Extremist individuals and organizations use this viewing potential to create lines of communication, making it easier for extremists 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 re-tweeted their posts and left favorable comments on numerous tweets that express a desire to become involved in the cause.

Radicalization

Many extremist organizations use Twitter to issue statements and press releases, disseminate propaganda, and provide

justification or encouragement for attacks. Whether their narrative suggests that the West is at war with Islam, the government is overstepping its bounds, or that certain religions or races are inferior, groups use Twitter to broadcast their ideology and propaganda to a large audience. This promotion can also take the form of directly criticizing opposing sources and information on other Twitter accounts. These groups can also post links to other websites and pages with radical content.

Mobilization

Extremist groups can leverage the ability to tweet near real-time messages to numerous people to organize demonstrations and to plot simultaneous attacks. They can also use tweets with pictures that have geolocation data or other identifying information to coordinate ambushes and attacks.

Response

Immediately after a successful attack, extremists can use Twitter to effectively spread misinformation and hamper the ability of first responders and law enforcement to respond. After the 2008 bombing at a hotel in Mumbai, India, the Pakistani government asked all tweets about the incident to stop because

the perpetrators were monitoring Twitter for updates about the response and search.⁷ Violent groups can also use Twitter to claim responsibility for attacks, link to articles and videos about the attacks, praise attackers, and call for similar attacks.

The Role of Community Policing in Addressing Violent Extremism on Twitter

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 (CVE). Individuals using Twitter 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 Twitter to help identify, prevent, and counter violent extremism include the following:

Enhancing trust to increase reporting

By working with the community, law enforcement can enhance the trust needed for this partnership to work. Trust is especially important to CVE initiatives. Community members tend to feel more comfortable reporting suspicious activities and providing information to law enforcement when they trust that the agency will handle the information appropriately and that the agency is transparent about its efforts.

Building trust can start as working with the community and attending community events in uniform. This allows community members to put names and faces to badges and uniforms and see law enforcement officers as community members too.

Enhancing transparency and communication

Communication shapes how individuals view law enforcement and their willingness to collaborate. Without balanced, two-way

communication and transparency regarding an agency's CVE initiatives, the community may believe that law enforcement is only interested in engaging the community as a source of information. Communities that believe law enforcement is only interested in collecting information and co-opting them into the intelligence gathering process—known as “securitizing” the relationship—are likely to feel alienated and less likely to work with law enforcement and report suspicious activity.

Creating agency Twitter feeds

Law enforcement agencies can create their own Twitter account to connect with members of the community and provide followers an official outlet to stay informed.⁸ Creating an account is a free, easy way for an agency to reach large portions of the community at once. Tweets can include information about upcoming community events, links to pages to report suspicious activities and other tips, information about preparedness plans, news and press releases, links to information on the agency's website, and other information.

Enhancing law enforcement and community policing missions

Police departments can adapt the features of Twitter to expand their communication, outreach, and response practices in a variety of innovative ways. For example, departments can conduct tweet-alongs, or virtual ride-alongs, in which a department can choose a certain time to tweet all the calls it receives, all calls of a certain type, or the activities of a specific officer or unit. Officers dedicated to CVE can conduct a tweet-along where they tweet 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.

Similarly, tweet chats allow followers to tweet questions to the police department, and representatives can answer them. The department can also use Twitter to officially address rumors and correct misinformation that may be generating fear in the community. And in the event of an attack, law enforcement can tweet official information and provide near real-time updates about its response.

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. Twitter allows users to block individuals from contacting them and to report content and accounts that violate the site's terms of service. Twitter 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 Twitter's terms of service, visit www.twitter.com/tos.
2. Aaron Smith and Joanna Brenner, "Twitter Use 2012," Pew Internet & American Life Project, May 31, 2012, www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Twitter-Use-2012.aspx.
3. "About Twitter, Inc.," Twitter.com, accessed December 23, 2013, <https://about.twitter.com/company>.
4. Ibid.
5. Smith and Brenner, "Twitter Use 2012."
6. Ibid.
7. Mindy Chidester, "The Exploitation of Social Media by Clandestine Groups, How Law Enforcement and Intelligence Can Better Utilize Social Media, and Legal Concerns to Ensure Its Appropriate Use by Government Entities," thesis, San Diego State University, 2012, http://sdsu-dspace.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.10/2583/Chidester_Mindy.pdf?sequence=1.
8. For more information about how law enforcement can use Twitter and other social media sites, visit IACP's Center for Social Media at www.IACPsocialmedia.org.

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This *Awareness Brief* is one of a series and part of other projects produced as part of the Role of Community Policing in Homeland Security and the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative. For more information about the CVE initiative, and to access additional IACP resources, please visit www.theiacp.org/CVE.

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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