

AWARENESS BRIEF

YouTube and Violent Extremism



Understanding YouTube

Each month, approximately 1 billion different users visit YouTube and watch more than 6 billion hours of videos, making YouTube one of the most popular video-sharing sites on the Internet.¹ Users can not only upload videos and share videos with other users but also view, rate, and comment on videos uploaded by other users and subscribe to the channel and public activity of other users. In addition, individuals without a YouTube account can view videos on this site.

YouTube has helped propel individuals into celebrities, raised awareness and educated people, provided organizations a new forum to advertise and recruit, and provided a forum for anyone to upload original content.

How Extremists Use YouTube

Although individuals and organizations worldwide use YouTube for a variety of legitimate reasons, violent extremists, gangs, and terrorist groups take advantage of its opportunities to broadcast their own ideologies.² The following identifies the ways domestic and international extremists of all persuasions use YouTube to promote violence:

Recruitment

YouTube provides violent extremists with an international recruiting ground. Approximately 80 percent of YouTube's traffic comes from outside the United States, and the site is localized in more than 60 countries and more



than 60 languages.³ Users can also upload videos and include subtitles in any language, further increasing the potential audience.

Extremists also 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 YouTube. Extremist individuals and organizations use this viewing potential to upload recruitment videos and create lines of communication that enable them to find, recruit, groom, and communicate with people worldwide. This aids extremist groups intent on attacking Western countries and their interest in creating an international network of followers that can be radicalized to violence.

Radical recruiters also contact people who have posted favorable comments on numerous videos that express a desire to become involved in the cause.

Radicalization

Violent extremists of all persuasions upload videos that include depictions of perceived affronts committed by enemies, speeches and statements of radical leaders, and other videos promoting violence and uprisings. Videos can also explain extremist ideologies and justify violent actions and responses. These videos often include graphics and edits that make them appear similar to traditional newscasts, making it difficult for viewers to realize that these are segments based on propaganda and skewed information.

Extremists also upload videos that provide moral support and encourage motivated viewers to launch attacks of their own. Violent extremist groups have even created cartoons that are intended to appeal to youth. Some videos that promote extremist views have been viewed hundreds of thousands of

times. Furthermore, thousands of supporters have subscribed to the channels of violent individuals and groups and have helped raise money for attacks.

Instructional information

One of the most common uses of YouTube by violent extremists is to upload educational and training videos that promote violent extremism. These videos can highlight what the different parts of weapons are, how to shoot and reload them, how to modify them to make them more effective for different missions, and how to strip and clean them.

Videos can also provide step-by-step procedures for building improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mixing chemicals to make the largest explosions. Other videos describe how to build timing devices and detonators using cell phones and wristwatches. Extremists can also upload videos detailing where to place explosives to cause the greatest amount of damage at malls, businesses, restaurants, and other venues. Videos providing suggestions on how to avoid arousing suspicion, how to conceal weapons and IEDs, and how to make false documents such as license plates and personal identification can also be found on YouTube.

Promoting “successes”

Extremists frequently upload videos of their “successes” and of themselves boasting about their “accomplishments” on YouTube. Sovereign citizens upload videos of themselves behaving defiantly during traffic stops, militants upload videos of successful ambushes and attacks at military bases, and individuals upload videos of themselves successfully detonating IEDs. Videos of extremists showing kidnapped individuals as proof of their success are also on YouTube.⁴ These videos help create the perception that the extremist group that viewers want to join is composed of individuals who are capable of carrying out successful attacks.

The Role of Community Policing in Addressing Violent Extremism on YouTube

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 YouTube 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 YouTube to help identify, prevent, and counter violent extremism include the following:

Building partnerships

One of the key principles of community policing is using a “whole community” approach to address problems and concerns. Partnering with an array of government agencies and services, local businesses, nonprofits and community services organizations, and other interested groups can prevent duplication of efforts and leverage the strengths and resources of different organizations.

Producing videos

Law enforcement agencies can partner with community leaders and organizations to produce videos that counter the messages being espoused by radicals and demonstrate the community’s resilience to extremism. These relationships can foster public-private partnerships by building goodwill and addressing community needs and concerns. Agencies can also partner with members of the media, students, and volunteers to film and edit videos. This whole community approach can provide innovative solutions to community concerns and provide law enforcement with resources to help counter violent extremist narratives.

Creating an agency YouTube channel

Law enforcement agencies can also create their own YouTube channel and upload videos for free.⁵ Agencies can upload videos that cover a variety of Internet safety and crime prevention topics.

Videos of community events where residents and law enforcement worked together, participated in fun activities together, or interacted in positive ways can also be beneficial. Community members who may have been hesitant to attend an event with law enforcement but who see their fellow community members interacting with law enforcement may be motivated to attend future events.

Law enforcement agencies can also upload press conferences and recruitment videos that highlight the benefits of being an officer and working in the community.

Endnotes

1. "Statistics," YouTube, accessed December 23, 2013, www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html.
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. YouTube allows users to block individuals from contacting them and to report content and accounts that violate the site's terms of service. YouTube 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 YouTube's terms of service, visit www.youtube.com/t/terms?hl=en.
3. "Statistics," YouTube.
4. 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.
5. For more information about how law enforcement can use YouTube and other social media sites, visit IACP's Center for Social Media at www.IACPsocialmedia.org.

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