How Social Media Becomes a Tool to Radicalize College Students

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Twitter was used as a primary tool to orchestrate the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai. From September to December 2014, more than 46,000 Twitter accounts were utilized by ISIS supporters, each with an average of 1,000 followers. A strong ISIS presence was also found on Facebook and YouTube. Despite these platforms' policies, videos spreading extremist ideologies and propaganda often remain online for too long. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an ISIS spokesperson, confirmed that social media was used to incite attacks

against the West. ISIS issues thousands of recruiting videos, memes, and tweets with little online content countering them. When Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube began suspending accounts related to ISIS propaganda in 2014, the group shifted to Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram. The official ISIS Arabic-language channel on Telegram claimed credit for the 2015 Paris attacks, which drew significant media attention. Following the attacks, Telegram began removing public channels, but extremist-hosted chats advocating violence are still accessible.

ISIS has created and maintained a "prolific media enterprise" despite account suspensions. In 2007, its media machine produced 1,000 events a year; by 2015, it produced that many in a month. These productions depicted utopian images of life in the "caliphate" and the ability to worship without interference. In addition to recruiting and radicalizing individuals, especially the vulnerable, extremists use social media to spread fear. Social media also acts as an "echo chamber" for those already radicalized and increases opportunities for self-radicalization.

College students (aged 18-29) are significantly more likely to use social media compared to older age groups. This usage can be explained through social learning theory, which posits that learning occurs in four stages: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Extremists target college students by analyzing their activities, such as views, shares, and likes, and producing content to capture their attention. The targets then reproduce the material by liking, sharing, and retweeting. Research has shown that the motivation for political violence and other attacks stems from social media interactions, consistent with this theory. For example, McDonald and Conway (2018) found that a group of American college students became radicalized via Facebook and Twitter, driven by behaviour learned on social media. In a study, Marion Donald Bell III interviewed college students and discovered that many were contacted by extremist groups on social media, encountered extremist content and literature, and felt pressured to join radical groups. Despite believing their knowledge and education made them less vulnerable, these students still faced threats, discrimination, recruitment attempts, and illicit offers.

Since the Hamas-Israel war began on October 7, 2023, there has been a sharp increase in verbally and physically violent protests, encampments, and occupations on college campuses all over the world. At many U.S. Ivy League universities, students have organized large-scale demonstrations, many of which have included vocal support for Hamas and its terror attack on Israel. These protests have escalated into verbal and physical attacks against Israeli and Jewish students. Similarly, in European universities, students have vandalized faculty buildings, marking them with Hamas and Hezbollah symbols and calling for violence against Zionists and the State of Israel. These recent events show the influence social media can have in shaping students' political views and actions. When extremist groups exploit online platforms to radicalize young people, it leads to real-world

consequences. And when young people on college campuses are vocally supportive of terror, violence, and discrimination it can compromise international security and Western democracies.

Monitoring extremist groups on social media is crucial for the national security of the U.S. and European countries. As the young people of today are the future's custodians, decision-makers and law enforcement need to invest in creating a virtual space free from radicalizing content and recruitment.

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