Study: Terrorist organizations have shifted Internet activity to social networks

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Hackers invading databases is just the tip of the iceberg in online terrorist activity: International terrorist organizations have shifted their Internet activity focus to social networks and today a number of Facebook groups are asking users to join and support Hezbollah, Hamas and other armed groups that have been included in the West's list of declared terror organizations. This has been shown in a new study conducted by Prof. Gabriel Weimann of the University of Haifa.

"Today, about 90% of organized terrorism on the Internet is being carried out through the social media. By using these tools, the organizations are able to be active in recruiting new friends without geographical limitations," says Prof. Weimann.

Over the past ten years, Prof. Weimann has been conducting a study of encoded and public Internet sites of international terror organizations, groups supporting these organizations, forums, video clips, and whatever information relating to global terrorism is running through the network.

According to Prof. Weimann, the shift to social media, and especially Facebook and Twitter, has not bypassed the terrorist organizations, who are keenly interested in recruiting new support in the new media's various arenas - Facebook, chat rooms, YouTube, Myspace, and more. "The social media is enabling the terror organizations to take initiatives by making 'Friend' requests, uploading video clips, and the like, and they no longer have to make do with the passive tools available on regular websites," he notes.

Facebook's popularity is being utilized by the terror organizations and besides recruiting new friends, they use this platform as a resource for gathering intelligence. A statement originating from Lebanon has reported that Hezbollah is searching for material on the Israeli army's Facebook activity, while many countries such as the USA, Canada and the UK have instructed their soldiers to remove personal information from this network as a precaution in case Al Qaeda is monitoring it. "Facebook has become a great place to obtain intelligence. Many users don't even bother finding out who they are confirming as 'Friend' and to whom they are providing access to a large amount of information on their personal life. The terrorists themselves, in parallel, are able to create false profiles that enable them to get into highly visible groups," he says.

For terror organizations, the social media is also providing a platform to maximize sharing 'professional' information. The following correspondence, for example, could easily be found on the open, non-coded forum belonging to Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades: "I have a kilogram of acetone. I want to know how to make an explosive with it to blow up a military jeep." A forum member promptly responded with descriptive instructions on how to turn the explosive liquid into a destructive tool.

"The most advanced of Western communication technology is, paradoxically, what the terror organizations are now using to fight the West," Weimann concluded.

Provided by University of Haifa

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