

Twitter pushes out Islamic state supporters, but shift may hinder counterterrorism, study finds

October 27 2017, by Jason Shevrin

Although Twitter was once the preferred platform of the Islamic State group, the social network's counter-extremism policies – including content removal – contributed to a decline in activity by IS supporters. New research from the George Washington University's Program on Extremism indicates the company's efforts may have been effective, but further analysis suggests IS's fight on Twitter is far from over.

To examine how IS evolved online, the Program on Extremism conducted a study of 845,646 tweets by 1,782 English-language pro-IS accounts from Feb. 15, 2016, to May 1, 2017. In "Digital Decay," a report analyzing the dataset, program research fellow Audrey Alexander concludes Twitter's policies hinder IS sympathizers on the platform, but argues that counter-IS practitioners should not overstate the impact of these measures in the broader fight against the organization online.

While Twitter's approach did successfully undercut the virtual network of IS sympathizers, contributing to a substantive drop in account activity among the users monitored, the decline was not caused by the company's efforts alone: IS' strategic shift from Twitter to messaging platforms that offer encryption services also affected sympathizers' behavior. While this shift was in part influenced by Twitter's counter-terrorism measures, it was also a noticeable trend before the company began to pursue mass suspension of pro-IS accounts.

Although a reduction in IS content on Twitter initially sounds like a positive metric for success, the Program on Extremism report argues that success for a [social media](#) company in the fight against the extremist group does not necessarily aid the U.S. government's efforts against the organization. Alexander explains, "Silencing IS adherents on Twitter may yield consequences that challenge law enforcement's ability to detect and disrupt threats posed by violent extremists."

"As a product of duress, the rope connecting IS' global base of supporters to the organization's top-down, central infrastructure is beginning to fray as followers stray from the agenda set for them by strategic communications," Alexander said. "Our study reveals that despite mounting pressures, IS sympathizers are skilled problem-solvers in the digital sphere. Rather than ruminating over losses, angered adherents fight to be heard, either on Twitter or other platforms."

The report finds IS' central leadership achieved mixed results in directing discourse among English-language sympathizers on Twitter. While battlefield initiatives served as a unifying theme among adherents, terrorist attacks did little to sustain dialogue. Most notably, current events – like the attempted coup in Turkey and the 2016 U.S. presidential election – were among the most popular topics within the sample. In fact, events unrelated directly to IS caused some of the most significant spikes in activity.

The study notes, "English-language IS sympathizers on Twitter defy straightforward analysis or convenient solutions." It also argues that in the fight against IS online, a success for tech companies in removing extremist content is not the same as success for counterterrorism community writ large.

"Swift efforts to silence IS supporters on social media may inadvertently produce side effects that challenge the efficacy of policymakers and [law](#)

[enforcement](#) in preventing threats posed by violent extremists," Alexander said. "Moreover, such actions do not necessarily affect the core of the movement and its leadership."

As an alternative, the report suggests entities tasked with countering online extremism and preventing terrorism must be adaptable and willing to pursue alternative ventures. While some collaboration is beneficial, the government cannot rely predominantly on the efforts of social media providers in the fight against IS online. Simultaneously, Twitter and other social media companies should consider different ways to slow and contain the flow of extremist content and users.

More information: Digital Decay? Tracing Change Over Time Among English-Language Islamic State Sympathizers on Twitter. [extremism.gwu.edu/sites/extrem ... italDecayFinal_0.pdf](#)

Provided by George Washington University

Citation: Twitter pushes out Islamic state supporters, but shift may hinder counterterrorism, study finds (2017, October 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-twitter-islamic-state-shift-hinder.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--