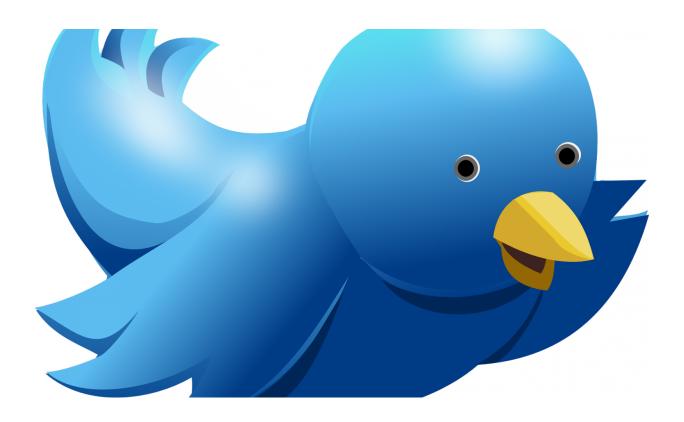# Sociologist uses Twitter to research criminological behavior online

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In the modern era of social media, more than 300 million people use Twitter to share news and engage in online conversations. This provides a glimpse into the minds of a diverse public – making Twitter a useful tool for researchers to study people who sympathize and promote extreme violence.

Dr. Karyn Sporer, associate professor of sociology, is analyzing a subsample of more than 4,300 tweets looking for emerging themes that justify violence. One of her goals is to help agencies find strategies to counter violent extremism and radicalization.

The project, "Justifications for violence: How jihadist sympathizers rationalize terrorism and mass murder," focuses on related tweets occurring within 24 hours surrounding three separate mass-casualty events: the Paris coordinated event (November 2015), Nice cargo truck event (July 2016) and the Orlando Pulse Nightclub event (June 2016). They were chosen because of their similarity in high number of casualties, intense media focus and social response. It is currently funded by the UMaine Faculty Research Funds program.

Patterns of common justifications for extreme violence emerge

Sporer's work is the continuation of a project she collaborated on while at the University of Nebraska. There, an interdisciplinary team of researchers created cyber-profiles for extremists. By using what members and sympathizers of terrorist groups posted online, the researchers hoped to better understand the groups' organizational structure and methodology.

The initial results of coding sympathizers' tweets were a shock to Sporer. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "There were some pretty substantial data in there and I realized I needed to dedicate time to analyze them."

The findings were shocking to Sporer because they were so similar to how common criminals justify their wrong-doings. "The justifications that common offenders use to defend stealing, abuse or murder – basic criminological theory – manifests in these tweets," said Sporer. The

findings were intriguing and Sporer decided to continue her research when she transitioned to the University of Maine.

Distinct patterns began to emerge as she delved into the thousands of tweets. People used ideology, retaliation and pointing out hypocrisy to condone violent events and garner sympathy for the extremists.

Research could provide tools to combat extremist messaging

Federal agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are interested in quelling the threat of domestic terrorists and homegrown violent extremists in the U.S. According to the DHS website, terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL use the internet and social media to recruit and radicalize individuals to violence. The DHS goal is to find and promote successful narratives to combat this violent messaging online – and Sporer's research could be vital in creating those narratives.

Sporer analyzes each tweet, word for word, and codes them to find patterns, or themes that emerge from the data. "We need to figure out what motivates people to feel sympathetic towards the extremists," she explained. "How can we prevent the narrative that justifies killing?"

According to Sporer's initial findings, cultural and religious beliefs and their related ideologies play a significant role; but using the belief that war is sanctioned on holy grounds to garner sympathetic support is not the dominant method extremists use.

Many use retaliation reasoning and society's hypocritical response to violent events to lure susceptible minds to join the cause. Sporer found many tweets where the message implies, "You started it … why are you

surprised that we are retaliating? You deserve this."

She also compared many tweets aimed at shaming those considered hypocritical. "You don't make hashtags when Syrian civilians are attacked, but you #prayforparis?"

Increasing awareness

Ultimately, Sporer hopes to continue her research and bring additional awareness to the issue. Her work could help create successful methods for countering violent extremism by using words to combat words. Eventually, her findings could be used to compare the messaging techniques of other extremist groups. If there are similarities, strategies could be devised to further combat hateful narratives online overall.

"The issue isn't going away; we can't stop anyone from going online and it's not illegal to sympathize. But we can find a message to successfully minimize people's justifications for violence."

Provided by University of Maine