Report details how islamic state supporters use Telegram

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Seamus Hughes (left), Bennett Clifford, Helen Powell and Nicholas Rasmussen discuss how Islamic State supporters use the encrypted messaging application Telegram. Credit: GW Program on Extremism

Supporters of the Islamic State (IS) want to use social media to share

propaganda and their extremist narrative, but they also want to coordinate operations without being detected by law enforcement and investigative agencies. These two goals are fundamentally in conflict, according to a new report from the George Washington University Program on Extremism.

The Program on Extremism released its newest [report](link), "Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram," on Thursday. The report, authored by the program's research fellow Bennett Clifford and GW Presidential Fellow Helen Powell, provides a comprehensive look at how IS sympathizers build global online networks, disseminate propaganda and guide operations using the encrypted messaging application Telegram. The report examined more than 630 pro-Islamic State channels and groups containing English-language content collected between June 2017 and October 2018.

The authors participated in a panel discussion at the Elliott School of International Affairs following the release of the report. The event featured Mr. Clifford, Ms. Powell, and Nicholas Rasmussen, senior director for National Security and Counterterrorism Programs at the McCain Institute and former director of the National Counterterrorism Center. The event was moderated by Seamus Hughes, deputy director of the Program on Extremism.

Telegram allows users to communicate through closed groups and forums, where content is not regulated by the platform. These closed groups limit members' ability to recruit, but external approaches like public file sharing and use of public social media risk operational security and user privacy, according to the report.

"When supporters do that, they potentially release information that could provide a link between their Telegram account and their presence elsewhere online, such as an IP address," Mr. Clifford said.

Over the past few years, companies like Twitter and Facebook have been pressured to crackdown on the spread of extremist content on [social media](#) platforms. The result means IS supporters are largely marginalized on Telegram, which is less accessible to the public compared to Twitter. How governments and the tech industry move forward from here should be carefully considered, Ms. Powell said.

"Instead of trying to chase [IS supporters] from platform to platform… we should think a little smarter about how we can limit and confine extremism," she said.

Because supporters are continuously trying to conduct outreach and recruit new members, there will always be a public window into their online activities. Pushing users from Telegram to other platforms where monitoring might be more difficult may not be the best plan of action, Ms. Powell said.

Governments should encourage Telegram to participate in industry-led forums and share insights and trends they observe with other tech companies to assist in their own monitoring. Telegram should also alert smaller companies when they observe IS supporters, known for their online adaptability, are increasingly linking to other platforms, Ms. Powell said.

The report looked at hashtags used by IS supporters on Telegram and found that discussion of terrorist attacks in the west was notably absent. Supporters fundamentally focused on what was happening on the ground in Syria and Iraq in light of the territorial collapse of the caliphate, Mr. Clifford said. Supporters have refocused on Islamic State military activities, attempts to ensure online network resilience and supplementing official propaganda with user-produced content.

Mr. Rasmussen said this report will arm governments with useful and

publicly-available information to tackle the challenges they face with isolating online extremism.

"ISIS continues to represent a global enterprise...the physical defeat of the Caliphate in Iraq and Syria does not change that reality," he said. "I think it's important to bring that home to the public and the broader policy community so that's not lost even amidst the success we've enjoyed against ISIS."

  More information: Encrypted Extremism: Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram. extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/file … cryptedExtremism.pdf

Provided by George Washington University

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