Investigating American Extremists and Terrorists Activities on Anonymous Internet Social Media Platforms

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of recent acts of domestic terrorism in Texas, New Zealand, and California authorities have begun investigating social media presence that premeditated harmful acts. In all three instances, the shooters posted their manifesto on the Internet and had an online presence on 8chan. The common thread among all shooters is their identification as a white nationalist and their social media site affiliation with Infinitechan. Similarities in the profiles of the shooters include their perceived viewpoints of population groups in regards to their political, ethnic, and social identities. The extreme ideas of the domestic terrorists were hidden behind the anonymity of web forums like 8chan. This paper will provide insight into the forums where domestic terrorists spread their agendas. Also, it will set the foundation for further research on developing a strategic algorithm that compiles and analyzes profiles of relevant users by using OSINT and data analytics techniques.

KEYWORDS: Extremism, Open Source Intelligence, Homeland Security, Counterterrorism, Crime, Cyber

INTRODUCTION

Reddit is a network of online communities based on people’s interest. In Figure 1 displays this website that is broken up into more than a million communities known as subreddits that /r/. The subreddits that show begin to display racial discrimination, American nationalism and other forms of bigotry can be found with /r/politicallyincorrect/. This subreddit is the politically incorrect section with 5.6k members Researchers at the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project state that 6% of alone adult users are Reddit users (Duggan & Smith, 2013).
One of the prominent online platforms is 4chan which is displayed in Figure 2. It is a forum that hosts over seven million users, along with a representation of their activities outside this electronic medium (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez, Harry, Andre, Panovich & Vargas, 2011). Activities showcased in 4chan include demonstrations of hacktivism (like actions of the “Anonymous” group), distributed denial of service attacks to shut down companies like Mastercard and Paypal in support of Wikileaks and protest against groups like the Church of Scientology (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez, Harry, Andre, Panovich & Vargas, 2011).
4chan has many threads; however, the Politically Incorrect thread is where hate speech can be found directed at different groups such as ethnic minorities. Figure 3 shows an overview of this thread however upon further inspection politically motivated messages with the swastika, the flag of the Confederate States of America (CSA), and other symbols that represent oppression for various groups are widely used.

On September 4th, 2019, James Watkins, the owner of 8chan appeared before Congress, the Committee on Homeland Security, and the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, DC to provide insight on the platform following the incidents of domestic terrorism during 2019. Within the report mentioned above, it is stated that “Why extremism thrives in the current
American political landscape remains unknown and deeply problematic. The celebration and exaggeration of victimhood exacerbates social divides and amped-up fear destroys rational debate. 8chan has no silver bullet, no magic cure to end extremism in America today. It knows that censorship and suppression do little to cure underlying societal ills. Thus, it remains committed to the promise of the First Amendment, to allow for unfettered free discussion, and to work with law enforcement when tragedies occur” (Committee on Homeland Security 8chan Inquiry, 2019). The platform, according to the report, currently is not continuing its activities. Before, it was hosting ideas of radical forum members and extremist propaganda.

With the ever-growing domestic terrorist events occurring that challenge the fabric of safety in American society, appropriate tools must be used to counter nefarious activities (Dawson, Kisku, Gupta, and Sing, 2016). As manifestos grow on these anonymous message boards, policing is essential to understanding possible domestic attacks. Hate speech and radical ideas are extensively being spread behind layers of secrecy; advancement in the control of such communication means is vital.

**REFERENCES**


