YOUNG AUSTRALIANS in INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

SOCIAL MEDIA, WHITE SUPREMACISTS AND A NEW AGE OF TERRORISM

POLICY BRIEF - NEVE LYNCH

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

White supremacism is emerging as a persistent and lethal threat in Australia and abroad. Social media platforms are facilitating the rise of such groups, providing the organisational infrastructure and reach needed for them to expand their presence. With a message designed for online consumption, these groups are well placed to exploit the unique circumstances associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The Christchurch massacre brought salience to the problem of white supremacism; an opportunity exists to examine its social roots, develop a National Hate Crimes register and support industry-led responses such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). The consequences of allowing white supremacism to propagate in Australia are unlikely to be anything but dire.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 lockdown is proving to be a time of immense growth and opportunity for white supremacist groups globally. These groups are capitalising on the unique circumstances of the pandemic; people are vulnerable, growing resentful of lockdown measures and have easy access to the internet.[1] In taking their message to such people, groups such as The Lads Society, have moved extremist ideologies and the fight against terrorism inside and online.[2]

Today, white supremacism goes hand-in-hand with a broad spectrum of ideologies; neo-Nazism, neo-fascism, anarchist elements, Islamophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, as well as anti-immigration, pro-protectionist and xenophobic sentiment.[3] Though some organised groups exist in Australia – such as Antipodean Resistance – most are loosely networked, highly dispersed and hold ambiguous goals.[4] Consistent with global trends, such groups are small and lack the leadership and organisational frameworks necessary to generate widespread appeal.[5] Yet, this poses an arguably greater challenge for intelligence and law enforcement efforts. Lacking charismatic figureheads, individuals are increasingly becoming radicalised by engaging with violence streamed online.[6]

Leveraging the viral power of violence by live streaming criminal activity in progress has become a trademark of white supremacist terrorism. Violent acts – such as the Christchurch massacre – are designed for online consumption.[7] By live-streaming, perpetrators ensure their violence gets cycled back into social media, fuelling the spread of hateful ideologies.[8] Violence spreads by contagion rather than direction – increasing the likelihood of lone wolf attacks.[9]

The online nature of this threat complicates the law-enforcement response. Yet it may prove to be its Achilles heel. By relying on the internet, white supremacist groups will find it difficult to exist without it.[10] De-platforming, removing actors and content, and denying these sites protection from cyberattacks, is an effective tool in the fight against white supremacist terrorism.[11] Yet, the overall removal of such content has not kept pace with its propagation. Social media companies must do more; or they must be held accountable for their complicity in terrorism.

THE PROBLEM

Social media platforms are not doing enough to combat the spread of white supremacist propaganda on their sites. The Christchurch mosque massacre proved this; over 4000 people watched on Facebook in real-time as Australian-man Brenton Tarrant killed 51 worshipers and injured another 47 across two mosques.[12] Coined the first 'internet mass shooting', the massacre has shed light on the vital role played by social media platforms in spreading violence and hateful ideologies.[13]

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, provide white supremacist groups with the organisational infrastructure and reach needed to expand. Similar to the media strategies of the Islamic State, groups attract new followers with skilfully produced videos and bold, violent graphics.[14] These recruitment videos often feature clips of such abhorrent acts of violence as the Christchurch massacre and the 2011 Norway attacks.[15]

Despite claims from Facebook that it would ban 'white nationalist' content, many extremist groups still operate on the platform. In the United States, 113 of 221 white supremacist groups as designated by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, an American legal advocacy non-profit, have a presence on Facebook.[16] In Australia, groups such as 'Sons of Odin' and 'True Blue Crew' use the reach of social media to build their movement.[17]

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1 A SOCIAL DISCUSSION OF THE SHARING OF ABHORRENT VIOLENT MATERIAL ACT

Following the Christchurch mosque massacres, Australia swiftly passed The Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material Act.[18] This legislation requires social media platforms to expeditiously remove abhorrent violent material from their sites or face fines up to 10% of annual group turnover and up to 3 years imprisonment.[19] The legislation has been widely criticised for its scope and its ambiguities.[20] No definition of 'abhorrent violence' is provided nor is 'expeditiously' ever defined other than as a 'reasonable time'.[21] Denying white supremacist groups online organisational structures will be a vital step in combating their hateful ideology, yet this legislation lacks the means of doing so. Passed in only five days, it lacks any meaningful consultation with the technology industry, legal experts, the media and society.[22] Moving forward, the government must not shy away from the complexity of the problem at hand and engage constructively with stakeholders.

The government must also help to facilitate a social discussion of the roots of white supremacism in Australian society today.[23] The toxic nature of political debates concerning race must be recognised and addressed; as does the perpetuation of the narrative of a 'clash of civilisations'.[24] By facilitating such a debate, it will become clear that the responsibility for countering the spread of white supremacism lies with every Australian.

2 NATIONAL HATE CRIME REGISTER

The federal government must develop a National Hate Crimes register. Currently, each state and territory employs a different legislative and classification framework to tackle hate crime.[25] Thus, before a National Hate Crimes register is established, a consistent, national definition of a 'hate crime' must be agreed upon.[26] The register will provide a vital missing link in understanding the nature of white supremacism in Australia. It will allow policy makers to identify long-term trends in the propagation of hate speech and may facilitate information sharing across jurisdictions.[27] It could be modelled on the Canadian Uniform Crime Reporting Survey, which classifies hate crimes by the perception of the accused rather than the victim's characteristics and offers the option of recording an incident as either a "suspected" or "confirmed" hate crime.[28] The register could also build on the success of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Hate Crime Data Collecting Guidelines and Training Manual, which standardises hate crime training and reporting for police.[29]

3 INDUSTRY RESPONSES SUCH AS THE GLOBAL INTERNET FORUM TO COUNTER TERRORISM (GIFCT)

To help combat the transnational nature of white supremacism, social media companies should improve information-sharing in their industry. One such way is to devote more resources to industry-wide databases such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT).[30] The GIFCT stores digital fingerprints - “hashes” - from major platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as from less moderated platforms such as Twitch.[31] Once a hash is added to the GIFCT database, any copies of the offending video or image on any platform can be detected and removed.[32] This would deny the viral nature of content and close loopholes for individuals wanting to copy content with the intent to re-distribute onto other sites. This database can also help smaller member sites with less resources in moderating their own platforms.[33] Though the GIFCT has great potential, it has drawbacks; namely concerns that social media companies will simply act as extra-legal censors, stifling free speech.[34] This point has been raised by many human rights groups who stress that the “boundaries between content moderation and counter terrorism [must be] clear.”[35] That social media platforms have recognised their culpability for the propagation of white supremacism on their sites is a step forward. The GIFCT must now be receptive to criticism and adapt to reflect community expectations.

CONCLUSION

By allowing their platforms to be used as recruitment centres and training camps, social media companies are facilitating the rise of white supremacist groups and their hateful ideology. The first 'internet mass shooting', the Christchurch massacre, represents a new age of terrorism defined by the livestreaming of abhorrent violence. Yet crucially, the Christchurch massacre also brought salience to the life-threatening nature of white supremacism. This window of opportunity must be seized upon in Australia to facilitate a social discussion of the roots of white supremacism, develop a National Hate Crimes register and support industry-led responses such as the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). Without such efforts, Christchurch may just simply mark the fateful beginning of a new age of terror.

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