The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists

SUMMARY

Emerging communication technologies, and social media platforms in particular, play an increasingly important role in the radicalization and mobilization processes of violent and non-violent extremists (Archetti, 2015; Cohen et al., 2014; Farwell, 2014; Klausen, 2015). However, the extent to which extremists utilize social media, and whether it influences terrorist outcomes, is still not well understood (Conway, 2017). This research brief expands the current knowledge base by leveraging newly collected data on the social media activities of 479 extremists in the PIRUS dataset who radicalized between 2005 and 2016.[1] This includes descriptive analyses of the frequency of social media usage among U.S. extremists, the types of social media platforms used, the differences in the rates of social media use by ideology and group membership, the purposes of social media use, and the impact of social media on foreign fighter travel and domestic terrorism plots.

The PIRUS data reveal four key findings on the relationship between social media and the radicalization of U.S. extremists:

- Online social media platforms are playing an increasingly important role in the radicalization processes of U.S. extremists. While U.S. extremists were slow to embrace social media, in recent years, the number of individuals relying on these user-to-user platforms for the dissemination of extremist content and the facilitation of extremist relationships has grown exponentially. In fact, in 2016 alone, social media played a role in the radicalization processes of nearly 90% of the extremists in the PIRUS data.
- Lone actors (i.e. individuals who were operationally alone in their extremist activities) in the PIRUS data were particularly active on social media. From 2005-2016, social media played a role in the radicalization and mobilization processes of 68.12% of the lone actors in the PIRUS data. In 2016 alone, social media factored into the radicalization and mobilization processes of 88.23% of the lone actors in the PIRUS data. By comparison, from 2005-2016, social media factored into the radicalization of 50.15% of individuals who were members of extremist groups or radical cliques.
- Despite the increased usage of social media among U.S. extremists, user-to-user communications do not appear to increase the likelihood that extremists will be successful in traveling to foreign conflict zones or committing acts of domestic terrorism. In fact, the extremists who were most active on social media had lower success rates regarding foreign fighter travel and terrorist plots than individuals who were not as active on social media. Importantly, activity on open social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, played a key role in the identification and interdiction of U.S. foreign fighters and terrorism suspects in several recent cases.
- While social media does not appear to increase the success rates of extremist outcomes, evidence suggests that it has contributed to the acceleration of radicalization of U.S. extremists. For example, the average radicalization duration (i.e., the time from first exposure to extremist beliefs to participation in extremist acts) of U.S. foreign fighters in 2005, when social media was first emerging as a factor in the radicalization of U.S. extremists, was approximately 18 months. In 2016, when over 90% of U.S. foreign fighters were active on social media, the duration of radicalization was down to 13 months on average.

---

[1] We define social media in the PIRUS dataset as any form of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos and images. This form of online communication is distinct from other types of internet usage in that it emphasizes online user-to-user communication rather than passively viewing content hosted by an online domain. Additionally, our definition of social media does not include file-sharing sites (e.g., Torrent networks, Dropbox, P2P networks, etc.).

Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) is a database of 1,867 Islamist, far-left, far-right, and single-issue extremists who radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States from 1948 through 2016. The data used in this research brief are limited to individuals whose first publicly known extremist behavior (typically the date of their arrest or plot) took place between 2005 and 2016, and contained valid (i.e., non-missing) data for their social media usage as it related to their radicalization and/or mobilization processes. More information regarding the PIRUS dataset, including inclusion parameters, can be found at: http://www.start.umd.edu/data-tools/profiles-individual-radicalization-united-states-pirus.

FREQUENCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Between 2005 and 2016, social media played a primary or secondary role[2] in the radicalization[3] and/or mobilization[4] processes of 265 of the 479 (55.3%) extremists in PIRUS with valid data. These individuals used social media platforms in a wide variety of ways, including to consume and spread extremist narratives, create sharable content, and/or communicate with like-minded individuals.
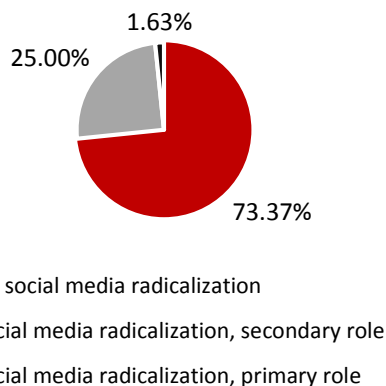

Social Media Radicalization, 2005-2010 (N=184)

1.63%
25.00%
73.37%

- No social media radicalization
- Social media radicalization, secondary role
- Social media radicalization, primary role

Figure 1

Social Media Radicalization, 2011-2016 (N=295)

16.95%
26.78%
56.27%

- No social media radicalization
- Social media radicalization, secondary role
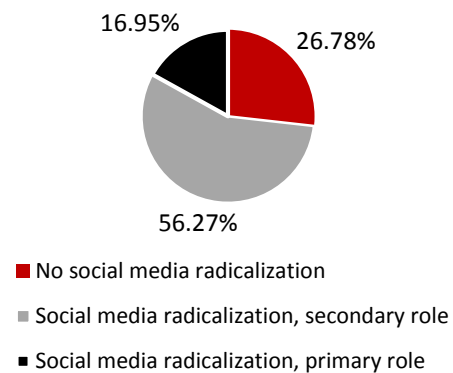- Social media radicalization, primary role

Figure 2

- From 2005 to 2010, only 49 out of 184 extremists displayed evidence of using social media in their radicalization or mobilization processes. However, of the 135 extremists who did not use any social media during their radicalization or mobilization processes, 24 (17.7%) of them interacted with other forms of online media, such as forums or message boards, and 22 of them (16.3%) utilized some form of non-internet media (e.g., music, videos, books, pamphlets, etc.).
- Merely 3 of these individuals (1.63%) from 2005 to 2010 utilized social media as their primary means of interacting with their affiliated extremist movements. The remaining 46 (25.00%) used social media as a secondary means of extremist interaction, instead favoring in-person relationships and other types of non-social media online communications, including chatrooms and online forums (Figure 1).

---

[2] We determined social media as playing a primary in the radicalization of individuals if their exposure to extremist ideologies and 50% or more of their socialization within extremist movements took place on social media platforms. Similarly, we determined social media as playing a secondary role in the radicalization of U.S. extremists if social media platforms were used to reaffirm or advance pre-existing extremist beliefs that were first acquired through face-to-face relationships. Finally, individuals were coded "No" for the influence of social media on their radicalization if they were present on social media sites but there is no indication that those sites contributed to their radicalization or mobilization.

[3] We define radicalization as the psychological, emotional, and behavioral processes by which an individual adopts an ideology that promotes the use of violence for the attainment of political, economic, religious, or social goals.

[4] We determined social media as playing a role in the mobilization of U.S. extremists if user-to-user platforms were used to plan, finance, or conduct extremist activities, including foreign fighter travel, non-violent illegal actions, and violent terrorism plots.

- In the last several years, however, social media has become a nearly ubiquitous method for consuming and sharing extremist content and communicating with extremists from around the world. From 2011 to 2016, 216 out of 295 (73.2%) of the extremists in PIRUS used social media platforms to passively consume content, participate in extremist dialogues, spread extant extremist propaganda, or communicate with other extremists (Figure 2).
- It should be noted that 166 out of the 216 (76.9%) extremists in PIRUS who used social media as part of their radicalization processes during this period used these platforms as a way to supplement existing face-to-face extremist relationships and participation in closed, offline extremist networks (Figure 2).
- Of the 295 extremists in PIRUS from 2011-2016, 50 relied primarily on social media as a means of radicalization (16.9%), indicating a substantial rise in the importance of social media as a way to consume content and communicate among extremists (Figure 2).
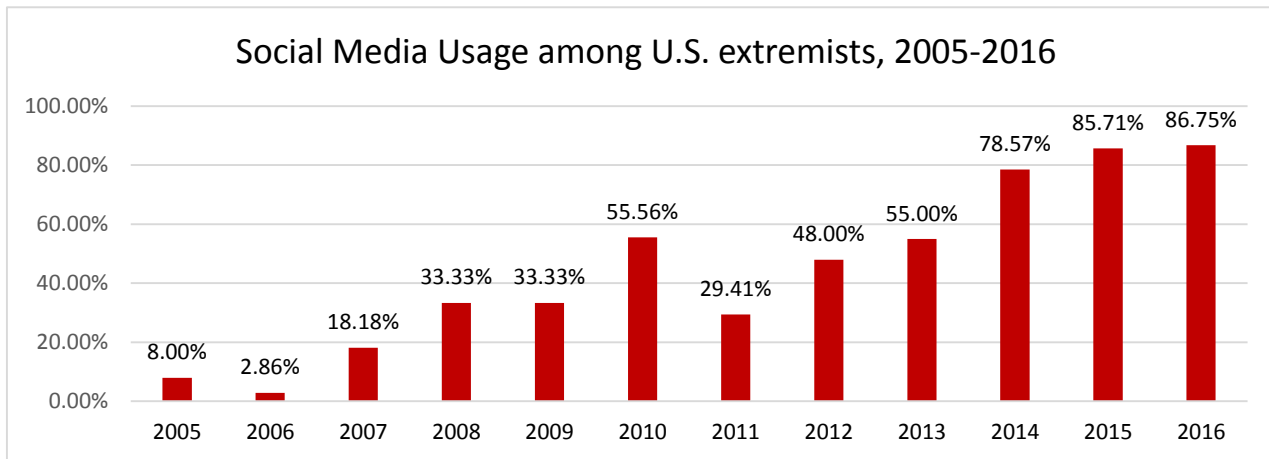

Social Media Usage among U.S. extremists, 2005-2016

Figure 3

- As is expected when taking into account the exponential growth of social media, user-to-user platforms have factored into the radicalization and mobilization of a far greater percentage of U.S. extremists in recent years. In fact, in 2016 alone, social media played a primary or secondary role in the radicalization processes of 86.75% of the extremists in PIRUS, compared to only 48% four years prior (Figure 3).

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE ACROSS DIFFERENT EXTREMIST TYPES – IDEOLOGICAL COMPARISONS

	Far-right	Far- left	Islamist	Single Issue
Yes, secondary role	40.69%	36.67%	48.47%	35.71%
Yes, primary role	2.07%	0.00%	19.08%	0.00%
No evidence of social media usage	57.24%	63.33%	32.44%	64.29%

Table 1

- Islamist extremists in the PIRUS data from 2005-2016 displayed the highest rates of social media usage and were the only ideological category in which a majority of cases utilized social media in their radicalization and/or mobilization processes (67.55%) (Table 1).
- In 2016, social media played a primary or secondary role in the radicalization of 93.18% of Islamist extremists in PIRUS.
- From 2005-2016, Islamist extremists were, by a large margin, the group most likely to engage with social media as a primary means of consuming extremist content or communicating with other extremists. In 2016, social media was the primary means of radicalization for 45.4% of the Islamist extremists in PIRUS. By comparison, individuals associated with extremist far-right, far-left, and single-issue movements most frequently used social media to supplement face-to-face or group-based radicalization processes (Table 1).

- From 2005-2016, far right extremists displayed the second highest rates of social media radicalization/mobilization (42.76%), although only 2.07% of far-right extremists during this period used social media as their primary means of radicalization (Table 1).
- Social media had the smallest impact on the radicalization processes of far left and single-issue extremists in the PIRUS data. From 2005-2016, social media was a secondary means of radicalization for 36.36% of far left and 35.71% of single issue extremists in PIRUS. Further, during this period, there were no instances where social media was the primary means of radicalization for far left or single-issue extremists (Table 1).

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE ACROSS DIFFERENT EXTREMIST TYPES – GROUP ACTORS AND LONE ACTORS

From 2005-2016, social media played a notably larger role in the radicalization processes of lone actors than it did in the radicalization of extremists who were affiliated with extremist groups or radical cliques. During this period, social media played a role in the radicalization of 68.12% of the lone actors in PIRUS. By comparison, social media factored into the radicalization trajectories of just over half (50.15%) of group actors during this period (Figure 4).
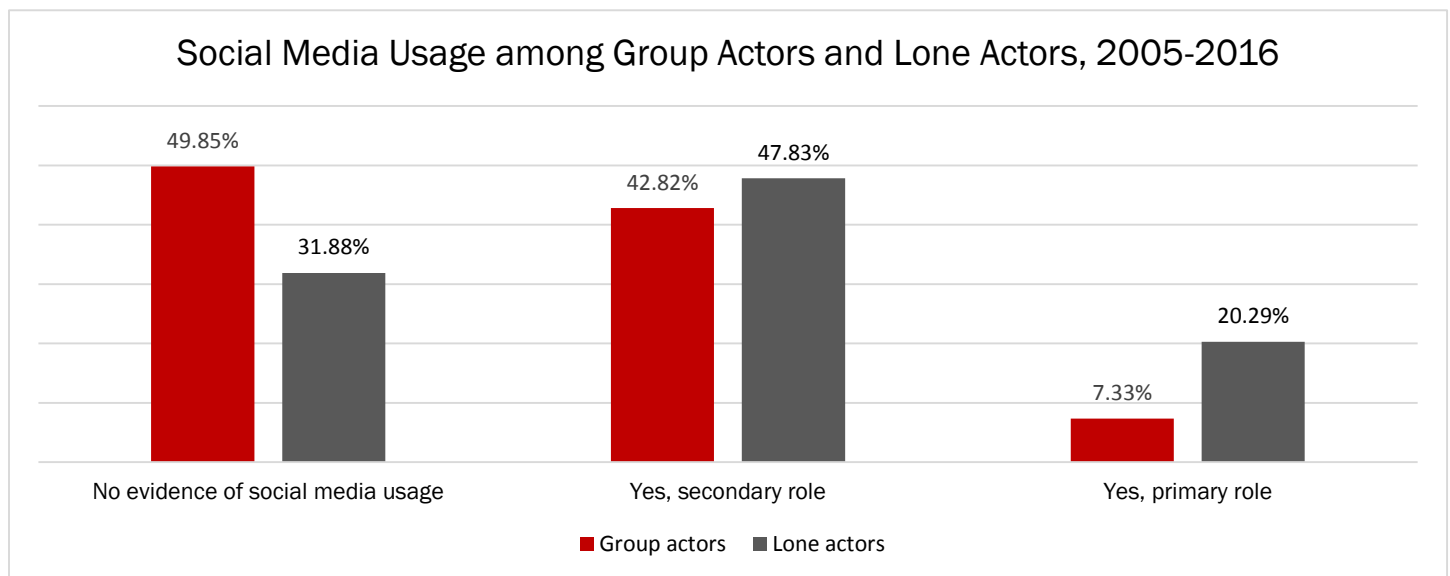

Social Media Usage among Group Actors and Lone Actors, 2005-2016

	No evidence of social media usage	Yes, secondary role	Yes, primary role
Group actors	49.85%	42.82%	7.33%
Lone actors	31.88%	47.83%	20.29%

Figure 4

- In 2016 alone, social media factored into the radicalization and mobilization processes of 88.23% of the lone actors in the PIRUS data, while it factored into the radicalization of 76% of individuals who were members of extremist groups or radical cliques (i.e. non-lone actors).
- Furthermore, social media played a primary role in the radicalization of a substantial number of lone actors in PIRUS. Over one-fifth (20.29%) of the lone actors in PIRUS from 2005-2016 used social media as their primary means of radicalization, while only 7.33% of group actors primarily radicalized through social media use during this period (Figure 4).

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

From 2005-2016, the extremists in PIRUS used a wide range of social media platforms within the context of radicalization and mobilization, including commonly used non-encrypted platforms designed for users to easily share and produce content, as well as lesser-used platforms that are used primarily for encrypted peer-to-peer communications.

- The types of social media platforms utilized most often by extremists in the PIRUS dataset largely reflect the mainstream popularity of the platforms in the United States.

- As the most popular social media platform in the United States,[5] Facebook was also the platform most commonly used by extremists in the PIRUS dataset. Nearly two-thirds of extremists (64.53%) used Facebook for radicalization or mobilization between 2005 and 2016 (Figure 5).
- YouTube was the second most frequently used platform among extremists, with a usage rate of nearly one-third (30.57%). The third most popular social media platform was Twitter, which was utilized by nearly a quarter (23.4%) of extremists in the data (Figure 5).
- From 2005 to 2016, over 10% of extremists used an encrypted platform, including Telegram, Kik, WhatsApp, and other encrypted platforms (Figure 5).
- However, it is likely that as mainstream social media services (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.) continue to improve their capability to quickly detect extremist content, more extremists will move to less well-resourced and/or encrypted platforms in an effort to share content, engage with others, and increase their operational security.
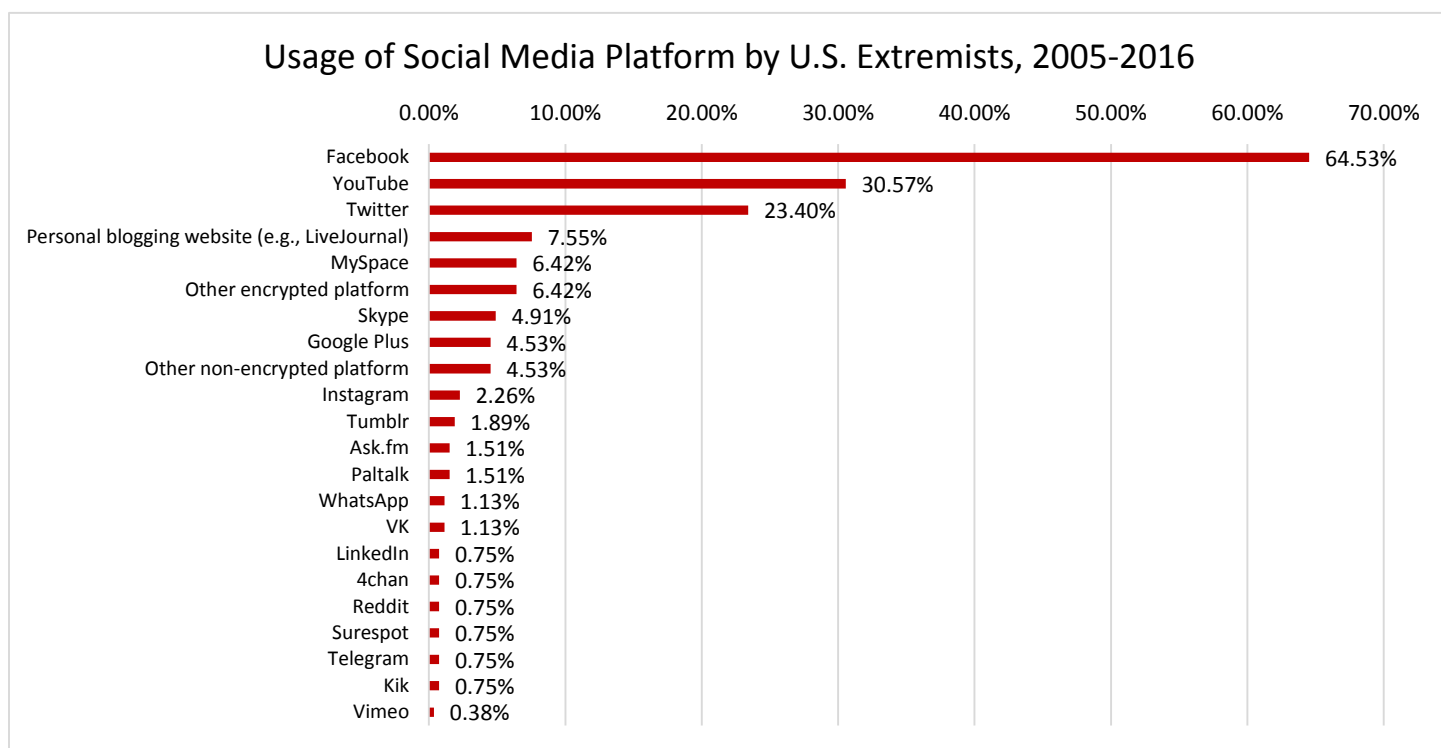

Usage of Social Media Platform by U.S. Extremists, 2005-2016

Platform	Percentage
Facebook	64.53%
YouTube	30.57%
Twitter	23.40%
Personal blogging website (e.g., LiveJournal)	7.55%
MySpace	6.42%
Other encrypted platform	6.42%
Skype	4.91%
Google Plus	4.53%
Other non-encrypted platform	4.53%
Instagram	2.26%
Tumblr	1.89%
Ask.fm	1.51%
Paltalk	1.51%
WhatsApp	1.13%
VK	1.13%
LinkedIn	0.75%
4chan	0.75%
Reddit	0.75%
Surespot	0.75%
Telegram	0.75%
Kik	0.75%
Vimeo	0.38%

Figure 5

SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES[6]

US-based extremists use social media for a wide range of activities, most commonly viewing and sharing content.

- Of the 265 extremists who used social media between 2005 and 2016, 243 (91.70%) *at least* consumed extremist content passively, meaning they watched videos or read texts but may not have actively contributed any content themselves (Figure 6).
- A majority of the individuals in PIRUS used social media beyond simple content consumption; 155 (58.49%) disseminated content (e.g. shared or spread content) and 152 (57.36%) participated in extremist dialogues.
- By contrast, a much smaller proportion of individuals used social media to facilitate extremist activities. Fifty-five individuals (20.75%) created content, such as videos, manifestos, or journal entries, that justified and encouraged extremist acts.

---

[5] http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/
[6] We conceptualized the range of social media activities as an ascending scale, where each successive activity is considered a more extensive use of social media in radicalization and/or mobilization.

- Slightly more (56 individuals; 21.13%) actively established relationships with other extremists using social media platforms. Finally, a small handful of individuals used social media to directly facilitate either travel to a foreign conflict zone (46 individuals; 17.36%) or a domestic terror plot (24 individuals; 9.06%).[7]
- Far-right extremists participated in extremist dialogues at a greater rate (67.74%) than far-left (54.55%) and Islamist (55.37%) extremists. Far-right extremists were also substantially more likely to actively create content (30.65%) than far-left (18.18%) and Islamist extremists (15.82%).
- During this period, U.S. extremists rarely used social media to facilitate domestic terror attacks (9.06%). Of those individuals who did use social media to help plan a domestic terror plot, 11 were far-right extremists, 10 were Islamist extremists, and 2 were far-left extremists.
- Islamists were far more likely to use social media to facilitate travel to a foreign conflict zone than to plan a domestic terror attack (25.99% compared to 5.65%). Islamist extremists also more commonly used social media platforms to establish a relationship with like-minded individuals (24.86%).
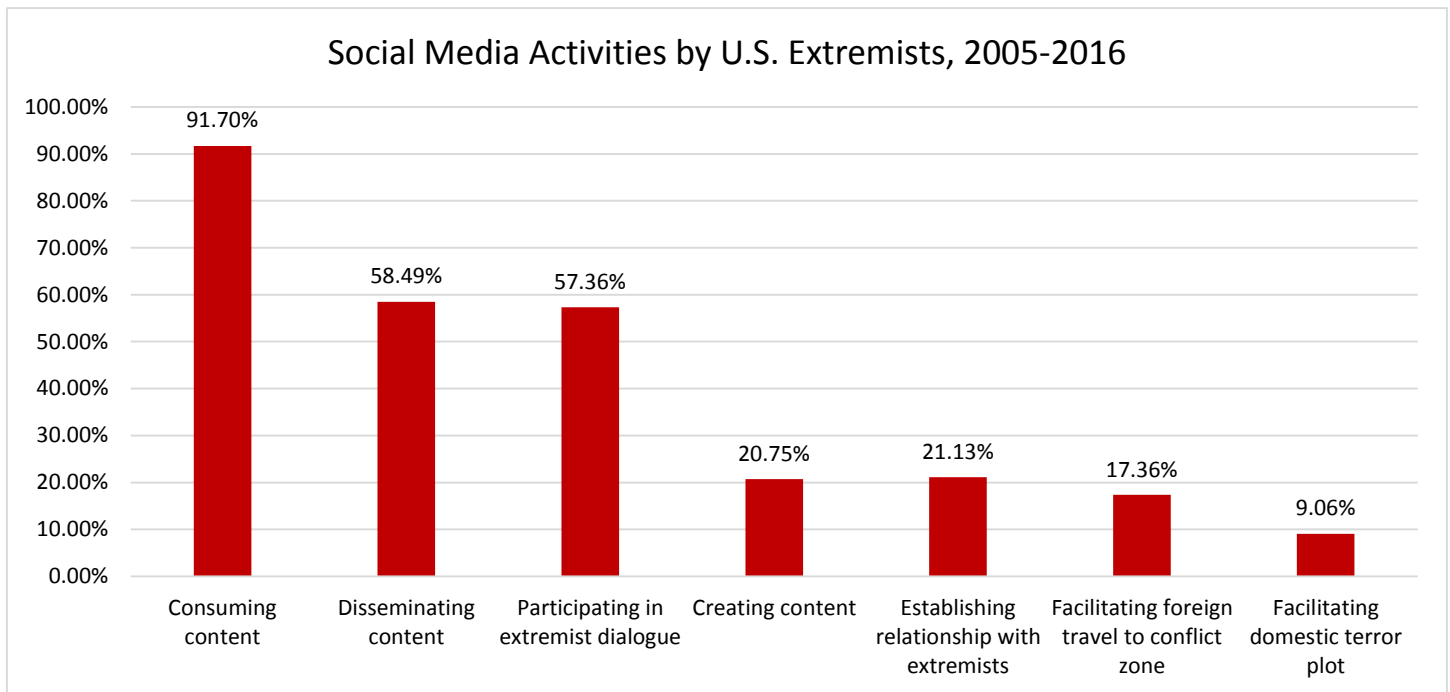
Figure 6

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND EXTREMIST BEHAVIOR

	Used social media (N=265)	Did not use social media (N=214)
Involved in non-violent domestic extremist activities only (N=137)	40.15%	59.85%
Involved in violent domestic extremist activities (N=226)	52.22%	47.78%
Involved in foreign fighting only (N=116)	79.32%	20.68%

Table 2

- When comparing the social media usage of extremists who were involved in violent domestic plots, those who were involved in non-violent domestic illegal activities only, and individuals who only traveled or sought to travel to foreign conflict zones from 2005-2016, notable differences emerge. For example, of the 226 individuals who were involved in acts of violence or had clear intent to engage in violence in the United States (but may have been interdicted before violence was carried out), 118 (52.22%) radicalized or

---

[7] These figures include both successful and unsuccessful travel and/or attacks.

mobilized through the use of social media. By comparison, the majority (59.85%) of individuals who limited their extremist activities in the U.S. to non-violent crimes (e.g., financial crimes, property damage, and sending supplies and material to foreign terrorist groups) were not active on social media. Finally, of the individuals who left or sought to leave the United States to travel to an overseas conflict and were not involved in any violent or non-violent behavior with a domestic focus, 79.32% were active on social media (Table 2).

- The lack of social media usage was rare among foreign fighters in the PIRUS data, with only 24 (20.68%) avoiding social media platforms between 2005-2016 (Table 2). Indeed, every individual who left or attempted to leave the U.S. to join a foreign conflict in 2016 used social media as part of their radicalization and/or mobilization processes.

SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES AND PLOT SUCCESS

Among extremists who were involved in domestic terror plots, actively using social media platforms to communicate with other extremists in order to facilitate attacks was negatively associated with plot success.

- Only 10% of individuals who used social media to plan, finance, or conduct domestic terror attacks successfully carried out their plots.
- Inversely, individuals who used social media platforms for more passive uses during their radicalization and mobilization processes (i.e., consuming content, sharing content, participating in extremist dialogue, creating content, and communicating with other extremists for ideological knowledge), were significantly more likely to achieve plot success (33.67%).
- However, the data show that the most successful extremists in terms of plot progression abstained from using social media altogether. Indeed, individuals who were not present on social media had the highest rate of successful plots at nearly 36% (Figure 7).
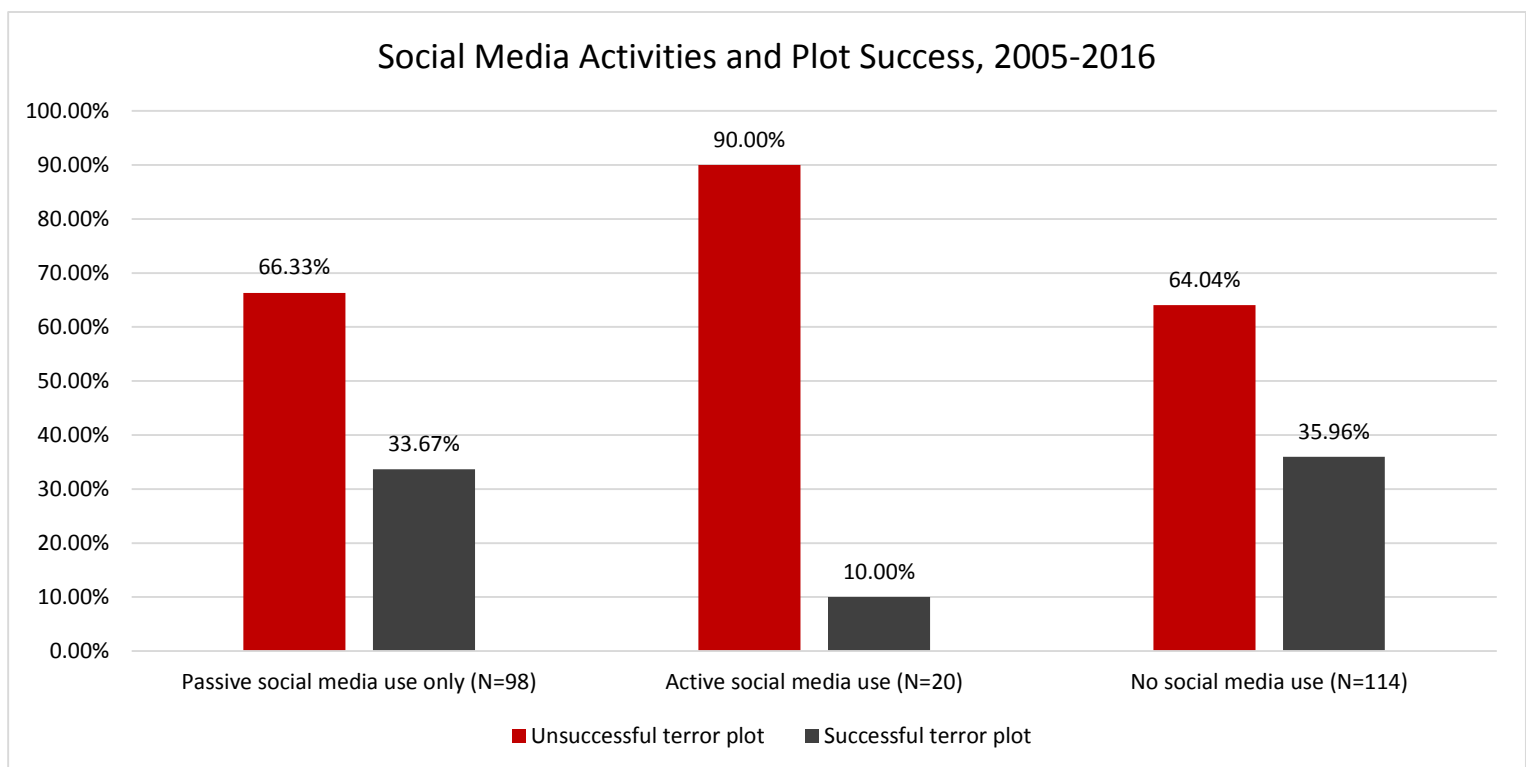

Figure 7

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND FOREIGN FIGHTER SUCCESS

The evidence from the PIRUS data indicates that social media use is also inversely related to achieving success as a foreign fighter, understood here as traveling to a foreign conflict zone and joining a foreign non-state armed group. Among the 116 individuals in PIRUS from 2005-2016 who aspired to travel to a foreign conflict zone (but were not involved in a domestic terror attack), 68 ultimately failed to reach their destination. Of those, 56 (82.35%) were active social media users. By contrast, of the foreign fighters who did not use social media, 50% succeeded in their efforts (Figure 8).

- This finding carries over to individuals who used social media to establish relationships with travel facilitators on social media. Of the 48 individuals in PIRUS who aspired to be a foreign fighter (but were not involved in a domestic terror attack) and successfully reached a conflict zone, 36 (75%) did not have the help of an online travel facilitator or someone they thought was a facilitator. By contrast, 70% of the individuals who connected with online travel facilitators failed to reach their destinations (Figure 9).
- These findings support the conclusion that while social media is a powerful way for extremists to share ideas and communicate, the use of open platforms may leave individuals vulnerable to identification and interdiction by law enforcement.
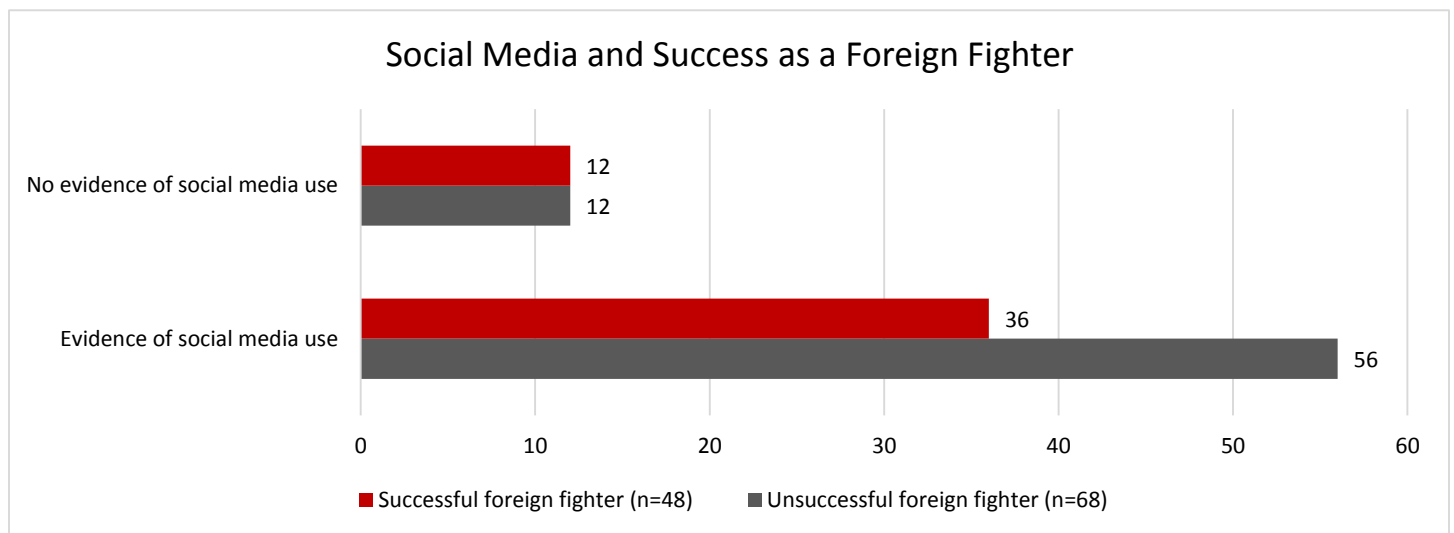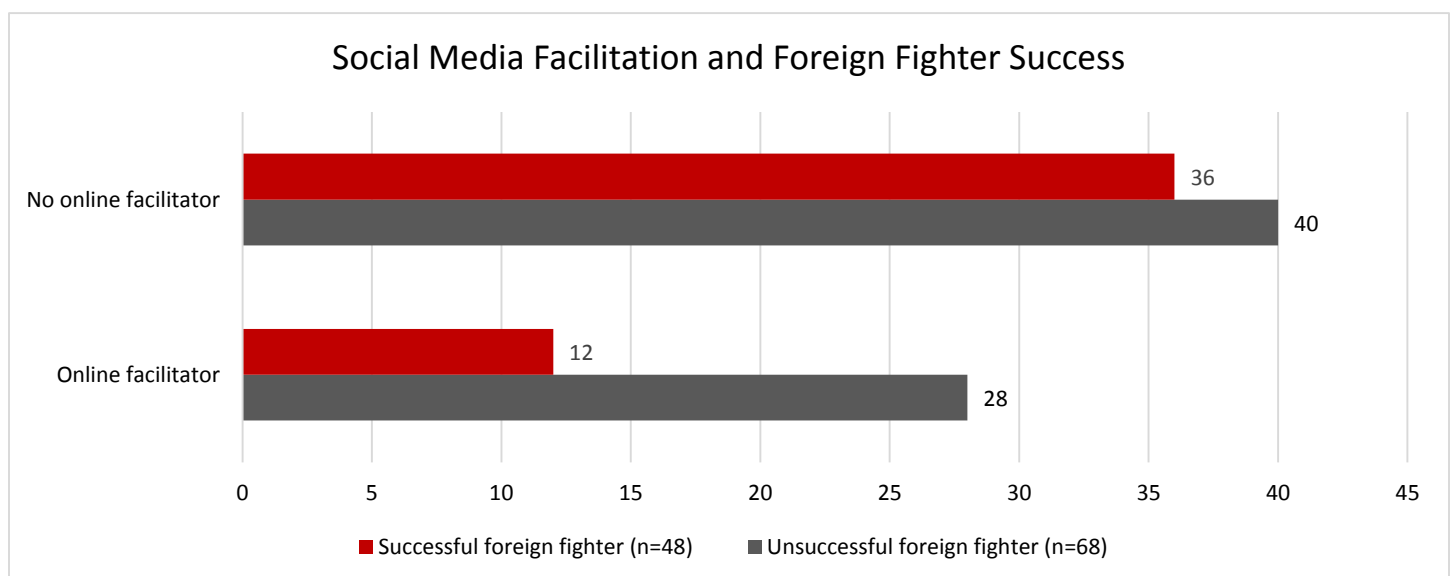

Figure 8

Figure 9

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AND RADICALIZATION DURATION

While social media usage does not appear to be linked to successful foreign fighter travel or domestic terrorism, preliminary evidence suggests that extensive social media use may accelerate the radicalization process. As social media usage has become nearly ubiquitous among extremists, the average duration of the radicalization process for some has shortened considerably. For example, among US-based foreign fighters in the PIRUS data, the average amount of time that elapsed between their first exposure to extremist beliefs and their first attempts to travel to foreign conflict zones decreased from approximately 18 months in 2005 to 13 months in 2016 (Figure 10). Although the average radicalization duration varies considerably from year to year, the overall trend has seen a gradual decrease in the amount of time spent prior to mobilization. These data support the findings of others (e.g., Carley, 2017) that social media usage in extremist movements accelerates consensus on radical viewpoints and increases commitment to the movements' objectives.
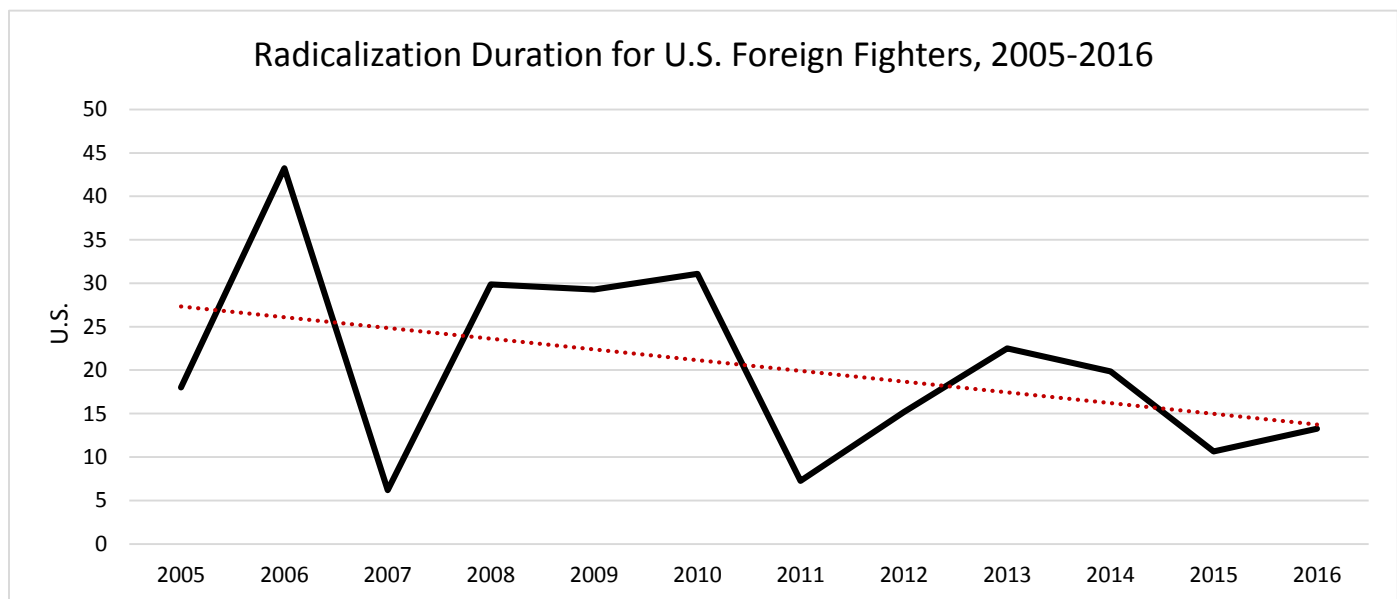

Figure 10

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Social media has become an increasingly important tool for extremists to disseminate content, share ideas, and facilitate relationships. Successfully mitigating the threat posed by homegrown violent extremists (HVEs) and domestic terrorists will require strategies for countering extremism online. These strategies must go beyond content removal and account deactivation to include leveraging social media to promote counter and alternative narratives and support services. Leveraging the newly established Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and identifying other ways to enhance the security of newer and less well-resourced online platforms will be a key to successfully devising and employing a comprehensive online counterterrorism strategy.
- While the conditions that allow for successful terrorist attacks are complex, preliminary evidence suggests that there is not a link between extensive social media use and the likelihood of carrying out a successful attack. In fact, the use of open social media platforms appears to make terrorist suspects vulnerable to law enforcement identification and interdiction.
- As open platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, continue to target extremist content for removal, individuals who adhere to radical ideologies are likely to continue their shift to secure social media services and lesser known platforms that are not as closely monitored. This shift could make it more difficult for law

enforcement to identify concerning online behaviors. Working with the GIFCT, governments should continue to assist smaller social media platforms in making their services less accessible to extremist groups.

- Given that social media use is positively correlated with unsuccessful plots and unsuccessful foreign fighter travel, due in part because social media usage leads to law enforcement disruptions, a strategy that relies on content and account takedowns may have the unintended effect of undermining counterterrorism investigations.
- While there does not appear to be a link between social media use and the successful commission of terrorist attacks in the US, increased social media activity may accelerate the radicalization process for some extremists. As individuals continue to gravitate to extremist content and dialogues online, and as the number of encrypted platforms proliferates, the windows of opportunity for intervening to off-ramp individuals who have begun to radicalize may continue to close rapidly. Thus, quickly identifying individuals who have begun to radicalize and providing needed support services will be a key component of a successful counterterrorism approach moving forward.

REFERENCES

Archetti, C. (2015). Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age. Perspectives on Terrorism, 9(1). Retrieved from http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401

Carley, Kathleen. (2017). Social Influence, Bots, and Fake News. Presentation to the Security, Networks, and Social Computing Working Group.

Cohen, K., Johansson, F., Kaati, L., & Mork, J. C. (2014). Detecting Linguistic Markers for Radical Violence in Social Media. Terrorism and Political Violence, 26(1), 246–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849948

Conway, M. (2017). Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 40(1), 77–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408

Farwell, J. P. (2014). The Media Strategy of ISIS. Survival, 56(6), 49–55. https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.985436

Klausen, J. (2015). Tweeting the jihad: social media networks of Western foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 38(1), 1–22.

PROJECT TEAM

Principal Investigator: Michael Jensen
Project Manager: Patrick James
Other Project Researchers: Gary LaFree, Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, Elizabeth Yates

START ▶▶