

The Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation Roundtable:

Discussing “online radicalization” with Peter Neumann

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Summary

“There is rarely such a thing as a true lone wolf terrorist. Even those who acted alone had to have a perceived community or teacher to introduce them to extremist ideologies—even if that teacher was a video recording and the community was an online forum,” said Peter Neumann at a recent lunchtime roundtable hosted by the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) in New York. “There are three ingredients that are necessary for radicalization. While these three common denominators are not sufficient alone for radicalization, they must be present for radicalization to occur. These three ingredients are a grievance, an ideology, and social activity which leads to mobilization.”

A member of CGCC’s Advisory Council, a Professor of Security Studies at King’s College London, and the director of the [International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation](#), Professor Neumann shared his findings about online radicalization with a group of key stakeholders including United Nations member states, the private sector and security experts at the CGCC roundtable. According to Professor Neumann, the sense of anonymity granted by the internet lowers the threshold for engagement with illicit and risky material such as extremist forums or content. Moreover, the internet creates a virtual community and a social environment in which like-minded users can block out diverse perspectives, thereby normalizing extremist views and creating a sense of empowerment and participation. Now more than ever, the internet has freed such communities from physical boundaries and allowed internet users to join groups and networks in other countries and regions, further facilitating their disengagement from their local social networks that may have forced them to engage with diverse groups and perspectives.

During the interactive discussion a number of key issues were raised, including the challenge of balancing the need for surveillance and monitoring with privacy and human rights principles, about the benefit of taking down extremist content and sites versus monitoring their usage and users to develop better intelligence, and how policymakers can respond to these technical and security challenges in developing legal and political responses. In response, Professor Neumann pointed out that it was nearly impossible to effectively take down internet sites and that there was sufficient open-source data available online that did not require intrusive surveillance. “Twitter is a public content site, and unless you’re smart enough to turn off your phone’s GPS, every tweet reveals its tweeter’s location.” Rather than censoring internet content, and deleting content from the internet, Professor Neumann recommended that governments and law enforcement officials monitor these sites, and use them as intelligence resources.

Ultimately, “radicalization is about recruitment – it is a sales pitch and an advertisement of a specific product,” and as such, law enforcement officials could collaborate with civil society organizations, technology companies, and public relations experts to develop counter narratives and positive alternatives that can reach users in the early stages of radicalization when users are seeking information about their interests and may still be receptive to diverse views. Professor Neumann noted that most

extremists are unlikely to commit an act of violence or suicide if there is doubt about the act's value or legitimacy. Therefore, he argued, "counter-speech' is not about convincing people of your view. But it is about inserting five or ten percent of doubt to prevent people from acting upon calls for violent action."

For CGCC publications related to this issue, see:

<http://www.globalct.org/publications/use-of-the-internet-for-counter-terrorist-purposes/>

<http://www.globalct.org/publications/alter-messaging-the-credible-sustainable-counterterrorism-strategy/>

<http://www.globalct.org/publications/mastering-the-narrative-counterterrorism-strategic-communication-and-the-united-nations/>