

DIGITAL DIALOGUES, EXTREMIST ECHOES:

A REVIEW OF ONLINE COMMUNITY MEMBERSHIP IN THE AGE OF EXTREMISM

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Overview

In an age of increasing digital connectivity, online communities have become important social structures that allow individuals to engage and connect beyond geographical limitations. This review of literature explores the dynamics, management, and risks associated with virtual communities, with a focus on their role in the propagation of domestic violent extremism (DVE) in the United States.

Research Objectives

- Examine the structure and dynamics of online communities
- Understand member characteristics
- Evaluate outcomes of online community membership
- Explore the intersection with domestic violent extremism (DVE)

Literature Review Methodology

- **Inclusion Criteria:** Conducted a comprehensive search for papers on Web of Science using terms such as “online community*”, “digital community*”, and “virtual community*”.
- **Data Collection:** Identified and analyzed 168 pertinent studies.
- **Categorization:** Grouped literature into four main themes: Community Typology, Member Characteristics and Dynamics, Online Community Management, and Emerging Literature.
- **Analysis:** Synthesized insights from various scholarly perspectives to understand the influence of online communities on DVE.

Summary of Findings & Discussion

- Member attitudes, including social identity, trust, and sense of community, influence positive behaviors such as active participation and knowledge sharing in online communities.
- Challenges in addressing extremism online emphasize the need for inclusive, safe environments and proactive management strategies.
- The profound influence of online communities on public discourse and political actions underscores the importance of mitigating extremist beliefs and behaviors.
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and ongoing research are essential to advancing the understanding of online community dynamics and their societal and security implications.

Outcomes of Participating in Online Communities

Empowerment and Engagement



Trust and Satisfaction



Behavioral Influence



Exemplary Case Studies:

The Intersection of Online Communities and Domestic Violent Extremism (DVE)

Case 1: Internet Radicalization Pipelines and the Attack on Paul Pelosi

Summary:

- A California man’s radicalization journey began with his involvement in the online “Gamergate” harassment campaign, leading him to invade the home of Paul and Nancy Pelosi and attack Paul with a hammer, leaving him seriously injured.
- He planned to kidnap Speaker of the U.S. House, Nancy Pelosi, believing she was part of a conspiracy to harm the country.

Implications:

- The process of online radicalization involves individuals joining communities based on shared interests and gradually being exposed to extremist content, reinforced by algorithmic recommendations.
- This case highlights the significant threat posed by online radicalization pipelines to public safety and societal well-being.

Case 2: QAnon and the Hoover Dam Incident

Summary:

- In 2018, a follower of the QAnon conspiracy theory drove an armored truck to the Hoover Dam, demanding the release of a government report he believed supported QAnon beliefs.
- The man was arrested and faced with charges related to terrorism, obstruction, and unlawful flight from law enforcement.

Implications:

- QAnon communities on platforms like 4chan and 8chan foster a sense of belonging and shared identity, which can reinforce extremist ideologies and misinformation.
- This case highlights the potential for online communities to drive individuals to engage in disruptive and potentially dangerous behaviors, posing significant threats to public safety.

Motives for Joining and Participating

Connection and Support



Knowledge-Seeking and Sharing



Professional Development



Entertainment and Leisure



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