



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson

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Subcommittee Hearing Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

The Digital Battlefield: How Terrorists Use the Internet and Online Networks for Recruitment and Radicalization

March 4, 2025

Terrorists' use of online platforms to spread ideology, recruit members, and plan attacks is not novel. Neither is it new that individuals with extreme views seek out virtual communities of like-minded people and use the internet to express grievances and plan and live-stream attacks.

Nearly ten years ago, minutes prior to a failed terrorist attack at the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas, one of the perpetrators posted a tweet with the hashtag #texasattack. One month following that attack, nine African-American parishioners at Mother Emanuel in South Carolina were killed by a white-supremacist terrorist who self-radicalized online.

Next week will mark five years since a terrorist live-streamed on Facebook the attacks in which he heinously murdered 51 people at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Unfortunately, the list of examples where extremism online and real-world violence converge goes on and on.

Although extremists have recently migrated to encrypted platforms, they largely use the same social media platforms as the average internet user. Research indicates that up to a third of internet users experience hate speech online.

The data is even more grim when it comes to online multiplayer games. According to a NYU study on extremists' exploitation of gaming platforms, 41% of survey respondents came across statements portraying a particular ethnic, gender, or religious group as inferior.

People encountered statements that included support for reprehensible ideas such as: violence against women is justified, a particular race or ethnicity should be expelled or eliminated, and Using violence is justified or necessary to achieve a political aim.

A separate study by ADL found that 75% of teens and pre-teens experienced harassment in online multiplayer games in 2023 and that women and Black or African American gamers were the most harassed because of their identity.

This problem will only become more acute as the current owner of X, Elon Musk, is an extremist himself who has created an environment on his platform where pro-Nazi accounts that share Hitler speeches flourish.

Moreover, Musk profits from this kind of hateful content. The Center for Countering Digital Hate found that X "stands to make up to \$19 million a year from ads on just ten toxic reinstated accounts," and that accounts spewing hateful anti-LGBTQ rhetoric generate up to \$6.4 million per year for X in ad revenue.

Musk will not adopt any counter-extremist content policies or measures because that would affect his bottom line – never mind the fact that he also holds the keys to the Federal government and will block any engagement between government and industry on the issue.

Nevertheless, Committee Democrats will continue to examine the threats posed by online radicalization and engage the willing and socially responsible online and gaming platforms on solutions.

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