

# Young People and the Dark Side of Social Media — Possible Threats to National Security

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## Summary

Social media is increasingly becoming a forum for criminality, misuse, and hate speech, as there are no filters or other controlling mechanisms to filter user-generated content. Furthermore, disinformation and propaganda are becoming more sophisticated and harder to track. Hence, this dark side of social media can pose a viable threat to national security. Future generations will be born into an environment of polluted and polarised online information networks. Consequently, young people, many of whom use social media on a daily basis, will have to find ways to survive in these circumstances, often without the help, knowledge, or experience of earlier generations. Thus, young people are at risk of becoming predisposed to all kinds of harmful material which can affect their thinking and behaviour. This can lead to many new threats to national security.

This study focuses on the observations of police officers on the current trends and threats youngsters face on the dark side of social media. The aim was to examine possible threats to national security related to young people's social media use. The data is based on three semi-structured interviews with police officers working in Preventive Measures Units. The analysis was done using inductive content analysis. Three main threats to national security concerning young people's social media use emerged from the interviews: the amount of false information available online, large-scale gatherings and swarming, and the glorification of violence and crime.

First, the police officers expressed concerns over the amount of false information in social media. They were worried that young people may lack skills to critically evaluate information they consume in the continuous information flow. Many youngsters may hold false information as true if it comes from a source they hold reliable. According to the interviewed policemen, another problem comes from real life incidents that typically cause rumours and disinformation, which leads to the need of authorities to publish true information as quickly as possible. However, they also theorised that there exist organised groups behind disinformation campaigns due to the quality of fake stories being published within minutes of the first news of attacks. The policemen emphasised that especially extremist groups pose a threat via affecting public opinion in society and public authorities negatively. These groups work systematically on their influencing, targeting specific groups of people, such as adolescents.

Second phenomenon that the policemen identified was the glorification of violence and crime in social media. Young people create provocative content to emphasise belonging to a group or to gain more followers. The messaging between youth has also shown signs of provocativeness, as youngsters sometimes included threats of violence in their messaging. The availability of violent content in social media has also been a concern, as it is not rare for young people to consume graphic media. Although most youngsters consume it for the sake of thrill, it has also been linked to admiration of delinquency and violence. Influential figures and opinion leaders in social media can also sometimes incite delinquent behaviour through posting provocative pictures or videos, where they, for example, carry weapons or use drugs.

Third, the police officers expressed concerns over large-scale gatherings and swarming. The unexpected gatherings of people, swarming, has been identified to sometimes incite riots, gate crashing and mobs through social media, allowing the virtual world to spill over into the real world. In many ways, swarming is the ultimate goal of influence campaigns, as it allows the campaign to cause effects in real world. The police officers also mentioned mass brawls as an example of swarming, which has included bystanders and onlookers. These incitements of violent behaviour can cause feelings of insecurity in youth.

In conclusion, despite most young people's social media use being harmless, the results indicate that social media platforms are also being used in ways that can endanger national security. Thus, it is important to be aware of the risks and be prepared for possible negative outcomes in order to maintain and enhance national security. Due to the importance that social media has in the lives of youth, the police needs to be prepared to tackle especially the phenomena of radicalisation, idolisation of violence and feelings of unsafety among the youth.

**Keywords:** information influence, national security, police, social media, young people

Norri-Sederholm T, Riikonen R, Moilanen, P, Huhtinen A-M. (2020). Young People and the Dark Side of Social Media – Possible Threats to National Security. In Eze T, Speakman L. & Onwubiko C. (eds.) Proc. of the 19th European Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security. ECCWS-2020. pp. 278-283. Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited.