

Extremist Propaganda in Social Media: A Threat to Homeland Security

By Erbschloe, M.

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A Book Review by

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Propaganda and disinformation on social media are a cause of concern for many of us who study extremism, politics, and conspiracy theories. In *Extremist Propaganda in social media*, Erbschloe focuses on the political use of propaganda by extremists to recruit sympathizers! instigate violence and influence political elections. While focusing on Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) recruitment and Russian influence on the 2016 presidential election, Erbschloe highlights the responses of the major social media platforms to their involvement in helping to spread disinformation.

The book is divided into eleven chapters and is touted as a resource for social media strategists, law enforcement, Homeland Security professionals, military planners, and operatives, and those who are tasked with countering radicalized fringe groups. Each chapter addresses a specific topic within radicalization and social media, yet it does so unquestioningly. The author provides facts or reports from outside sources, such as the testimony of Facebook and Twitter to congress after the 2016 election, and definitions of propaganda and terrorism from the Department of Homeland Security. What is not provided, however, is countering opinions, or the work scholars who have researched and found discrepancies in the responses of social media platforms. As a textbook, it provides the basics of understanding official responses from the federal institutions and companies and would be beneficial for those learning the foundations of government response to propaganda and online extremist content.

Erbschloe focuses on his theory of blisstopian societies that create a bubble of like-minded individuals online, reinforcing each other's worldview. He believes these communities arise when people become complacent to the information and accompanying social doctrine that is propagated, and do not question what they encounter. When blisstopian societies arise, this unquestioning approach to information contributes to the rise of extremism, misinformation, intolerance, and radicalization and in doing so, we see a perpetuation of racism, religious bigotry, violence, hate crimes, sexist, and sexual and gender minorities discrimination. Erbschloe argues that these blisstopian societies are contrived and manufactured by groups on social media who continuously create propaganda that reinforce these worldviews while continuously recruiting new members.

The goal of the book is to provide analysis of how social media can create an environment for and perpetuate extremism and radicalization in various groups online so that the perspective of homeland security can be expanded to better deter and analyze how extremist or radicalized groups

or individuals can be prevented from expanding their reach or having an impact at all. This analysis seems to be one of the factors that is missing in the author's presentation of the work, while providing a very clear and detailed account of federal government definitions and responses from various social media platforms, the ways in which extremists and radicalized groups circumvent social media policies and algorithms are not included in the analysis. There are numerous scholarly articles which details these circumventions that are incredibly useful in the continued outreach of extremists in their recruitment and spreading of their ideology which is unfortunately not addressed within the eleven chapters of the book.

The first chapter analyzes people's use of social media with the intention that by understanding how we use social media, we can then analyze how propaganda is disseminated online. The work takes a dualistic approach in that it highlights the benefits and disadvantages of our social media use. This introductory chapter provides the reader with definitions of propaganda, extremism, and the resulting movements created from the propaganda. These definitions and explanations are foundational for the rest of the book. In chapter two Erbschloe provides an example of how propaganda can have an effect through a dissection of social media and the electoral process. Using the 2016 presidential election as the backdrop for his analysis, the author provides the official responses of the American Intelligence Community as well as the social media platforms themselves to Russian campaign meddling and the Honest Ads Act. While this information is important to understanding what not only occurred during the 2016 election, there was little or no engagement with the role of extremist groups and their involvement in propaganda which had an effect on the electoral process as well.

The third chapter focuses on the government's institutional response to online propaganda, extremism, and radicalization through the creation of partnerships and coalitions to counter the impact of the spreading of this material online. As the book is primarily on the American experience, the information is focused on the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice's responses. Erbschloe acknowledges that there are issues with free speech and differing laws from coalition countries, and the presentation of the material does not take into consideration the research completed by academics in extremism and radicalization which would present key data on how extremist groups circumvent the tactics of the coalitions and the federal agencies attempts at controlling the problem online. We see this same lack of integration of official response and the work of scholars in the fourth chapter that deal with extremism and the military. Using propaganda generated by ISIL and the effect on military responses to violence, Erbschloe does delve into the issue of military personnel and their engagement with extremism online. The chapter offers a bigger picture of international military response and does acknowledge the issue of extremist recruitment of personnel; rather than incorporating the coalitions being created between armed forces and scholars, the data is again primarily based on the official response.

Chapter five takes a similar track when presenting law enforcement and propaganda online. Erbschloe presents the difficulties that law enforcement officers face with both monitoring online propaganda, but also the dichotomy of pro and anti-police movements online. The missing aspect again is material that is sourced from scholars who work with communities affected by both the propaganda and the law enforcement response. Scholarly work on law enforcement personnel and extremism is limited, but there are many scholars working in the field of impact of extremism and law enforcement on communities who are the focus of hate ideology, and this is a missing component that would have balanced out the information that the main target audience of this book would need.

Chapter six takes a dramatic shift from the earlier chapters in that it analyzes the use of propaganda by corporations which has led to the financial ruin and physical harm of many individuals. The example provided is the American tobacco industry and how the federal government responded with policies and laws in the aftermath. This is an important chapter as it provides the reader to understand propaganda as not simply a tool for radicalization, but it does seem somewhat misplaced in the larger context of radicalization and extremism that the book is primarily based upon. The book then shifts back to the main theme with chapter seven analysis of extremists targeting youth. This chapter provides background information of the approach of extremists such as neo-Nazis, anti-abortion groups, and governmental response, yet again there is a lack of interaction with scholars who study the societal issues which drive youth to seek community bonds with these groups. Erbschloe describes in detail the role of online violence becoming ineffectual on youth, but ignores many of the mental health, family issues, and isolation which may draw individuals into these groups. Chapter eight builds upon this topic by analyzing the role of censorship and the First Amendment on propaganda and how political leaders can become the voice of these issues. However, the topic of free speech versus censorship is not clear legally. Once more, the author spends time engaging with the official responses but does not delve into the issues of populism and how politically this can affect the use of and response to propaganda. Here the author misses an opportunity to summarize the proceeding chapters and show the real-world implications of populism and online propaganda.

This missing analysis could have led to a deeper conversation in chapter nine on anti-science propaganda. Populism builds upon anti-institutional trust and creating a us versus the elitist cleavage in which anti-science propaganda can be an exemplar to explain the larger socio-political consequences of online propaganda. This could have also been the foundation or catalyst to the last two chapters which analyze the effectiveness of propaganda both online and offline, such as print media and television, and why all forms of extremist propaganda are effective. In these two chapters the author incorporates social, mental health, and isolation issues, yet again there is a lack of engagement with academic scholarship on these topics.

The book itself is presented as textbook, with classroom activities listed which attempt to have the students engage with each other and the broader community. The issue lies in the fact that there is a very limited scope in the analysis which would and should counter the results the students would get through these activities. While providing a strong foundation of official responses, the book overall misses providing countering opinions, larger scholarship in these fields, and the socio-political issues that may arise, yet it would be an asset in the classroom through its collection of American government and social media platforms' official responses and understandings of propaganda online.

About the Reviewer

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