GNET Survey on the Role of Technology in Violent Extremism and the State of Research Community-Tech Industry Engagement

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What role does technology, particularly computer-mediated communications, play in violent extremism?

This is the animating question driving the Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) as a research-tech industry initiative. Since extremist actors have been some of the earliest adopters of the Internet and recognised its potential as a communications and mobilisation tool, researchers have been grappling with answering questions related to the role of technology and extremism for decades, but particularly since the advent of Islamic State and the growth in violent extremism motivated by right-wing ideologies, as well as the rapid emergence of violent conspiratorial extremist movements, namely QAnon, that was largely facilitated by the Internet.

To compliment past literature reviews on the role of Internet technology and extremism, to gain a current understanding of the research community's findings that may not be included in previously reviewed literature and to understand the academic research community's level of engagement with the tech industry, the Lowy Institute conducted a survey among researchers of terrorism and violent extremism on facets of this core question.

The findings of the survey reveal that there is a great deal of consensus within the research community that Internet enabled communications and social media platforms "support, encourage or mobilise real world harm." However, according to the responses to more detailed survey questions, parsing the role of technology on violent extremism is incredibly complex, multifaceted and still contested.

Survey responses to questions about researchers' engagement with the tech industry revealed that this is a potentially fruitful but also fraught space – much in the same way there remain dilemmas and considerations around collaboration with governments and security agencies among the terrorism research community and concerns around the securitisation of academic research. A number of responses indicated a cynicism about tech industry engagement with the academic community and a number of concerns including the opacity and lack of transparency of major platforms, their reactive nature, differing research priorities to industry and scepticism around how seriously and effectively social media platforms are tackling violent extremism and harmful disinformation.