

THE DARK WEB AND TERRORISM



Rupert Godesen reports on the DarkWeb and the role it plays in terrorism communications and the spreading of information

Terrorism, which the dictionary defines as “the use of violence and threats to intimidate or coerce especially for political reasons” has been a by-product of the way our world runs since time began. There are hateful groups that use grievance, politics and religion as a convenient hook on which to hang their desire to carelessly smash, kill and destroy because they are little more than bunches of violent thugs. But as time passes we sadly see that in human society (like

the animal kingdom) the strong predate on the weak for their own ends and sometimes the weak, who have no other recourse or voice, hit back using the only means at their disposal to get attention. Terror will more than likely always be a part of our world.

The internet by contrast is a relatively new phenomenon, but influences almost every aspect of human existence these days, and yet I can remember a time when I didn't have an email address – something that's hard to imagine now.

Anyone with even a perfunctory knowledge of the internet can access the Dark Web

Not everyone likes change, each new innovation that came along such as the printing press, the telegraph system and the motor car was hailed by many as the solution to the world's problems, and by its detractors as the end of life as we know it. When the printing presses started producing books there was an outcry from some corners that our children would no longer set foot out of doors, instead they'd be stuck indoors with their noses in a book. I'm sure these days many parents would love their kids to be doing just that. Each innovation changes the human landscape in subtle ways. The internet has also changed everything in countless positive ways, too numerous to mention here, but at the same time it has been a boon for criminals and terrorists.

SPREADING TERROR

On the 22 July 2016 sporadic gunfire broke out in Olympia shopping mall in the Moosach district of Munich sending the residents into a panic. Centred around a McDonalds restaurant it was reported that several gunmen were running amok killing people as they went, it was also reported that one of them was shouting “Allah u akbar” which was circulated in the media. This later proved incorrect and is a good example of the truism, that eyewitnesses are the least reliable source of information when it comes to uncovering what actually took place.

Terrorists main aim is to spread terror among the population sending a message that “Your police can't protect you, and we can strike at a time and place of our choosing, about which you can do little” to further

THE DARK WEB PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE SPREADING OF TERRORIST WEAPONRY AND IDEAS

their political aims. Groups of marauding gunmen that the police find very difficult to locate and take down are among the worst of those fears.

But back to Munich, and as the incident came to a head it transpired that it was in fact the work of just one individual. An 18-year-old man by the name of David Sonboly, skilled with computers who held extreme right wing views. Sonboly had lured his victims, most of whom were not native Germans to the branch of McDonald's using social media. Sonboly eventually shot himself in the head, but not before he had murdered nine people and injured 36 more. He was armed with a Glock pistol and a day sack was retrieved after he was killed stuffed full of ammunition and a speed loader. Where the hell did an 18 year old get hold of this stuff?

The answer lies in his interest in computers and what he found while exploring the Dark Web. Most of us are vaguely aware of the Dark Web as some mysterious area of the internet where people buy and sell drugs,

but you'll be shocked at its origins and what it was originally designed for. The Dark Web is a portion of internet where anonymity is highly prized. Imagine if you will the surface internet as we know it with email addresses, twitter names, bank details and internet service providers. There will be details about you and it's possible to track you down if you do something dodgy. It's similar, say, to a road system: you have a car which has a registration document, a licence with your name and address on it, the car has a VRN and also needs a MOT, the road has a classification and a name and your destination has a post code, you get where I am going with this.

This is the surface web, so if you're speeding the cops can identify you from a remote camera, police car by the side of the road and you're sent a ticket and prosecuted. This a huge simplification but it's possible with the right skills to find someone's identity and take action.

Imagine, though, that there's another road network in the shadows beneath the one that we're familiar with, where there are no road markings, not even white lines. The cars have no VRNs, you don't need a licence, there are no patrol cars, no licences or MOTs needed on this network, no road names. Nothing to identify any driver or vehicle and not even street lights so even if someone was watching they couldn't see anything. Complete anonymity. And the roads are jammed with traffic doing business under this cloak, selling all manner of things that cannot be traced.

THE TOR PLATFORM

This is the world of the Dark Web and just like a dark bit of the ocean beneath the sunshine, nasty things now live down there that don't want to be discovered. The Dark Web runs on a platform called TOR which is downloadable on any PC or laptop by anyone. It looks just like a normal web browser and works in the same way. It was the creation of the US Government which wanted a way to covertly communicate between sites of the CIA, FBI and other agencies that don't want their post read by a snooper. Not long after it was created TOR was made available to the public so that the US Government could hide its traffic in the background noise of the busy network.

And at first it worked like a dream, it was embraced by such worthies as human rights groups, foreign journalists filing stories out of sight of oppressive regimes and other liberty activists. But criminals are innovators too, constantly seeking ways to stay one step ahead of the law and it wasn't long before they saw the advantages and TOR it was being used for criminal activities, and it grew and grew and then it mushroomed and today internet crime far outweighs any other type of crime in terms of money stolen.

Using techniques like social engineering, finding the weakness in an individual person and exploiting

▶ that to get passwords or usernames to gain access to a system and once in either steal money or encrypt the computer and hold the user to ransom to get it unscrambled, they are masters at what they do. One example might be handing out memory sticks that contain an application form for a holiday competition outside a busy bank, if they hand out 100 sticks there's a good chance one person might load it onto their laptop at home and the next thing a seemingly innocent email has been sent to a work colleague with a file which contains a virus.

GETTING LEFT BEHIND

Terrorists and criminals have a lot in common and throughout the world are happy bed fellows. Terrorists need weapons and ammunition. If they have money it's a match made in hell and the Dark Web is ready made for both groups to make contact discretely, and the police are lagging way behind. The US Government is still funding the TOR project despite many of the world's police forces, including its own, highlighting how it remains a hive for villainy and potential terrorists in the making.

David Sonboly, was just one young man on his own, who spent over a year in his bedroom finding

his way around the Dark Web, mastering encryption techniques to further mask his activities, joining chat rooms in which he was able to connect with an illegal firearms dealer who didn't ask questions and didn't care what he was using the pistol for as long as they were paid and dispatched the package to his home complete with the bullets and speed loader. So a disturbed 18 year old with a bit of IT know-how can get hold of a 9mm pistol and get it sent to his house via

TODAY INTERNET CRIME FAR OUTWEIGHS ANY OTHER TYPE OF CRIME IN TERMS OF MONEY STOLEN

parcel carrier.

Today's terror groups like criminal gangs are IT savvy, sophisticated, well funded and organised. You only need to look at how IS mastered social media and lured thousands to the so-called caliphate and a very unhappy end to realise that the threat from the Dark Web and the role it plays in spreading terror is quite terrifying if you think about it ●

Rupert Godesen

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