

Preliminary Analysis on the Recruitment Process for Domestic Violent Extremist Groups

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Abstract: The rise of social media has coincided with the emergence of numerous domestic violent extremist groups with alt-right political ideologies in the United States and Europe. The current study analyzes patterns of communication in the Iron March dataset. Social network analysis was used to determine the most tightly connected users, and graph clustering shows the interactions between these influential users and other members of the forum. Our analysis shows a level of organization within the forum, and an adversarial approach to recruitment of new members, which was used to prevent infiltration by law enforcement and maintain the anonymity of participants. Users who completed the requirements for recruitment were permitted into other, more private, communication channels.

Keywords: Human Factors · Extremist Groups · Social Media Analysis

1 Introduction

While much has been written about the use of social media to influence the 2016 US Presidential elections, primarily by the Russian Government [1-3], relatively little has been written about automated analysis of online resources for understanding the nature of domestic violent extremist groups (DVE) in the United States. In a recent article, Shortland and Forest call for the use of technology to identify the minority of individuals within extremist organizations that will conduct acts of terrorism, as opposed to the majority who may share their ideologies, but are unlikely to turn to violence themselves [4]. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop automated tools for processing, understanding and synthesizing the vast amount of data generated by DVEs online in order to find those who appear to be most likely to perpetuate or incite violence.

In November 2019, SQL Leaks published the entire contents of the Iron March forum. This online forum has been linked to 100 hate crimes¹ and is widely believed to be one of the first online channels used by the Atomwaffen group². After obtaining access to these data, we undertook a project to understand the connections between Iron March participants, to identify the users who were most central to the online community. We were specifically interested in recruitment activities, and further investigation

¹ <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/02/15/visions-chaos-weighing-violent-legacy-iron-march>

² <https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2019/11/06/massive-white-supremacist-message-board-leak-how-to-access-and-interpret-the-data/>

revealed what appeared to be a semi-structured process for indoctrinating new members into DVE organizations.

The entire SQL database of the Iron March forum was uploaded to the Internet Archives webpage on November 6th, 2019. It has since been taken down, but is available on various torrent sites. Singer-Emery and Bray III were among the first to discuss the contents of the forum’s SQL database [5]. Notably, the data dump contained both public and private posts along with registration information for each individual user. The forum was active from Sept 2011 to November 2017, with a large increase of activity immediately before and after the US presidential election in November 2016 (see Figure 1). After November 2017, the online community migrated to a different site (possibly on the Discord platform).

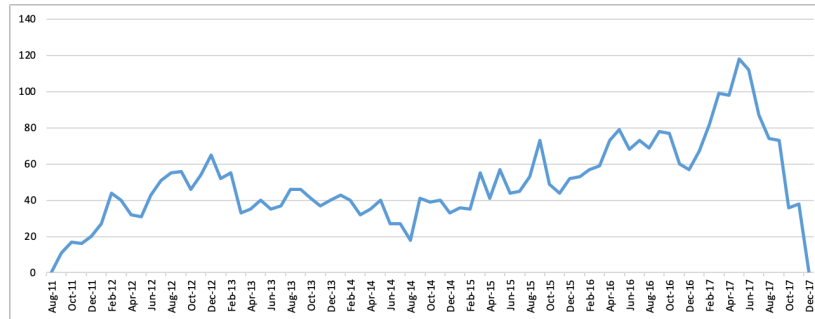


Figure 1: Iron March, Active Users by Month

In total, there were 1,207 users registered to the forum, 875 of these users posted at least once, and 659 users had a conversation with at least one other user. Notably, 20% of the active population accounts for 75.9% of all conversations within the forum. On one extreme we have one user ‘Odin’ who is by far the most connected individual with 61 separate conversations, and on the other extreme, there are 216 users who messaged at least once but never received a reply. In this article, we define a conversation as two or more users communicating on the same thread within the public forum.

Although the Iron March forum received notoriety for its high concentration of White Supremacist groups, fewer than half of the users were based in the United States as determined by their IP address at the time they made their first post. Although it is possible that some users employed IP spoofing, there is still a broad range of locations and nationalities represented in the collection, as shown in Table 1.

2 Identifying the Most Connected Users

We used social network analysis in order to identify subgroups of connected users within the Iron March forum site. This analysis leads to our conclusion that participation with the site, as determined by number and length ongoing conversations, was the key to identifying the leaders within the online community.

Social network analysis led to the development of a graphical depiction of the engagement of the most connected users within the forum, and their relationship to the rest of the community. The Pareto Principle [6], where 80% of the effects are created

by 20% of the causes, is commonly referenced when analyzing online communications. Effects in this case could be taken to mean connections within the Iron March Forum, whereas the causes are the users on the forum. Keeping this rule in mind we notice that 93.4% of the connections involve only 21% of the active user population ($n=875$). In Figure 2a, the 184 people in the center ring of the donut are each connected to at least four other active users), thus there is a trend towards few users with significant influence over the majority of communication on the forum, a statistic that is consistent with other social networking sites. In 2b, we see that just 9 people conversed with 21.2% of the active user population (179 users) - an incredible amount of influence - clearly showing the central hub of leadership within the community.

Table 1. Active Users by Country, Iron March Forum

Country	Active Users	Country	Active Users
United States	419	Denmark	11
Great Brittan	88	Finland	11
Canada	62	Russia	10
Sweden	49	Norway	10
Denmark	19	Brussels	10
Netherlands	19	Belgium	9
Ireland	17	Hungary	8
Portugal	14	Croatia	6
France	12	Other	82
Romania	11	Total	875

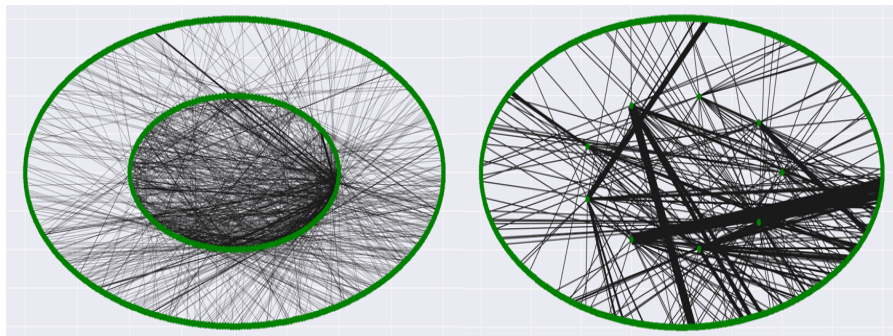


Figure 2. Analysis on the most active users in the Iron March Forum

We expand upon the analysis in Figure 2 to determine how groups of users interacted on the Iron March forum. Figure 3 shows the results of our cluster analysis as the level of engagement threshold increases. The nodes represent a single user, and distance between nodes represents the number of shared threads between two users. The post threshold specified below each network graph denotes the level of engagement, ranging from users who posted twice on the same thread (threshold of 2), to users who posted 8 times on the same thread. With a threshold of two, the network graph depicts a single hub of activity and interaction, but as the threshold increases, clusters begin to emerge.

When the threshold reaches a threshold 6 or 7, clusters are fairly clear. As the threshold continues to increase, these clusters eventually break down into scattered communications. This social networking analysis and clustering experiments show promise for identifying the most prominent and active members of an online community and how they are interacting with each other. Taken together, Figures 2 and 3 appear to depict a shared responsibility among the most active users, with each interacting primarily with a subset of the community. This level of organization and leadership has not previously been described in the Iron March dataset.

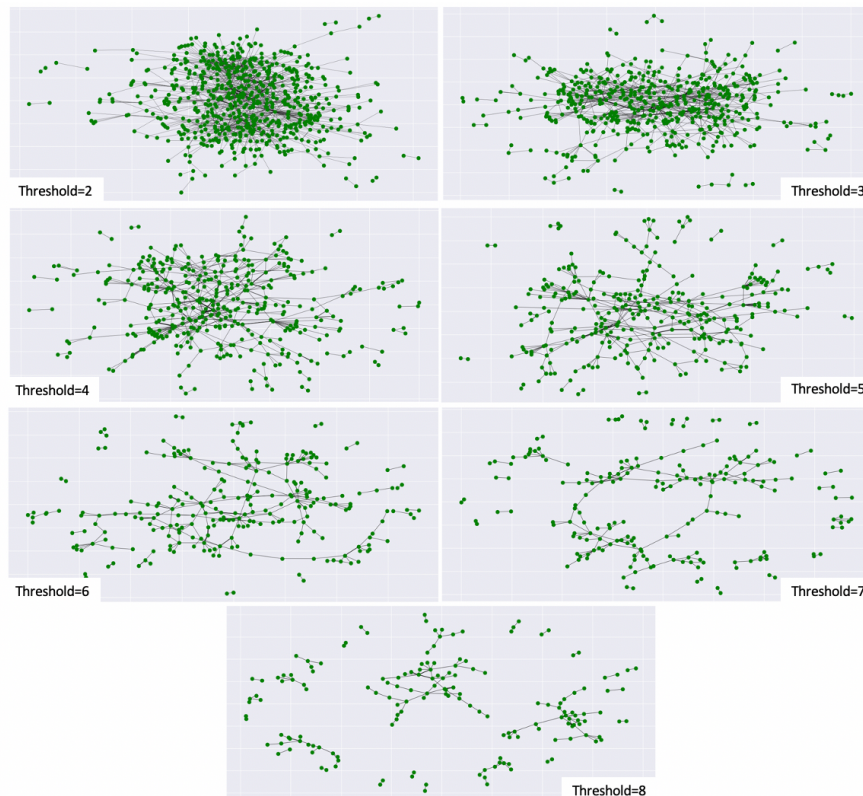


Figure 3. Network cluster analysis of Iron March Forum at increasing thresholds

3 Recruitment Strategies within the Iron March Forum

Both informal and formal recruiting strategies were observed within the Iron March Forum. Formal recruiting was only observed from users that were a part of an established White Supremacist group on the forum. Notably, users with a formal process were in the minority on the forum and they never exclusively used formal recruiting. Most users defaulted to an informal form of recruitment. Many of the activities were reminiscent of reframing strategies that are used by online sexual predators to lure their

victims into believing the communication is normal. These strategies indoctrinate the victim into the use of the “correct” language, as determined by the predator [7].

Formal recruitment took the form of administering a test or questionnaire to the perspective recruit. One user, “Odin,” was the most prolific formal recruiter on the forum. He was observed administering an ideology test to new members. This test was comprised primarily of questions about works of literature that Odin considered central to his ideological foundation (including SEIGE – the collected works of James Mason, who is an advisor to the Atomwaffen Division). Odin repeatedly referred to SIEGE as “required reading.” Potential new members were open about their interest in Atomwaffen, with quotes including “I live in Jacksonville, FL, and I would like to learn more about joining Atomwaffen Division. Please advise.” and “I’m trying to figure out if there’s an Atomwaffen branch for (Northern) California ... wondering if Atomwaffen has a presence here. ... Is there a procedure to found an Atomwaffen chapter?” While there never appeared to be a single correct response to the test questions, Odin was happy to share what he believed to be the correct answer with the recruit should they provide an incomplete answer. These responses reflected the reframing noted above.

The most popular form of recruitment across the entire forum was more informal. During this process a recruiter would casually ask leading questions to assess the user’s ideology. This would often take place without the recruit knowing they were being assessed for recruitment. In contrast to formal methods of recruitment, it took fewer messages for a recruiter using informal recruitment to feel confident that they had found a new recruit. Consistent across the majority of recruiters using informal methods, in the final step of recruitment, they ask the recruit to join a separate Skype group chat or Discord group. We believe these strategies were used to ensure that the participants were serious in their intent to get more involved, and were not attempts at infiltration by law enforcement groups.

Although the Iron March forum attracted numerous White Supremacist groups, consistent among them was an interest in taking the conversation off of Iron March and onto a platform where their communications felt more secure. Initially Skype was the most referenced platform, and recruiters would regularly tell their potential recruits to make an account. The use of Skype is understandable because it provides recruiters with the ability to match a face to an online username giving them a greater level of trust in the recruit’s intent. By 2017, recruiters were directing potential new members to Discord to continue the conversation.

A significant number of American users were quick to disclose their own location, and also suggest that other users travel to their location for an in-person meeting. The word “travel” appeared in 50 separate communications and “meeting” appeared in 65. The fact that the American users were more likely to disclose their hometown suggests that they are very comfortable with the notion that the ideas they are publishing to the forum fall within their first amendment right to freedom of speech. This also lends support to our theory that the groups were not satisfied with merely talking online about ideology, but were planning offline activities and training exercises among the most engaged and receptive recruits.

Although the forum contains primarily English text, Table 1 shows that a majority of the users on the forum appear to be in other countries. Users from outside the United States engaged in recruitment activities at the same rate as those located in the US.

However, users within the United States were more likely to disclose their hometown or state in an effort to organize face to face meetings with other members of the forum.

4 Conclusion

The leaked SQL database of the Iron March Forum continues to provide researchers with opportunities for analyzing the activities of DVE organizations within the United States. This research has demonstrated the nature of the interactions between users on the Iron March forum, and identified the most active and central forum participants. While the forum was the medium upon which many members were first introduced to the online DVE community, a large number of users finished the recruitment process on another platform. Future research will expand these techniques to other online communities that appear to cater to these organizations, such as Discord (some channels), gab, and Telegram, among others. There is an online arms race with DVE groups, with new communities emerging on one platform almost as quickly as they are shut-down on another. Use of automated tools for quickly analyzing these activities is necessary to ensure that both private and public entities can quickly respond to emerging threats.

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