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## **Targeted Advertising for CVE: Google Steps In**

*By Dymphles Leong*

### **Synopsis**

*The Redirect Method, a targeted advertising initiative by Jigsaw, a Google technology incubator, is among one of the latest ventures by the private sector in tackling security challenges such as violent extremism. Such efforts are welcomed in enhancing existing contributions in countering violent extremism.*

### **Commentary**

JIGSAW, a Google technology incubator, announced a new initiative on 7 September 2016 that aims to use targeted advertising on Google's search engine to confront extremist recruitment efforts online. Dubbed the Redirect Method, it seeks to engage young people who are vulnerable and sympathetic towards the messaging of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) also known as IS or Daesh.

Jigsaw aims to connect individuals interested in extremist propaganda with YouTube videos that undermines the efforts of extremists at recruiting these individuals. This initiative intensifies efforts of the world's biggest search engine in deterring aspiring recruits from the propaganda efforts of ISIS. Could the Redirect Method be a game changer in tackling violent extremism?

### **The Redirect Method**

At the core of the Redirect Method is a targeted advertising campaign, with similar aspects of a traditional advertising campaign such as understanding the characteristics of a target audience and the promotion of ad content. Firstly, keyword generation is conducted; identifying text entered into Google's search field from a list of 1,700 keywords identified which an individual who is sympathetic to ISIS might

use in searching for information. Some examples identified include supporter slogans. This aids in narrowing a specific sector of the audience online in order to differentiate between individuals who have positive sentiments towards ISIS versus a more general audience.

Targeted advertisements appear alongside search results in the form of text and image advertisements. Clicking on the advertisements would redirect an individual to a playlist of curated YouTube videos that were not explicitly designed for the purpose of countering the group, and are derived from pre-existing videos from sources including citizen journalism.

## **Why Jigsaw?**

Jigsaw's venture into using targeted advertising and technology for security purposes is but one of the increasing examples of private sector companies adopting technologies to tackle global security challenges that were commonly seen as being the purview of the government.

Google has built its business on predicting what people want based on its search advertising algorithms, with up to 3.5 billion online searches every day. Its online advertising is a US \$1 trillion e-commerce sector underpinned by advertising, which helps connect a million organisations and individuals online.

Given that Google has previously trained various Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in keyword advertising, Jigsaw's efforts in this arena is a natural progression to its previous methods of countering violent extremism.

Early pilot results look promising. According to results from the eight-week pilot project, more than 320,000 individuals were drawn to the videos for over a period of two months, while the advertisements saw a click rate that was three times more than typical ad campaigns run on Google's AdWords. Furthermore, up to 500,000 minutes of YouTube videos were watched.

## **Advantages of Redirect Method**

The advantages of the Redirect Method can be categorised and framed into four benefits – Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely, using the United Kingdom's Behavioural Insights Team EAST framework to effect behavioural change:

### *Easy*

Increasing focus has been placed on content curation over content creation in campaigns in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). Content curation enables the streamlining of existing content into easily accessible package where all it takes is one click for individuals to be redirected to a pre-curated set of thematic videos specifically targeted to recruiting narratives of ISIS, e.g. religious legitimacy. Thus barriers to engagement with counter content are reduced.

Results from the campaign are measurable. Data from the campaign is empirical and can thus be used to evaluate the reach and effect of ads on the target audience by

using Google AdWords and YouTube Analytics, similar metric tools used to evaluate a business ad campaign.

### *Attractive*

Tapping onto the notion of confirmation bias, where individuals seek and act on information that identifies and affirms pre-existing beliefs, advertisements by the Redirect Method adopts and seemingly mimic the group's branding philosophy. Advertisements are not judgemental or reproaching, but are phrased in questions such as "What is life like there?"

This makes it attractive and appealing to individuals who have positive sentiments towards ISIS, and enables opportunities for cognitive openings to pierce the walls of the echo chambers in order to push forward messages that answer queries that they have.

### *Social and Timely*

Jigsaw is currently researching into the potential of developing artificial intelligence to engage with individuals directly in one-on-one conversations, building future online counsellor capabilities to chat directly, and connecting them directly with resources or agencies that can assist them. This highlights that in order to sustain the intervention process one-to-one engagement must be done. Furthermore, advertisements and videos are also timely as they intercept and capture the attention of young adults attempting to search for pro-information concerning the group.

## **Relooking to Overcome Limitations**

While the Redirect Method can help to interrupt the cycle of radicalisation and divert young people away from extremism online, there are limitations. On one hand Redirect might drive the target audience away from mainstream search engines and into more encrypted private channels of communication, as they might fear the monitoring of online search activities. Furthermore, a large number of advertisements could potentially discourage individuals from clicking on the advertisements as advertisements might be considered as spam.

While the Redirect Method can divert the attention of these individuals at the point of intervention, it remains to be seen if the initiative can be sustainable. The development of content and engagement formats for future use is crucial.

The Redirect method offers a fresh perspective of approaching an issue where most counter efforts are seen as 'public service announcements' which do not fully engage the target audience. Although initial results for the pilot are small, marrying keyword detection and targeted videos are a step up from current efforts such as content blocking or removal.

While the Redirect Method is not a panacea for countering extremist information on the Internet, it provides a targeted and more organised way of getting the message to the ones who need it most. As Richard Stengel, the United States' Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs recently commented, the

messaging focus of ISIS is changing to more micro targeted messaging; thus it is now even more crucial that the focus of counter efforts be targeted towards a more visceral personalised message.

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