The Role of Social Media in Gun Violence

Fall 2022 Virtual Public Meeting

Speakers include:
- FBI Analyst
- Digital Justice & Civil Rights expert
- Criminology experts, and
- District Residents

Thursday, September 22, 2022

5-7 pm

Register Here Via Webex: Link

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**Criminal Justice Coordinating Council**

CJCC

Background

On September 22, 2022, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened a virtual public meeting on "The Role of Social Media in Gun Violence". The public meeting theme evolved from ongoing efforts to respond to violent crime, a strategic priority for CJCC partners. Increasingly, system-involved persons and perpetrators of violent crime employ creative measures, i.e., social media, to boast about or advertise their activities, as well as threaten rivals. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the public how social media and related platforms contribute to gun violence across the District of Columbia.

Panel Introduction

Dr. TaLisa Carter, Assistant Professor, American University, moderated the panel discussion that included:

- Desmond Upton Patton, Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania
- Nora Benavidez, Senior Counsel and Director of Digital Justice & Civil Rights Free Press & Free Press Action Fund
- Michael Kolko, Special Agent, Retired, FBI
- Rojay Ball, a District Violence Interrupter
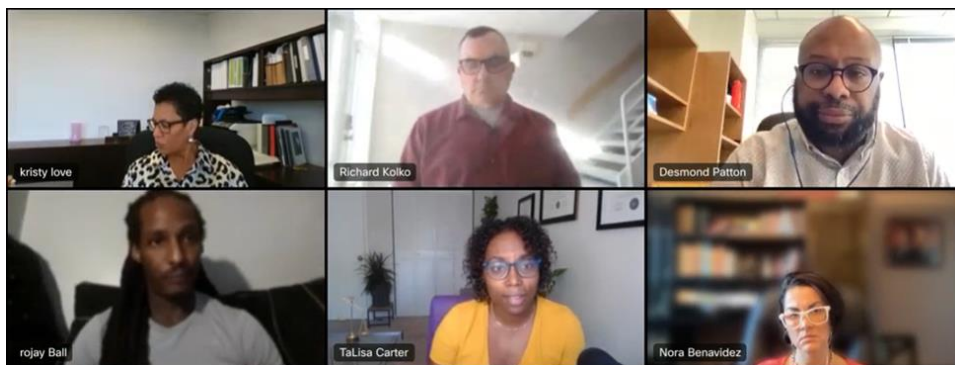
Panel Discussion

The discussion included a series of questions directed to the panelists, including those offered by meeting attendees using the virtual meeting chat feature.

What is the connection between social media and gun violence?

Dr. Patton stressed the critical point that many individuals literally live their lives on social media platforms, and sometimes these persons live in communities where gang violence exists,

prompting discussions on social media platforms. He stressed that an aspect of social media is some peoples' lived experiences can sometimes be expressed aggressively and in a threatening manner. He explained that a lot of the interaction seen on the platforms is not negative, but when it is, it is hyper-visible and sometimes involves confrontational language. Confrontational language is generally perceived as disrespectful and offensive, and it can result in harm or death in offline interactions. Dr. Patton stressed that some, but not all, social media language could have negative undertones. Mr. Ball offered that social media platforms allow people the opportunity to say and do things online that they might not otherwise state directly to someone in person. Additionally, posts can lead to bruised egos/feelings and prompt physical violence and retaliation.

An important element of the conversation highlighted how social media platform providers employ algorithms/formulas to track platform users' focus and interests, and in turn directs users unwittingly to specific content that is tailored to violence. The use of the algorithms can influence impressionable young minds and shape how they behave.

An ongoing discussion in the public policy domain revolved around whether social media platform providers have to abide by any performance and conduct standards. The first question posed to panelists was:

Do social media platform providers have a responsibility to regulate or manage content intended to contribute to free expression and public discourse?

Ms. Benavidez stated that there is a strong link between the online world and offline violence.

Dr. Carter offered context that there is a disconnect between social media and reality. For instance, some content users function differently online than in person, and lob insults or use inflammatory and threatening language. In some instances that behavior can result in online resentment and reactionary responses such as physical violence. Ms. Benavidez offered that generally, platform providers have not been held responsible for their inaction governing the conduct of platform users.

Dr. Patton shared his perspective regarding accountability that existing law is reflective of society's values; and that in general the law must catch up regarding policies that hold social

media providers accountable for the content on their platforms, leading to the following question:

Are platforms a weapon or tool?

According to Dr. Patton in some instances social media platforms are tools that are leveraged for harm. He stressed that currently, no operational definition exists for harm caused online. He noted that practically speaking, the behavior and rhetoric of gangs and extreme groups generally occur on the fringes of social media platforms. Dr. Patton offered additional context that there is value in exploring inclusive practices with community stakeholders to imagine and define what harm is in social media.

The conversation continued with a focus on the role of law enforcement in responding to violence prompted by content and actions by platform users on social media. Panelists were asked to respond to:

Where does law enforcement fit into the equation?

Mr. Kolko commented that preventing violence via social media is a difficult task to achieve, because the FBI's work is based on responding after a crime occurs. Once a crime occurs, the Bureau utilizes a digital footprint to build its case. Mr. Kolko stated that as a practical matter, there are no mechanisms employed by the Bureau to stem the violence that occurs online.

Who is responsible and how do you prevent crimes occurring on social media?

Mr. Ball commented that the music industry bears some responsibility for criminal behavior among youth online and offline. Specifically, the industry promotes images that incite violence, and Facebook/Meta and Instagram are the predominant platforms that young people use to express themselves and impress others. He stressed the importance of the potential harms of social media to young people. Mr. Ball added that negative content is a strong influence among both teenage and adult users of certain platforms.

Why are we attracted to violence perpetrated in entertainment?

Ms. Benavidez commented that content moves us, specifically divisive and violent content, because it triggers reactionary and reflexive behavior. Mr. Kolko offered that people are fascinated with depictions of violence and conflict, and past violent behavior is generally predictive of future behavior on social media.

What can we do to prevent violence?

Mr. Ball emphasized the importance of engaging young people in hands-on activities that involve personal interactions, especially with older community members. He also stated online activity can be harmful to youth and there is value in limiting their access to cell phones and social media.

TaLisa Carter

Dr. Carter offered a cautionary note against overuse and exposure to social media because it contributes to sensory excitement, and in some cases overload. Dr. Patton added that for many young people social media consumes their life, and it is important for them to separate virtual life from reality. The professor stressed the importance and value of creating a social media ecosphere that encourages users to be good digital citizens of sound content. Further, it was emphasized that it is critical to regulate the type of content that is being consumed.

The conversation also highlighted whether and how platform providers can be regulated.

How can platform providers be regulated or influenced to change their platforms?

Mr. Kolko commented that law enforcement is developing applications to combat online violence. He expressed the caveat that social media companies are driven by profits and companies will not change their strategies and culture unless users of social media transform their consumption of content. Ms. Benavidez stated that there is limited authority to strictly govern the behavior of platform providers. She added context that there are instances where repeated content violations occur and sanctions are imposed on platform providers, including suspending the platform providers from airing any content.

A few other points were highlighted, including, minority and marginalized communities, i.e., Black, Brown, LGBTQ+ and immigrant communities' voices are silenced and harmed online, and

surveillance of platform users occurs regularly. The surveillance of social media users enables platform providers to employ algorithms that determine the type of content and posts shown to social media users.

As the conversation continued, Kristy Love, CJCC's Interim Director, sought an explanation regarding the difference and scope of influence between in-person and online confrontations via social media.

Please compare offline versus online behavior influences.

rojay Ball

Mr. Ball highlighted that persons who experience arguments or "beefs" with someone offline are not as strongly impacted as they would be online. A person embarrassed or insulted offline, meaning in-person, would experience limited negative exposure, criticism by their peers or shame from family members. However, similar behavior occurring online would produce exponential harm and posts online. As the insult is spread further through tags, posts, and re-posts, a person could experience additional harm from the exposure of the insult. Additional consequences could occur in the form of extreme violence being directed at the offender/s online.

Dr. Patton offered that experiences occurring online have the potential to go viral and reach embedded networks of known or unknown affiliated persons, because social media has made us hyper-visible and hyper-connected. Further, online behavior can generate additional likes/feeds which may not be authentic, i.e., bots, that in turn trigger algorithms that drive traffic and online responses.

Is there a connection between gun violence and gun trafficking online?

Nora Benavidez explained that platform providers are afforded broad license before being sanctioned for advertisements and depictions of guns and related sales online. Rojay Ball explained that people utilize Instagram to show off guns online and in some instances, police have monitored online behavior and confiscated weapons. Dr. Patton pointed out that real-time posts, clicks, tags, etc., inflict harm if equitable online behavior is not enforced on all parties.

Examples of Violence Promoted Online

Desmond Patton

Dr. Patton commented that repeated actions of disrespect and "piling-on" in the social media sphere produce the effect of being hyper-public and hyper-visible, potentially promoting retaliation by the offended party. Rojay Ball stated that online users rely on opposition research to determine who is trending, and who needs to be highlighted and targeted for retaliation. Mr. Ball also explained how videos set the tone for behavior that is copied, such as the wearing of ski masks used to create a persona and protect the identity of persons with criminal intentions.

Has social media failed us?

Nora Benavidez indicated that in some ways social media has failed us because its original intent was to connect people, rather than morph into news feeds that serve as information sources. Additionally, she commented that the sophisticated use of algorithms has created breeding grounds for the worst type of corporate behavior involving racism and sexism. However, she offered that there is hope when you look at an online open source like Wikipedia, which utilizes crowd source funding and is not influenced by corporate profit motives.

Mr. Kolko indicated that social media is a "gold mine" for law enforcement because it provides digital footprints that aid Bureau investigations. He added that social media has failed in efforts to combat hateful behavior and rhetoric.

What can be done about the music industry involvement in gun violence prompted by social media activity?

According to the panelists, the music industry has fostered violence across all genres. A point was made that Country Western music is notorious for calls to violence (domestic violence and retribution), but Hip-Hop and Rap are depicted as being the sole engine for harmful lyrics and dangerous images. Dr. Patton offered that what you see is what you get in terms of imagery, and that if changes are desired, the public will need to engage in direct advocacy.

Rojay Ball stressed that the music industry signs content providers to lucrative contracts with the specific intent of having those persons generate violent content. He suggested that to counter

the practice, comparable resources should be dedicated that focus on healthy lyrics and positive images. He also said the targeted demographic of teenagers is ill-equipped to make informed decisions about signing contracts that will exploit them and drive the behavior of their peers. He stressed the importance of identifying community-developed solutions that inspire and enable content developers to employ a different model and method that will cultivate alternative types of influencers.

Can anti-gun violence partners deploy alternate content to protect vulnerable communities?

Nora Benavidez recommended narrative power-building, i.e., rejecting the language of the status quo and responding to the challenges presented by the algorithmic reality that drives or directs what people see when they access certain applications. She also stressed the importance of developing alternative legitimate outlets to distribute content.

Rojay Ball stated that there are positive aspects to social media, including music and videos that express the depth of pain suffered by people using the platforms to tell their stories.

Dr. Patton offered that in his research he has transitioned to exploring trauma, grief, joy and healing. He emphasized the importance of redirecting online language and behavior. Further, Dr. Patton stated that many people are living their lives on social media in complex ways, and it is critical to delve deeper beyond the dimensions of violence that is portrayed on social media. He also commented that he is diversifying his pool of graduate assistants and researchers to include community members who can offer authenticity to his research based on their lived experiences.

The question of accountability on social media was explored.

According to Ms. Benavidez it is critical to maintain online anonymity among content users to maintain the free expression of ideas. Further, she stated that autocratic and totalitarian regimes embrace the strategy of eliminating anonymity on social media in order to curtail free speech and diversity of thought.

Dr. Carter offered an additional line of question regarding techniques to activate "people power" on social media platforms.

Dr. Patton commented he is engaging in the reimagination of utilizing people who are community experts skilled in analyzing data. Rojay Ball suggested generating additional community involvement, and identifying alternative funding to support positive imagery. Mr. Kolko challenged people to assert accountability whenever they see community members engaging in unhealthy, harmful and criminal acts. Ms. Benavidez said as a First Amendment scholar she is working on systemic and institutional reforms and holding firm that modifications can and should be made to social media platforms, but it is also vital to ensure the anonymity of people who use those platforms.

In a final all-panel question, Dr. Carter asked for final suggestions and recommendations from the panelists. Responses included:

- Parents of youth should seek to understand youth experiences by engaging. Most importantly, parents should not punish youth by withholding their social media devices.
- It is vital for users of social media platforms to be able to differentiate between virtual experiences and real-life. Further, there is value in developing interdisciplinary approaches to educate people about the nature of social media platforms and the driving forces that affect the behavior and attitudes of people who do harm or are caused harm via social media platforms.
- It is important to promote open dialogue about what social media is, and how it works across demographics and communities, and for organizations and communities to collaborate in ways that inform and protect community members from violence inspired by social media.
- It is vital to limit the stifling of First Amendment speech that occurs on social media platforms.
- Social media can be used as a vehicle to help people realize their potential and be positive influencers.

Conclusion

CJCC Interim Executive Director Kristy Love thanked the panelists for their insightful contributions, the attendees who viewed the virtual meeting, and acknowledged the work of CJCC staff who organized the event.