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Participant Recruitment through Social Media: Lessons Learned from a Qualitative Radicalization Study Using Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Social media are useful facilitators when recruiting hidden populations for research. In our research on youth and radicalization, we were able to find and contact young people with extreme ideals through Facebook. In this article, we discuss our experiences using Facebook as a tool for finding respondents who do not trust researchers. Facebook helped us recruit youths with extreme Islamic and extreme left-wing ideals. We conclude by discussing the benefits and limitations of using Facebook when searching for and approaching populations who are difficult to reach.

INTRODUCTION

How do you approach potential respondents who do not trust you? Some target groups are, after all, very suspicious about research that might be initiated or financed by the government. For example, people with extreme ideals often distrust people outside their own networks because they distrust the authorities and can, therefore, be difficult to find in radicalization research and hard to approach (Berko 2009; Juergensmeyer 2003; Richardson 2006; Stern 2003). Social media have turned out to be useful facilitators when trying to recruit hidden populations for research. The purpose of this article is to discuss our experiences of using Facebook as a tool for finding respondents with extreme ideals who do not trust researchers. In our research on parental influence on radicalization, we tried to recruit adolescents and young adults with extreme ideals. However, the often-used snowball sampling in fieldwork did not work for our research population.

The young people with extreme ideals were very protective of their own group; passing on names of group members was not acceptable.

We therefore searched for other methods to find potential respondents.

Many researchers have found that the use of social network sites can be a useful method to recruit a difficult-to-reach population (Barratt et al. 2015; Masson et al. 2013; Palys and Atchinson 2012; Parkinson and Bromfield 2013; Seltzer et al. 2014). Still, to our knowledge, little is known about the use of social networking sites for the recruitment of adolescents and young adults with extreme ideals. However, as young people are very active on social media and the Internet is often used for propagating radical ideologies (Prucha and Fisher 2013), the Internet seemed to be a good place to start our field research and to find respondents.

We focused on Facebook because it is where people present themselves in their profiles, share their opinions, meet other users, and join groups with shared interests (Leung 2013). Since the personal profiles often reveal what is on a person's mind, this seems to be a place where people with extreme ideologies could be found (Van San 2015).

Social networking sites would be particularly useful when searching for respondents who are stigmatized or marginalized in the off-line world as their isolation would push them toward social contacts in the virtual world (Palys and Atchinson 2012). Thus, due to their marginalized position in society—caused by their radical views—respondents with extreme ideals are possibly found online more easily as they prefer to stay under the radar in the off-line world. Furthermore, approaching respondents online could help in building trust because the younger generation tends to prefer online messages as these give people “just the right amount of access, just the right amount of control” (Turkle 2011:15).

In this article, we share our experiences of using Facebook as a tool for recruiting respondents who do not easily trust researchers. We address the question as to how Facebook can help the search for and approach to respondents who are difficult to reach due to a lack of trust.

In the first section of this article, we discuss the method we used to find and approach our respondents. Second, we elaborate on the results of using Facebook to recruit young research participants with extreme ideals. In the concluding section, we discuss the pros and cons of using social networking sites in searching for respondents who do not trust you.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The fieldwork described in this article is part of a follow-up study on the development of extreme ideals in adolescents and young adults (Van San et al. 2013). Our aim was to study parental influence on radicalization, and we therefore sought to interview a minimum of 50 young people with extreme ideals as well as their parents. In our research, we understand extreme ideals to be “ideals that are severely at odds with those of their family and/or the mainstream” (Sieckelinck et al. 2015:330).

The research was conducted in Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands between January 2012 and March 2015. We used Facebook to find and approach the research population, and we recruited young respondents online between February 2012 and July 2013.

METHOD

Recruitment and Inclusion Criteria

We searched Facebook to find young people between 15 and 30 years old who showed extreme ideals on their profile. We interviewed adolescents and young adults with extreme right, radical Islamic, or extreme left-wing ideals. Our research focused on people with various types of extreme ideals, as growing evidence reveals that the processes of radicalization among widely divergent groups show parallel developments (Gielen 2008; Van San et al. 2013).

Procedure

Many researchers feel uncomfortable about revealing private information, especially when the research concerns people in the fields of radical politics or criminality. It may be tempting to use anonymous Facebook profiles to observe and contact potential respondents, but this goes against the ethical guidelines of research. Also, transparency is essential in building trust. A possible solution to proceed on Facebook would be to create a neutral researcher Facebook profile. We created three of these Facebook accounts in which we presented ourselves as researchers. We chose neutral but explanatory names: For example, a name on one of our profiles was “PhD-student Utrecht.” On our profiles, we explained who we were and what our research was about.

We generated separate profiles to approach different ideological groups. A single Facebook account would not have been sufficient because right-wing oriented people would certainly not trust a person who also shows interest in Islamists and has anarchistic Facebook friends. However, when we met the respondent face-to-face for an interview, we were open about our approach to people from a range of different ideologies.

Subsequently, we searched Facebook for respondents. We traced potential respondents by visiting relevant group pages. We found these group pages by using the following example key words in our search: Groene Vogels [Green birds], Shariah4Belgium, Shariah4Holland, Dutch Oi, Fitna, Anarchistische groep Amsterdam [Anarchistic group Amsterdam], Anti Dierproeven coalitie [Anti Animal Testing Coalition], Kraken gaat door [Squatting goes on]. We then visited these pages and selected people who posted messages on the group page or who “liked” extreme posts. We then looked at these people’s personal profiles and checked whether they were explicit about their ideals on their profile. For example, the adolescents and young adults were approached if their profiles showed adulation of martyrdom, white supremacy, or antigovernment claims.

Next, we sent potential respondents a private Facebook message to ask them for an interview. In this message, we explained who we were and the purpose of our study. Rather than using terms such as “radical ideals” (which might imply a security perspective that considered their ideals as unwanted and dangerous), we asked the potential participants about their “strong ideals.”

[FIGURE 1]

We had two reasons for using this approach: a theoretical one and a practical one. The theoretical reason was that a lot of research on radicalization is conducted from a security perspective (Schmid and Price 2011), in which scholars try to find ways of counteracting radicalization. From this perspective, young people who develop

strong or extreme ideals are often considered to be radicals and are thought of as potential dangers to society.

However, by simply considering adolescents and their ideals to be dangerous, one overlooks the fact that ideals, even radical ones, are part of a democratic discourse, and that some idealistic young people simply want to be actively involved in their communities (Van San et al. 2013). We therefore chose to approach our respondents as young people with strong ideals, rather than as radicals. A practical reason for this approach was that we learned from previous research (Van San et al. 2013) that words like “radicalization” can stand in the way of finding respondents. However, our respondents were eager to talk to us when we told them about our parenting perspective and asked them about their strong ideals. The online use of words such as radicalization could also put the respondent at risk, as some may be monitored by security services.

Delicacy of wording in the recruitment message was important for obtaining trust. We stressed to our respondents that we are working for a university, as universities are usually perceived as neutral institutions.

Moreover, we communicated that we are writing a book instead of doing research. We did not use the Dutch word for research, *onderzoek*, because it could also mean “investigation,” which has strong connotations with police and security services. In the text, we tried to avoid any normative judgments toward their ideologies and chose an open-minded approach. Moreover, we promised the respondents confidentiality and anonymity (see Figure 1).

The people we interviewed were quite suspicious about the government, institutions, and researchers. It was therefore impractical to ask them to complete a written informed consent form. However, all our respondents gave verbal consent to participate in our research. We also received parental consent for participants who were between 16 and 18 years old. We anonymized all interviews to reduce any possible harm to the respondents by changing the interviewees’ names and leaving out details that could identify them. Furthermore, all participants were informed that they could contact us at any time for further questions and could terminate their participation in the research whenever they pleased. Two respondents did this.

RESULTS

Between February 2012 and July 2013, we recruited over 80 respondents.

Fifty-one of the respondents we interviewed were adolescents and young adults with extreme ideals, 33 of whom were recruited through Facebook.

The other 18 young respondents were recruited in traditional ways at demonstrations or gatherings. We also interviewed 30 parents, foster parents, and siblings whom, in general, we approached through the young respondents.

Through Facebook, we were able to recruit 19 young people with extreme Islamic beliefs, seven people who sympathized with extreme right-wing ideas, and seven people who were involved in animal activism or who supported anarchism. The age of the respondents we recruited through Facebook ranged from 16 to 31 years, with a mean age of 20.5 years. Twenty-one of these respondents were male and 12 were female.

Making Contact

When approaching a potential respondent, we usually sent one invitation message and after receiving a positive reply, one or two more messages were sent to arrange a

time and place to meet for an interview. We found that it took far fewer messages to convince people with extreme Islamic ideals to participate in the research (usually just one), and a lot more messages if we approached young people with extreme left-wing ideals.

In general, approximately four out of 10 messages were answered.

Although Facebook was very useful in helping us approach respondents with strong ideals, it did not enable us to approach all groups. Young people with extreme right-wing sympathies were, for example, difficult to find on Facebook. They seemed to prefer their own closed and anonymous community forums, such as Stormfront, rather than Facebook. When we tried to approach extreme right-wing respondents on Stormfront, all members were warned within the hour that researchers had tried to contact members. As noted in the forum, “Or maybe it was the Secret Service?” We found that Facebook is a more open medium than group forums such as Stormfront in that all layers of society and different generations use Facebook. Adolescents and young adults with left-wing ideals and (converted) young Muslims were easy to find on Facebook. One might imagine that people with extreme ideals would keep their profiles private so as not to be discovered by the police or secret services, leaving the researcher with the less extreme public Facebook profiles. Contrary to this assumption, we found that a considerable number of the people with extreme left-wing and Islamic ideals had made their Facebook profiles public.

Convincing Respondents to Participate

One extreme left-wing female respondent we were trying to convince to participate in our research refused because she had seen our LinkedIn pages and found that one of our team members used to work for the local police as an administrator. So it is important to consider your online persona when approaching respondents who do not trust you.

Furthermore, we found that Islamic young people were especially enthusiastic about participating in our research when we approached them through Facebook. Their enthusiasm was possibly driven by their desire to perform Dawah (to spread the word of Allah) but possibly also by the sincere interest that the researchers showed in their ideals. Left-wing oriented idealists, however, were easy to find but hard to convince to participate in our research. Afraid that it would be government-led research, they often refused involvement. However, in a few cases, the person was eventually persuaded to meet us after extensive messaging and chatting on Facebook. Despite the use of social media, fieldwork within radicalization research remains a long-term effort; a researcher has to be persistent.

DISCUSSION

In this article, we have shared our experiences of using Facebook as a tool for finding and approaching respondents who do not trust researchers. In keeping with Barratt et al. (2015) and Masson et al. (2013), we found that the use of social network sites can help in the recruitment of a hard-to-reach research population. A first major benefit was that Facebook profiles gave us a clear idea about people’s ideals, so we had a better notion of who to invite for interview: Facebook made a hidden population visible.

We did not use advertisement banners that are common in online fieldwork, but rather chose a personal approach. We used private messages to recruit people with extreme ideals because there exist strong privacy concerns among this population, as

having extreme ideals usually involves membership of stigmatized or illegal groups. We therefore assumed that the chances of these respondents voluntarily replying to an advertisement were small. Instead, to engage with respondents from the very beginning of the process, we contacted them personally.

[TABLE 1]

A second benefit we found was that an approach via a private Facebook message gave respondents the power to open, ignore, delete, or contemplate the request in their own time. Potential participants could then quietly consider whether they were willing to participate in an interview and they were able to leave “the field” at any time, making the approach less intrusive.

A third benefit was that the potential respondent did not have to worry about group members who might be negative about their participation in research. When the researcher approaches potential respondents during a demonstration or event, others might notice them talking to a researcher. In contrast, when he or she is approached by private Facebook message, participation is more likely to be anonymous, which is important for respondents who are distrustful of people outside their own network. However, a concern that scholars need to take into account when using Facebook for respondent recruitment is their own online persona, as every researcher is traceable on the Internet. Palys and Atchinson (2012:357) also warned that “the door to the Internet opens both ways,” so when recruiting people who are very distrustful, researchers should consider their online persona before writing to respondents.

A final possible limitation is that in cases where you are not friends on Facebook, messages are sent to the “other folder.” Potential respondents are then not signaled that they have e-mail. However, by paying \$1, you can send your message directly to someone’s inbox.

In Table 1, we have summarized some guidelines for approaching respondents who do not trust people outside of their own networks.

CONCLUSION

This study provides additional evidence that Facebook can be a facilitator in finding and approaching potential respondents who are hard to find in the off-line world because they do not trust anybody outside of their own networks.

Finding potential interviewees through relevant group pages that they “liked” on Facebook and subsequently sending them a private recruitment message through Facebook turned out to be effective. The identified guidelines may benefit the future recruitment of respondents who do not trust researchers.

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TABLE AND FIGURE

The Utrecht University is writing a book about young people and their strong ideals. We are looking for people between 15 and 30 years old who would like to share why they put themselves into action for people, animals and/or the environment, and how this has developed over time. We want to know how adolescents and young adults develop their ideals and what role (if any) parents, teachers, or friends play within this development. We are therefore looking for people who give 100% for their ideals and are not scared to proclaim their strong ideas. Do you often clash with others over ideology? Are you proud of what you stand for, no matter what your parents, teachers, or friends think? Are you an assertive activist and would you like to participate in an interview for our book (of course anonymous), send us a message!

Figure 1. Recruitment text used in our research.

Table 1. Guidelines for Approaching Respondents Who Do Not Trust You.

- Create a researchers' Facebook page in order to be transparent
- To build trust use a positive approach toward the research topic
- To build trust use a personal approach instead of an advertisement
- Show sincere interest
- Be persistent
- Researchers should be aware that their online persona is traceable on the Internet