Council of the European Union

NOTE

From:	EUROPOL
To:	Standing Committee on operational cooperation on internal security
Subject:	EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol
	- Concept note

Delegations will find in Annex a concept note on the creation of a EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol.

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EU Internet Referral Unit at Europol

Concept note

Setting the scene

Terrorist use of Internet and social media has increased dramatically over recent years. Jihadist groups in particular have shown a sophisticated understanding of how social networks operate and have launched well organised social media campaigns to recruit followers, promote or glorify acts of terrorism and violent extremism.

Recent studies have shown that within four months, more than 46.000 Twitter accounts were used by supporters of the Islamic State (ISIS)[1] and as many as 90.000 tweets and other social media responses are produced every day[2]. Some EU Member States (MS) have taken measures to reduce the abuse of the Internet by terrorists for propaganda purposes. They have created specialist police units to monitor the cyber environment, identify content suspected of having a violent extremist or terrorist nature and work closely with the industry to remove it on the basis that it breaches individual companies' user policies.

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[1]   J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census – Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter*, The Brooking Institution, No 20, March 2015. http://www,brookings.edu This is a relatively small number compared to the number of unique monthly users of twitter (310 million).

[2]   http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/world/middleeast/us-intensifies-effort-to-blunt-isis-message.html?_r=1

Given the size of the problem, its span across multiple linguistic audiences and jurisdictions, tackling this phenomenon efficiently requires the EU Member States **to pool resources and devise a coherent and coordinated European prevention strategy** to counter terrorist propaganda and ensure that Internet remains a public good, free of terrorist and violent extremist propaganda while respecting fundamental principles such as the freedom of speech.

Accordingly, on 12 March 2015 the Council of Ministers agreed that building on the Check-the-Web project, **Europol will develop an EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) by 1 July 2015 which will comprise the following four tasks:**

- To coordinate and share the identification tasks (flagging) of terrorist and violent extremist online content with relevant partners,

- To carry out and support referrals quickly, efficiently and effectively, in close cooperation with the industry,

- To support competent authorities, by providing strategic analysis and operational analysis,

- To act as a European Centre of Excellence for the above tasks.

With this document and upon the EU Presidency's request, Europol is pleased to inform the COSI about the preparatory work undertaken to create a fully operational European Internet Referral Unit by 1st July 2015. This concept will be further developed in the coming months in cooperation with Europol's Management Board (MB) and the European Commission.

Existing expertise

Europol established the Check the Web (CTW) project in 2007. In this context it has developed valuable expertise in terrorist propaganda. The CTW team is composed of linguists and counter terrorism experts covering seven languages including Arabic and Russian. They identify, flag and analyse propaganda material issued by terrorist groups online. The material is stored in a dedicated database (CTW portal) directly accessible by competent authorities of the 28 MS and containing more than 10.000 electronic documents and individuals. The resulting analysis and reports are regularly used in support of criminal investigations and judicial proceedings.

Within the framework of the European Cybercrime Center (EC3), Europol has also developed advanced technical capabilities in cyber-intelligence gathering, forensic analysis, social network and big data analysis. In addition, EC3 established good working relationships with the Internet industry through advisory groups that meet on a regular basis at Europol, together with national investigators.

Europol is taking the necessary steps to combine the expertise of both EC3 and Europol's counter terrorism unit in order to fully exploit their combined capabilities to support the Member States in their endeavour to tackle online terrorism propaganda.

Challenges of a dynamic and rapidly evolving environment

The abuse of social media by terrorist organisations is a dynamic phenomenon. Terrorists and violent extremists are implementing advanced strategies to evade preventive measures and to keep their material online. They have established networks of influential accounts across multiple social media platforms and have disseminated propaganda material through a network that is constantly reconfiguring. This creates resilience and reduces the effect of account suspension[3].

Therefore, prevention strategies such as suspending social media accounts or removing terrorist and violent extremist content need to be combined with pro-active measures. To be successful in such a rapidly evolving environment the EU IRU should not be confined to playing a "whack-a-mole" game with terrorists. It should look beyond current challenges, towards future developments and emerging social media trends and resources. In addition to helping with the suspension of individual accounts distributing terrorist propaganda, the EU IRU should have the capacity to support the Member States in challenging the core of the networks that distribute content and to limit the effectiveness of the social media strategies of terrorist and extremist groups in their efforts to radicalise and recruit vulnerable individuals.

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[3]   Jamie Bartlet, *How to beat the media Mujahideen*, Demos Quarterly.
         http://quarterly.demos.co.uk/article/issue-5/how-to-berat-the-media-mujahideen

Proposals

Against this backdrop, Europol proposes that the EU IRU implements a set of responses to terrorist's abuse of the Internet which combines both preventive - flagging and suspension - and pro-active measures; in particular dynamic intelligence gathering to inform the flagging process.

1) The EU IRU will coordinate and share the identification tasks (flagging) of terrorist and violent extremist online content with a **network of national counterparts.** Mid-April Europol will invite representatives of national IRUs and comparable units to an operational meeting to launch that network and to jointly define its standing operating procedures (SOPs). This meeting will aim at identifying their needs and discussing how Europol's existing expertise within CTW and EC3 can be best used to support their actions.

2) The EU IRU will build upon Europol's existing relations with the Internet industry to act as a **central European platform representing the European law enforcement interests**. In May, Europol will organise a meeting with representatives of social media companies and other relevant industry partners, in the framework of the Commission's Forum with the Internet service providers' community. The aim of the meeting will be to secure industry's commitments to a common public-private approach and to jointly define rules and procedures for carrying out and supporting referrals concerning breaches of individual companies' user policies.

3) **Take-downs and account suspensions need to serve a strategic purpose**, focusing on reducing the ability of the network to operate as a whole and effectively limiting the impact of propaganda on different audiences. The removal of content should therefore be based on a comprehensive assessment of the existing propaganda material disseminated and on indications about its impact on vulnerable audiences. To that end the EU IRU will support competent authorities, by providing strategic and operational analysis.

4) Research shows that social media accounts provide valuable intelligence.[4] Preventive measures should not interfere with on-going investigations. Consequently, the EU IRU will act as a **European deconfliction structure**, relying on a network of national contact points, available 24/7, with direct contact to relevant competent authorities. Response time from the network should ideally be less than a couple of hours between the publication and the suspension in order to avoid further dissemination.

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[4]   Twitter accounts often provide reliable GPS coordinates in ISIS territories, or information regarding local events which can be relevant for intelligence services.

5) Ultimately, the EU IRU should be in a position to anticipate and pre-empt terrorist abuse of social media and play a pro-active advisory role vis-à-vis Member States and the private sector. It will act as **an EU centre of excellence** with a dedicated research and analysis team, formed of practitioners from law enforcement, the academia and the private sector which will underpin this work, helping to maintain current knowledge and a dynamic online research capability. It will also organise trainings to enhance national capabilities and maintain close contacts with the Commission's Forum with the Internet service providers' community.

Budget and resources

Europol is currently assessing the requirements of the EU IRU in terms of financial and human resources. The operational meeting of the national contact points will help fine-tuning this assessment and its outcome will be discussed at the next Europol Management Board. Europol Director has already held a provisional discussion on the matter with Commissioner Avramopoulos.

Given the short time frame to set up a fully functional EU IRU, Europol invites interested **Member States to second national experts on a transitional basis** to reinforce the EU IRU as of 1 July 2015.

Way forward

Europol is looking forward to working closely with the European Commission and with the Member States in the framework of the Europol Management Board to further develop the tasks of the EU IRU as agreed by the Ministers on 12 March 2015.

The two operational meetings will provide a practitioners' perspective to the high-level meeting planned by the European Commission in the coming months.

Europol remains at the disposal of the EU Presidency to regularly report to the COSI on the progress achieved in the implementation of this project.

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