

Operation250 Case Studies

Radicalization/ Extremism

David grew up in a small town in Michigan. His parents were divorced, he struggled in school, and he often struggled to find himself friends. Not too long after entering high school, David dropped out and found a job bagging groceries.

Because of the troubles that David underwent during the early stages of his life, he lived at home with his mother and quickly lost almost all of his friends. He began to engage online more, joining discussion boards and engaging with conspiracy theories that were being pushed on these websites. As he began to make these virtual friends, they began to tell him conspiracies about the world.

Ideas of blaming all African Americans for the ills in the world, pushing the narrative that Jews were poisoning society for all of their issues, as well as promoting anti-government message were just some of the ideas that they were telling him. As David became closer to these individuals, the more influential these ideas became.

David began to no longer become a listener, but then started to promote the message himself. His online persona became a trailblazer amongst those who followed and listened to him. All of those he was friends with on Facebook, Twitter, and some of his favorite online forums all were exposed to his ideas and beliefs.

Not too long after, all these decisions and beliefs begin to culminate together to be brought offline. Locally in his town, a new police chief is appointed. This individual is African American and David, along with many of his friends online, begin to express how they feel threatened. Many of his friends begin to explain how this new appointment is a threat to David's way of life and to greater society. He then began to discuss ways of addressing this threat.

Weeks later, David called 911, requesting he have police officers to come to his home. Upon arrival of the police officers, he assaulted them as they entered his home. This involved a violent fist fight, however ended with the arrest of David once the police were able to control the situation.

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Discussion Questions

1. How might have the internet changed the process of radicalization for David?
2. Is it likely that David would have been radicalized without the internet?
3. Can you identify the poor online decisions made by David in this case?
4. What could have been done before David found himself online to avoid this outcome?