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Deal or no deal: Investigating illicit firearms trafficking on Telegram through crime scripting and social network analysis

The messaging service Telegram has become popular among criminals as a learning environment and online marketplace. Massive group chats and end-to-end encrypted secret chats enable criminals to exchange information and sell illegal goods, among which firearms, to a large audience. This study aims to investigate the process of illegal firearms trading on Telegram through the application of crime scripting and social network analysis. The Telegram data extracted from one specific smartphone belonging to one of the leaders of a criminal organisation (N = 14) involved in illicit firearms trafficking was used, which was seized during a Dutch police investigation. The user of this phone sent and received 126,589 chat messages on Telegram in total of which 119,230 messages in group chats (N = 17) and 7,359 messages in private chats (with 90 unique accounts) over the span of 377 days. This study will address several research questions. First, the study will determine the user's level of activity across the 17 group chats. The content of both group chats and private chats will be analysed to find out what topics were being discussed. Furthermore, the study will examine whether firearm trade deals were exclusively made in private chats or also within group chats. Additionally, the extent to which private chats with possible buyers or sellers arose after the user posted or responded to firearms advertisements in group chats will be explored. Lastly, the study will identify the different scenes and facets involved in the process of firearms trafficking on Telegram.

Keywords/Topics

Telegram Criminal networks Illicit firearms Crime scripting Social Network Analysis

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