



Facebook removes posts made by people smugglers aiming to lure migrants

Social media content painting a positive picture of risky Mediterranean sea crossings is removed after Guardian highlights nature of material

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Friday 25 August 2017 17.00 BST

Facebook has removed several posts made by people smugglers openly advertising to attract migrants seeking passage to Europe.

Written in Arabic, many of the posts were accompanied by videos and testimonials of what the smugglers claim are successful trips across the Mediterranean from Turkey to Greece, and from Egypt to Italy. All were written in recent months, a time of year when many people attempt the journey.



Screengrab of a video on a people smuggler's Facebook page, which shows a migrant in a lifejacket thanking him for a safe journey. Photograph: Facebook

People smugglers make about \$35bn (£27bn) a year worldwide and the industry is the main driver of migrant deaths at sea, according to the head of the International Organisation for Migration. The number of migrants who have died crossing the Mediterranean has so far reached 2,400 this year.

A spokesman for Facebook said: "People smuggling is illegal and any posts that coordinate this activity are not allowed on Facebook. We have removed all of the content that the Guardian shared with us for violating our community standards. We encourage people to use our reporting tools to flag this kind of behaviour so it can be reviewed and swiftly removed by our global team of experts, and escalated to law enforcement where required."

Facebook posts by smugglers attempt to paint a rosy picture of the service. They are often accompanied with images of large boats in calm seas or posts about "successful" trips. In one entry, a smuggler describes himself as a noble "hero", enabling people to access a better life in Europe. Another, in response to a query on the risks involved, says: "Some are worried about safety and security. You have to understand, it's in our interest to get you to your destination securely so that others will come."

The sea crossing is one of the fastest-growing black markets in the world, sparking fierce competition between smugglers whose business rests on their reputation, said Paolo Campana, a criminologist at the University of Cambridge.

"Because there is no regulation, the trust problem becomes more acute," he said. "To trust the wrong smuggler can have fatal consequences."

Campana is examining social media posts and court records of prosecutions to analyse the networks behind smuggling operations and understand how migrants choose between

them. “It is easy to enter the market, so it is competitive,” he said. “You have to advertise your services and you have to be perceived as a competent smuggler.

“What is on Facebook is just the surface. There are closed groups, which we do not have access to. If you see what is in the public domain, then there will be even more behind closed doors,” he said.

A researcher on his team, who analysed Facebook posts mainly from smugglers offering crossings to Syrians via the eastern Mediterranean route (to the Greek islands via Turkey), found evidence of smugglers offering an insurance scheme. If the initial boat was apprehended by Turkish coastguards, a second, third or fourth trip would be free. The prices varied from \$450 for a small dinghy, to \$1,500 for a “safe private yacht for families”.

Campana said he didn’t know how many crossings are negotiated on the internet, but said social media was just “one aspect” of the booming illegal trade. “In the last five years there have been 2 million illegal border crossings into the EU, including Britain. More than 95% of the journeys involved a sea crossing. And you can’t do a sea crossing without the involvement of one or more smugglers.”

Between 2014 and 2015, illegal border crossings along the eastern Mediterranean route, from Turkey to Italy and Greece, increased more than 17-fold, from about 50,000 to 885,000, although they have since dropped. On the central Mediterranean route, widely considered the most dangerous into Europe, the number of crossings has soared from more than 60,000 in 2011, to 181,000 in 2016.

Campana said the EU focus on policing and naval operations in the Mediterranean was counter-productive, but the issue was a “huge moral dilemma” for authorities.

“Naval operations are very noble; however, they have the unintended consequence of assisting the smugglers by taking the refugees off their hands very close to the Libyan coast – making the ‘product’ more attractive and, ultimately, increasing the number of journeys,” Campana said.

“This is a market driven by exponential demand, and it is that demand which should be targeted. Land-based policies such as refugee resettlement schemes are politically difficult, but might ultimately prove more fruitful in stemming the smuggling tide,” he said.

Joel Millman, a spokesman for IOM, said the organisation had come across Facebook posts from smugglers trying to use their name as an endorsement. “We have had some luck with Facebook, who have shut [posts] down on the basis they are fraudulent. But, unfortunately, they pop up again.”

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