The exploitation of digital technologies by non-state armed groups in Colombia

by Arthur Bradley and Ottavia Galuzzi

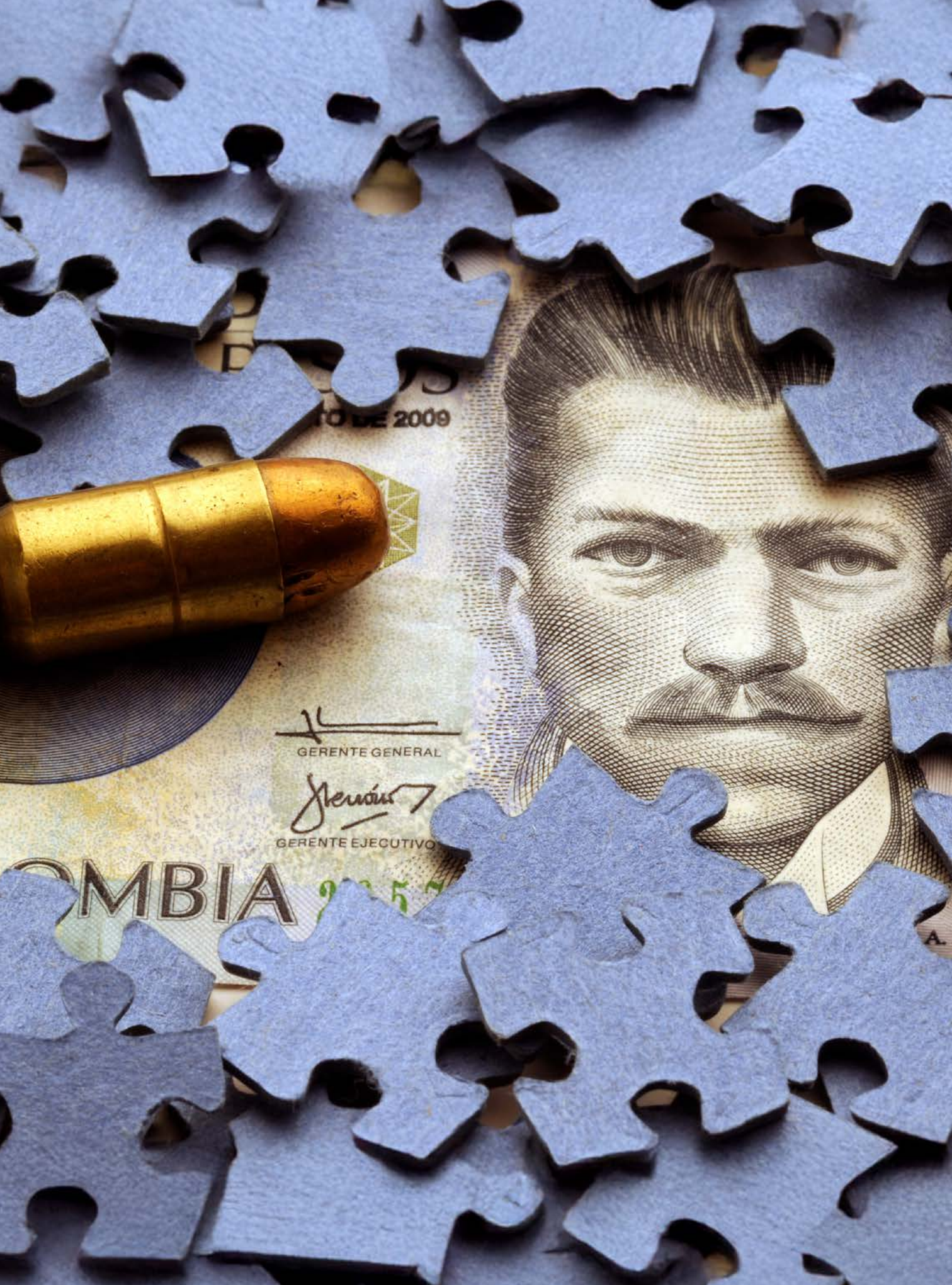
Armed non-state groups in Colombia have recently strengthened their presence through a series of attacks, the impact of which has been amplified by the widespread exploitation of digital technologies by these groups. On 21 August 2025, two separate attacks killed a total of 18 people and injured dozens of others in Colombia. In Amalfi, Antioquia, armed militants attacked a police helicopter carrying personnel overseeing the removal of coca crops, used in illicit drug production.[1] In the southwestern city of Cali, a vehicle loaded with explosives was detonated on a street near a military school.[2] Colombia's authorities attributed the Cali attack to the Estado Mayor Central, or Central General Staff (EMC), while the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), or National Liberation Army, claimed responsibility for the events in Amalfi, although the Government accused the Estado Mayor de los Bloques y Frentes (EMBF) of being responsible.[3]

Dissident factions of the FARC (FARC-D), ELN and other non-state armed groups have posed such threats to the Colombian state and its population for several decades. FARC-D denotes the dissident factions that rejected or later abandoned the 2016 peace accord, primarily split into the

1 "Two separate guerilla attacks kill 18 in Colombia", *France 24,* August 2025.

2 "Two separate guerilla attacks kill 18 in Colombia", *France 24,* August 2025.

3 United Nations Security Council, "United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia – Report of the Secretary General", September 2025.


GERENTE GENERAL
GERENTE EJECUTIVO

EMC and Segunda Marquetalia (SM); some affiliated accounts continue to use FARC-EP branding. Despite ongoing peace negotiations in the country, groups such as ELN and FARC-D are increasingly exploiting digital platforms such as TikTok and static websites to communicate externally and recruit, particularly minors.

A study published by the Colombian Organized Crime Observatory in 2022 identified 1,020 cases of child recruitment by guerrilla groups between 2017 and 2020 in all but two of the country's departments. In the first half of 2024, according to government data, 159 children were enlisted by armed groups, and 55 additional recruitment cases were recorded during the first half of 2025.[4] However, the true figures of child recruitment are likely to be significantly higher, as many families refuse to report their missing children for fear of reprisal.[5]

While child recruitment is not a new issue faced by the Government of Colombia, militant groups' increasing use of social media for this purpose has made it more difficult to counter.[6]

Abuse of digital technologies

As part of UNICRI's workstream on Cybercrime and Online Harms, UNICRI conducted research into the increasing exploitation of social media and other digital technologies by non-state armed groups in Colombia, which in recent years has coincided with a broader increase in Internet access among the general population.[7]Communications by non-state armed groups and their members have progressively shifted from paper pamphlets to digital messaging, including in private encrypted spaces such as WhatsApp and Telegram,[8] as well as in more public digital spaces like TikTok, X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Russia-based video platforms.

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The most powerful armed groups, including the ELN and the EMC, maintain an official presence on mainstream social media platforms. Broadly, the groups use these channels to share official statements, often political rather than militant in nature, to position themselves in the national debate. Messaging shared here typically aims to present the organizations as legitimate political actors, rather than violent criminals, while on platforms with younger audiences, the videos openly flaunt a narco lifestyle.[9]

The BBC reported in June 2024 that the EMC maintained a WhatsApp group with journalists, in addition to its profiles on mainstream social media.[10] There are signs that international technology companies are moderating accounts operated by non-state armed groups in Colombia,[11] although many of these accounts still remain active. Groups routinely repost identical videos across multiple hosts to outlast takedowns, while cycling handles and logos to evade automated filters.

4 Rachelle Krygier and Laura García, "The school children being lured by rebels on TikTok", BBC News, June 2024; Defensoria del Pueblo, "Reclutamiento de niñas, niños y adolescentes en Colombia durante el primer semestre de 2025", July 2025.

5 Elizabeth Dickinson, "Colombia's Stolen Children. Bogotá Must Do More to Stop Armed Groups From Recruiting Minors", Foreign Affairs, May 2025.

6 Rachelle Krygier and Laura García, "The schoolchildren being lured by rebels on TikTok", BBC News, June 2024.

7 Interview with a regionally based analyst, 2024.

8 Interview with Camilo Tamayo Gomez, University of Huddersfield, 2024.

9 Interview with a regionally based analyst, 2024.

10 Rachelle Krygier and Laura García, "The schoolchildren being lured by rebels on TikTok".

11 Luis Jamie Acosta, "Social networks clamp down on Colombian FARC dissident accounts", Reuters, January 2021.

The screengrab (Figure 1) shows a tweet posted by one of a network of accounts affiliated with the EMC's FARC-EP (EP – People's Army) on X, including video footage of armed individuals from the Jaime Martínez Front planting trees as part of what it describes as "reforestation day". The accompanying text criticizes the then upcoming United Nations Biodiversity Conference in Colombia in October 2024 as an event that it claims is "disguised as environmentalism" but "promotes militarism". Some official FARC-EP accounts identified during this research were removed by X during the analysis phase, including accounts that had been active since as early as 2022.

Figure 1.
An account on X affiliated with a dissident FARC group, captured in July 2024

WHOIS information (the standard public record of domain ownership) for a website likely affiliated with FARC-SM shows that it was created in October 2019 and is registered with a domain registrar based in the United States. Archived versions of the site suggest that it has been active for most of the five years since it was created. Open-source research indicates that FARC-SM also maintains at least three channels on Telegram and an official account on X. In addition, the group has posted videos on multiple platforms simultaneously – a tactic also used by other threat actors to maximize the digital lifespan of content in the face of removal by individual technology companies.[12]

12 Stuart Macdonald and Sean McCafferty, "Online Jihadist Propaganda Dissemination Strategies", *VOX-Pol*, March 2024.

In May 2024, for example, a video featuring Iván Márquez, FARC-SM leader widely reported as killed, though this remains unconfirmed, was shared on a FARC-linked website with links to copies on Terabox, Proton Drive, Google Drive, and WeTransfer.

The ELN has a more sophisticated and wide-reaching public online presence than the EMC or other Colombian-based groups.[13] This analytical research identified accounts affiliated with the ELN on multiple platforms, including X, Mastodon, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Internet Archive, and a network of ten websites, including those dedicated to its provincial fronts. Its radio station, Antorcha Stereo,[14] advertises affiliated pages on TikTok, Facebook, Instagram and X via its own page on Beacons.ai, an "all-in-one creator platform" designed for social media influencers.[15]

In addition to digital messaging curated online by the leadership of these non-state armed groups, their individual members also have an increasing presence on digital platforms. Multiple recent studies have found accounts run by members or supporters of dissident FARC groups, including on Facebook and TikTok.[16] It is likely that such accounts exist without leadership approval. In June 2024, a member of the EMC's Dialogue Commission told the press that the group was "trying to control" the use of social media by its members, given the associated security risks of public photos or other content, including innocuous backgrounds and image patterns, that might give away the identity and location of fighters.[17]

Searches for related keywords and hashtags on TikTok reveal multiple accounts affiliated with dissident FARC groups.

13 Interview with Camilo Tamayo Gomez, University of Huddersfield, 2024.

14 Daniel Pardo, "Antorcha Stereo, la polémica emisora de la guerrilla colombiana que se escucha en Venezuela", *BBC News Mundo*, October 2015.

15 https://beacons.ai/i/about-beacons.

16 "Colombia's guerrilla recruitment video problem", BBC Trending Podcast, June 2024.

17 Rachelle Krygier and Laura García, "The schoolchildren being lured by rebels on TikTok".

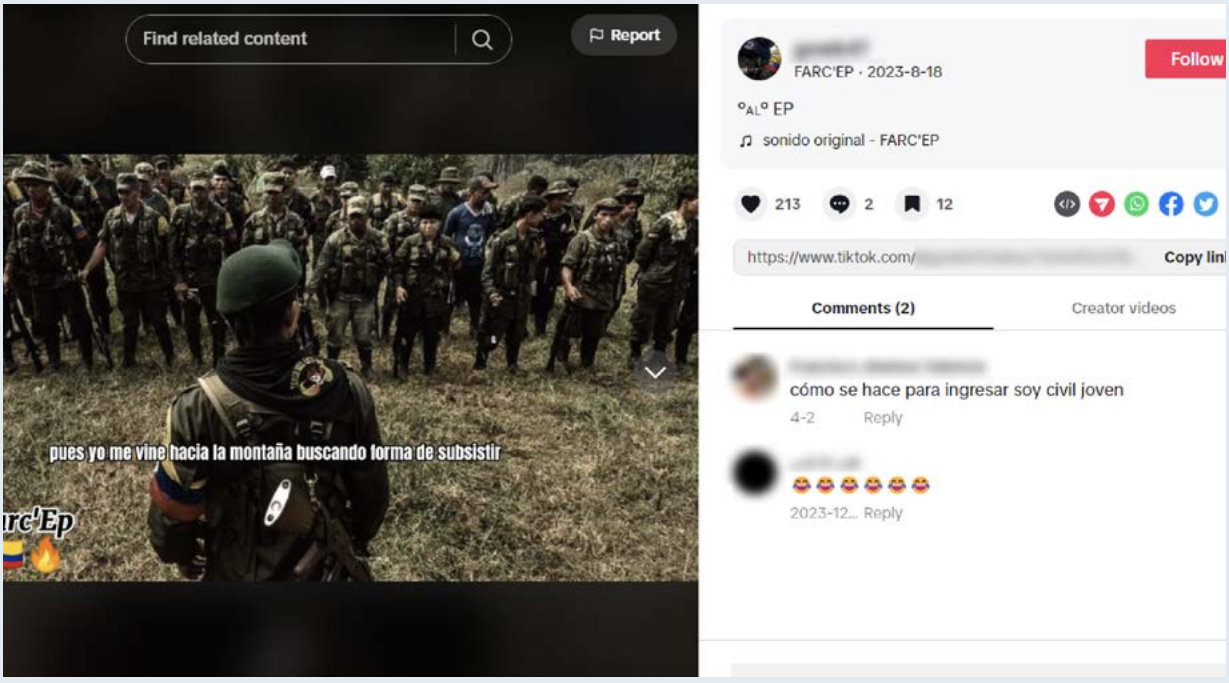

Figure 2. A TikTok account affiliated with FARC-EP, captured in July 2024.

The accounts are identifiable by their use of FARC logos and particular emojis, including the green leaf to signify the coca plant, often combined with the ninja emoji and the Colombian flag. These accounts typically promote the narco lifestyle[18] with images of firearms and fighters in the jungle. Posts are often accompanied by music associated with armed groups. Interactions in the comments with non-members, some of whom express interest in joining, suggest that such content serves as a recruitment tool on TikTok.

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There are a few indications that non-state armed groups in Colombia have the capability to exploit digital technologies for more offensive technical cyber operations. However, militants are reported to routinely harass civilians online, in particular those they allege to be government informants or allied with rival armed groups.[19] Experts interviewed as part of this brief research believed that non-state armed groups there are likely interested in expanding their cyber portfolio.[20] It is probable that higher-ranking criminals within

18 Elizabeth Dickinson, “Colombia’s Stolen Children. Bogotá Must Do More to Stop Armed Groups From Recruiting Minors”, Foreign Affairs, May 2025.

19 Interview with a regionally based analyst, 2024.

20 Interview with a regionally based analyst, 2024.

these groups are exploiting encrypted networks and cryptocurrencies, access to which can be hampered by poor Internet connectivity in rural areas. This assumption is supported by the growing use of Starlink Internet in regions with minimal state presence but significant activity by armed groups, such as remote areas of the Amazon.[21]

The use of the Internet by non-state armed groups in Colombia is indicative of broader efforts by violent actors to exploit digital technologies to further their objectives, including via propaganda, recruitment, internal communication, and financing. Such issues require cross-sector responses involving stakeholders from both the public and private sectors, including collaborative working relationships between governments and the technology sector. This is particularly important in Colombia and other countries in the Global South, where existing initiatives must be leveraged to address the challenges posed by militancy in the digital realm. The use of digital technologies by non-state armed groups, as by the general population, is an integral part of day-to-day communication and productivity, which means that neither online nor offline spaces can be studied in isolation from one another.

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Arthur Bradley is an specialist in tracking and analyzing terrorist and other malevolent use of online platforms. He provides consultancy services to the private sector, non-governmental organizations, IGOs, academia, public sector institutions, and law enforcement agencies. Prior to working independently, Arthur was the OSINT manager at Tech Against Terrorism.

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21 Interview with a regionally based analyst, 2024; "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges", *US Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs Press Release,* March 2020.

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