BABELSTREET

Using Babel Street Insights to Prevent Illegal Street Rallies

Car shows and friendly meetups are fun, social occasions for car enthusiasts. But in the past few years, they've taken a darker turn as pop-up street rallies devolve into lawless chaos.
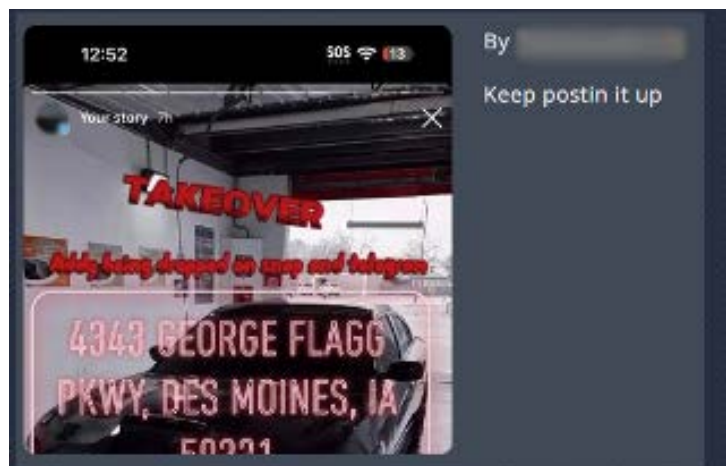
The rallies, also known as "sideshows" and "takeovers" take place in parking lots, garages, highways, and city intersections. They can involve hundreds of cars, participants, and bystanders who may also be engaged in other criminal activities involving drugs, weapons, and stolen vehicles.

In late September 2024, the Maryland Car Rally Task Force disrupted over 12 events across the Baltimore/ Washington DC metro area in a single night.[1] In another incident earlier in the month, 14 illegal firearms were seized from a teenager participating in a street rally in Prince George's county, Maryland. [2]

By their very nature, these pop-up events are difficult to predict and deterring them involves resource-intensive police patrols in known hot spots. While they're happening, designated spotters keep an eye out for police, and law enforcement officers are often greatly outnumbered and unable to control the scene. Police are in reactive mode as they respond to events only as they're occurring. Meanwhile, residents and their property can be injured, damaged, or worse.

How OSINT tools can help

Although these rallies appear spontaneous, they are planned and promoted through social media channels to followers and participants of the illegal racing scene. Using references to "Project X" [3] "takeover" and "carmeet," organizers can rapidly spread the word to followers in-the-know. They also post images of a flyer with the details on where and when the takeover will occur, often accompanied by hashtags like #takeover, #sideshow, #slideshow, and #getbackorgetsmacked.

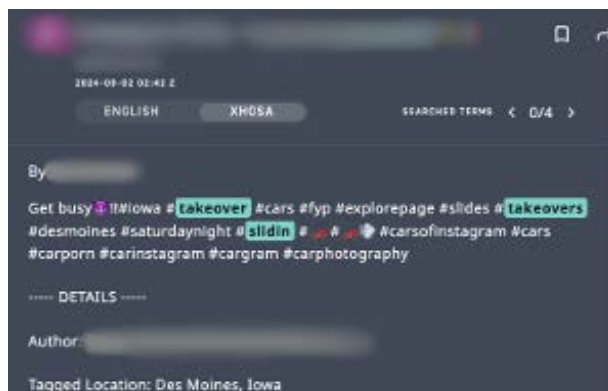*Flyer advertising a takeover location*

Law enforcement agencies with the resources and ability to follow social media channels might catch some of these references — if they are monitoring the right accounts of known organizers. But what if police don't know who's behind the rallies?

That's where an open-source intelligence (OSINT) tool like Babel Street Insights can help. In fact, one jurisdiction recently used Babel Street Insights to investigate a group that was organizing illegal car meetups that were then giving rise to more criminal activities involving drugs and weapons.

Local police started with one account name from a communication platform user known to have participated in events. With that account name, investigators were able to identify the main communication platform group where the takeover plans were being distributed. Within that group were more usernames of account holders social media platforms, leading to the discovery of a broader criminal network aligning their activities with these illegal rallies. Even people filming these illegal activities can be charged with crimes.

Video of illegal street rally

Examples of commonly used hashtags for takeover events

Disrupting these dangerous events demonstrates how law enforcement agencies can make use of OSINT tools and investigative tradecraft to yield targeted search results on criminals and their activities. In the case of street rallies, police can more precisely target takeover locations to prevent the activities from happening and can identify organizers and affiliated bad actors for further prosecution.

Endnotes

[1] Maryland State Police https://news.maryland.gov/msp/2024/10/01/maryland-car-rally-task-force-dismantles-over-twelve-unlawful-exhibition-driving-events-in-maryland-counties-saturday-night/

[2] WBAL TV, Sep 5, 2024, https://www.wbaltv.com/article/14-guns-seized-illegal-car-rally-investigation-adin-carr/62068216

[3] Philadelphia Inquirer, Sep 23, 2024, https://www.inquirer.com/crime/car-meetups-philadelphia-police-social-media-project-x-20240923.html