

Young Extremists: A Dive into Online Youth Radicalization

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International Policy Review - Policy of the Month

April 11th, 2025

Introduction

Extremism is a problem that the world has been faced with for some time, and the delicate nature of the problem is proving to be a difficult challenge for policymakers.¹ That extremists are rather adept at finding new means of recruiting individuals within their ranks should not come as a surprise. In this case, the internet has become a means of radicalizing individuals, and young people are especially vulnerable and susceptible to extremist propaganda. This brief examines youth radicalization in the online domain, providing an overview of current trends, and offering recommendations to mitigate such issues.

Background

Online radicalization is not a new phenomenon, but a longstanding issue. The internet has been used as a tool to radicalize individuals of all ages as far back as 1995, when Stormfront was founded by Don Black, an American Nazi sympathizer and member of the Ku Klux Klan.² In recent years, Europol presented that the online environment provides instruments to facilitate radicalization and the proliferation of extremist propaganda.³ To highlight the seriousness of this trend, politicians underlined the need to ensure that vulnerable young individuals are not exposed to terrorist ideologies online.⁴ Furthermore, it is essential to note that such dynamics are not characteristic of only one type of extremism.⁵

Analysis

Numerous researchers present how the internet provides a window for terrorists to radicalize young people.⁶ As such, while the internet is a space for individuals from all over the world to connect, it is far from a safe space for younger people. Indeed, there are instances where teenagers sympathized with far-right movements such as neo-Nazism and QAnon, and radicalized at a young age.⁷ As such, teenagers have not

¹ Sara Zeiger, and Joseph Gyte. "Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet." In *Handbook of Terrorism Prevention and Preparedness*, ed. Alex P. Schmid, 358–95 (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2021), 359.

² Joe Whittaker, *Online Radicalisation: What We Know* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2015), 9.

³ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024* (Publications Office of the European Union, 2024), 3.

⁴ Whittaker, *Online Radicalisation: What We Know*, 6.

⁵ Adrian Cherney et al., "Understanding Youth Radicalisation: An Analysis of Australian Data," *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 14, no. 2 (September 15, 2020): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19434472.2020.1819372>.

⁶ Europol, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024*, 8.

⁷ Jacob Ware, *The Third Generation of Online Radicalization* (George Washington University, 2023), 20-21.

only been successfully recruited, but they also participate in hating, plotting, and recruiting other individuals.⁸ Furthermore, social media has increased the speed and complexity of radicalization processes.⁹

Young people are especially vulnerable to such dynamics. Several reports and studies on the topic illustrated that radicalization is effective towards teenagers due to their search for a sense of belonging, and that adolescence is a “turbulent time for young people.”¹⁰ It is as such that researchers show how young extremists have an increased likelihood to interact with social media. The Danish Institute for International Studies presents that minors participated in 27% of IS terrorist plots in Europe over the past decade,¹¹ with a clear increase post-COVID-19. Researchers suggest that this increase is due to the fact that the time spent by adolescents online has increased as a result of the pandemic.¹² However, the internet is not the sole cause of such radicalization,¹³ instead it is mainly used to reinforce anti-social behaviour and radical mindsets,¹⁴ and to prey on people’s social isolation.¹⁵

Thus, we now turn towards social media and how it is being used to radicalize young people. In the early 2010s, platforms – such as Facebook and Twitter – took less stringent actions regarding content removal.¹⁶ Consequently, this allowed extremists to actively spread their content online and reach greater audiences.¹⁷ However, developments regarding both public and private policies have made it harder to use open platforms such as Twitter and Facebook for radicalization purposes. Nonetheless, this also entails that extremism now proliferates in other parts of the internet. For example, alt-right groups skew younger than other far-right groups and are popular on websites such as Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan.¹⁸ YouTube is also used as a tool to spread extreme ideas, with channels having seen increased content creation and user

⁸ Farah Pandit, “Teen terrorism inspired by social media is on the rise. Here’s what we need to do,” *NBC News*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/teen-terrorism-inspired-social-media-rise-here-s-what-we-ncna1261307>.

⁹ Zeiger and Gyte, “Prevention of Radicalization on Social Media and the Internet,” 360.

¹⁰ Guillaume Bronsard, Adrian Cherney, and Floris Vermeulen, “Editorial: Radicalization Among Adolescents,” *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.917557>.

¹¹ Danish Institute for International Studies, “Europe’s Teenage Jihadists,” DIIS, January 29, 2025, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/europes-teenage-jihadists>.

¹² Danish Institute for International Studies, “Europe’s Teenage Jihadists.”

¹³ Cherney et al., “Understanding Youth Radicalisation: An Analysis of Australian Data.”

¹⁴ Jens F. Binder and Jonathan Kenyon, “Terrorism and the Internet: How Dangerous Is Online Radicalization?,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.997390>.

¹⁵ Matteo Vergani et al., “The Three Ps of Radicalization: Push, Pull and Personal. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence About Radicalization Into Violent Extremism,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 43, no. 10 (2018): 862, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2018.1505686>.

¹⁶ Whittaker, *Online Radicalisation: What We Know*, 14.

¹⁷ Whittaker, *Online Radicalisation: What We Know*, 14.

¹⁸ Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., ‘Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube’, in *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAT* ’20: Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency: ACM, 2020)*: 132, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372879>.

engagement.¹⁹ Moreover, messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram are also used to interact with interested parties and sympathizers, which helps to build relationships that are then further embedded into extremist networks.²⁰ Lastly, research shows that such extremist communities fulfill certain identity and relational needs that prone individuals might have.²¹ Therefore, young individuals – especially those whose relational needs are not fulfilled – can easily fall prey to radicalization efforts. This is rather important because it demonstrates how easily accessible various radicalizing instruments are. As young, vulnerable, and often socially alienated people – the targets – spend a high amount of time on the internet, it provides terrorists with an exploitable gap, which leads to grave repercussions.

Policy Solutions

As previously mentioned, the online landscape has changed in recent years due to regulations at both the private and public levels. Regarding the private sector, various companies and platforms have undertaken to remove content that can be flagged as affiliated with terrorism.²² To add, the European Union adopted Regulation 2021/784, which targets the dissemination of terrorist content online, and demands that platforms address this issue and ensure the “removal of or disabling of access to such content.”²³ Beyond Regulation 2021/784, the EU adds an additional layer of protection through the adoption of the Digital Services Act, which states that providers of “very large online platforms shall put in place [...] effective mitigation measures [...] related to specific types of illegal content.”²⁴ Moreover, the EU also instituted its Counter-Terrorism Strategy in order to address issues related to radicalization. Yet while the EU is the main forum for collaborating on issues related to terrorism, crime, and security are still a member state's competence. Nonetheless, there is a need for a multi-faceted response on lower levels of government in order to mitigate the issue of youth radicalization, and the question of whether a supra-national approach is enough still remains.

One issue posed by repressing radicalizing content is that it could backfire. This means that

¹⁹ Ribeiro et al., ‘Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube,’ 135

²⁰ Laura Wakeford and Laura Smith, “Islamic State’s Propaganda and Social Media: Dissemination, Support, and Resilience,” in *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, ed. Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd, and Travis g. Coan (Oxford University Press, 2019): 167, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190932459.003.0006>.

²¹ Wakeford and Smith, “Islamic State’s Propaganda and Social Media: Dissemination, Support, and Resilience,” 167.

²² Whittaker, *Online Radicalisation: What We Know*, 14.

²³ ‘Regulation 2021/784 of the European Parliament and of the Council on Addressing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online’, 29 April 2021.

²⁴ “Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a Single Market for Digital Services and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC” (2022).

repression can reinforce the narrative of *us against all* that radicalists often advance. Secondly, such actions drive groups to other, more private platforms such as Telegram. While restricting extremist groups' access to greater audiences through open platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is a positive outcome, this implies that groups will turn towards smaller platforms with stronger privacy policies. This is especially true of Telegram, whose end-to-end encryption makes it harder for experts and platform owners to regulate.²⁵ In this case, the public and the private sector should seek to increase their cooperation by devising plans for counter-narratives that target radicalization narratives and motives. However, this is also a rather delicate problem. For example, in the case of IS-affiliated radicalization, institutions tasked with creating counter-narratives run the risk of appearing hypocritical and ignorant if they attack the theological ideology that lies at the core of IS identity.²⁶

Additionally, strategies to prevent further radicalization should not be focused on promoting an alternative system, such as democratic values and norms.²⁷ Yet that can also be applied to other extremist groups, such as those of the extreme right, seeing that wrongly-placed narratives can reinforce in-group narratives and meaning. Instead, narratives should seek to deconstruct the systems that give meaning to such groupings and consequently radicalize youth. This can happen through strategic communication campaigns that emphasize the destruction and suffering caused by the actions of extremists and violent terrorist groupings. For example, the *Extreme Dialogue* initiative by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue seeks to reach out to both young individuals and educators by telling first-hand stories of “former extremists and survivors of violence,”²⁸ including witnesses such as former far-right extremists, former Islamist group members, as well as family of victims, and citizens formerly targeted by radical groups.²⁹ The Institute claims that such an approach provides a direct challenge to online extremist propaganda, and that it highlights the “profound impacts of extremism on people’s lives.”³⁰

Another way to prevent or help de-radicalize young individuals is through efforts of community building. In order to do this, interaction between de-radicalized individuals and other young people at risk of radicalization is crucial. Moreover, by presenting successful stories of de-radicalized individuals, minors

²⁵ Tobias Borck and Jonathan Githens-Mazer, “Countering Islamic State’s Propaganda: Challenges and Opportunities,” in *ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message*, ed. Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd, and Travis G. Coan (Oxford University Press, 2019): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190932459.003.0008>.

²⁶ Borck and Githens-Mazer, “Countering Islamic State’s Propaganda: Challenges and Opportunities,” 232-233.

²⁷ Borck and Githens-Mazer, “Countering Islamic State’s Propaganda: Challenges and Opportunities,” 232.

²⁸ “Extreme Dialogue,” ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue), accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.isdglobal.org/extreme-dialogue/>.

²⁹ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Extreme Dialogue.”

³⁰ Institute for Strategic Dialogue, “Extreme Dialogue.”

can understand the dangers associated with online radicalizing media, as well as how certain actions and affiliations can affect them and those around them. As such, it is imperative to integrate people who are undergoing the two aforementioned processes: radicalization and de-radicalization. One potential example that can be followed is that of the *Against Violent Extremist network*, an initiative that provides a venue for connection between former radicalized individuals.³¹ A report by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue shows that direct engagement programs are an important part in the de-radicalization effort.³² The report also mentions that such programs also often include former extremists as intervention providers. As such, having a concerted effort – including the government, civil society and former extremists – aimed at creating communities around radicalized individuals can be an effective counter-radicalization strategy. Ultimately, this could also ensure that the relational needs of young, alienated people are fulfilled, due to the social character of this community-building effort. Nonetheless, there is a question of whether parties involved – both radicalized and de-radicalized – are willing to cooperate. Consequently, due to the delicate nature of the matter, it should also be ensured that all the parties concerned are protected from groups and entities that could pose dangers to efforts of community building.

Lastly, more efforts should be made to solve the issues related to the target audience: the young generation. That is, young individuals need to better understand the dynamic online environment that they are engaging with, as well as the dangers associated with it. This can only be done by increasing media literacy among members of the younger generations. This can be done through national campaigns aimed at providing a better understanding of the issue of online radicalization, as well as, through cooperation with educational institutions and online media experts. Moreover, specialized training should also be provided to educational institutions and parents. This can take place through providing training on the topic of extremist radicalization, focusing on early signs and guides on how to deal with online radicalization. For example, Finland can be seen as a success story regarding media education. Recognising the need for media literacy through its national strategy, Finland seeks to promote media skills and literacy through education and a multidisciplinary curriculum.³³ As such, government organs – such as the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the National Agency for Education – allocate resources and guidance, as well as tools for media education for teachers.³⁴ Subsequently, the focus of such national policies should be put on vulnerable

³¹ “Against Violent Extremism,” ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, February 20, 2023), <https://www.isdglobal.org/against-violent-extremism-ave/>.

³² Jacob Davey, Jonathan Birdwell, and Rebecca Skellett, “Counter Conversation: A Model for Direct Engagement with Individuals Showing Signs of Radicalisation Online” (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2018), 5-6.

³³ European Commission, “6.8 Media Literacy and Safe Use of New Media,” Youth Wiki, November 28, 2023, <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/finland/68-media-literacy-and-safe-use-of-new-media>.

³⁴ European Commission, “6.8 Media Literacy and Safe Use of New Media.”

demographics, such as persons coming from certain socio-economic circumstances and areas at risk.

Conclusion

The issue of online youth radicalization is a delicate problem that requires a multifaceted effort. As such, preventing young people from radicalizing should be a top priority. Therefore, public-private cooperation strategies must be employed that aim to counter extremist narratives and propaganda by dismantling the very system of meaning behind them. Moreover, efforts of community-building are an opportunity to present the dangers of radicalization, while emphasizing successful deradicalization stories through interaction. At the same time, this will also fulfill certain relational needs of socially alienated youth. Lastly, this should be done hand-in-hand with increased media education for young people, educators, and parents, while taking into account vulnerable demographics.

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