

# Social Media and the Radicalization of Youth in the Digital Age

## *A survey of the research literature*

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### SUMMARY REPORT OF A UNESCO ONGOING PROJECT

Does social media lead vulnerable individuals to resort to violence? Many people believe it does. And they respond with online censorship, surveillance and counter-speech. But what do we really know about the Internet as a cause, and what do we know about the impact of these reactions?

All over the world, governments and Internet companies are making decisions on the basis of assumptions about the causes and remedies to violent attacks. The challenge is for analysis and responses to be firmly grounded. The need is for policy that is constructed on the basis of facts and evidence, and not founded on hunches - or driven by panic and fearmongering.

It is in this context that UNESCO has commissioned the study titled *Social Media and Radicalization of Youth in the Digital Age*. This work provides a global mapping of research (mainly during 2012-16) into the assumed roles played by social media in violent radicalization processes, especially as they affect youth and women.

The research responds to the belief that the Internet at large is often claimed to be an active vector for violent radicalization that facilitates the proliferation of violent extremist ideologies. It finds research showing that protagonists are indeed heavily spread throughout the Internet. There is a growing body of knowledge about how terrorists use cyberspace. Less clear, however, is the impact of this use, and even more opaque is the extent to which counter-measures are helping to promote peaceful alternatives.

To assess what research says about these matters, the study examined numerous studies relevant to the processes of digital radicalization, the potential effects of social media, and the impact of counter measures. More than 550 published studies from scientific and "grey literature" were assessed, covering English (260), French (196) and Arabic (96) languages. Responding to the unique set of social media in China, studies in Chinese were also assessed.

The study concludes that research is still at a budding stage, and it urges caution about the results and their interpretations. It further confirms a recent UN observation that "The role of the Internet in the radicalization of vulnerable individuals to commit acts of violence, along with other factors, needs further research".<sup>1</sup>

The case for upscaled and improved research is strong. Major issues are at stake – not only the basic right of people to be free from the threat of violence, but also the key freedoms of expression, privacy, and participation which can become victims of counter-measures.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee. 2017. Comprehensive international framework to counter terrorist narratives. UN Security Council S/2017/375

In the absence of knowledge derived from quality research, it follows that policy will be condemned to be reactive and assumption-driven. If stakeholders are to properly address – and avoid exacerbating – the wider problem of violent radicalization and the role of the Internet therein, a big research push will be needed.

## DEFINITIONS AND APPROACHES

While there is no consensus definition, broadly speaking “radicalization” refers to a process in which individuals are moved towards beliefs deemed “extreme” by the status quo. Not all processes of radicalization, however, have acts of violence as either their goal or their outcome. However, the UN’s concern is with those radicalization processes which intentionally result in violence, and particularly when that violence is terroristic in targeting civilians.

Communications, along with events and how individuals interpret their life experiences, play a part in radicalization processes. Yet distinctions can and need to be made between communications that may be perceived as “extreme”, but which do not rise to the level of constituting criminal incitement or recruitment, and those which advocate for violent acts to be committed.

Although scholars emphasize different aspects when discussing these issues, there are three main recurring characteristics in the way that they conceptualize violent radicalization. In this sense for this study, the concept of radicalization covers an observable process involving:

- The individual person’s search for fundamental meaning, origin and return to a root ideology;
- A group’s adoption of a violent form of protest and expansion of root ideologies and related oppositional objectives;
- The polarization of the social space and the collective construction of a threatened ideal “us” against “them”, where the others are dehumanized by a process of scapegoating.

→ In relation to the digital features of social media (especially virality, ubiquity and anonymity), these three levels are especially visible. This is evident in the dissemination of propaganda for violence, the representation of violent identity in the media and social media, as well as mutual polarization and “othering” (portraying certain people as fundamentally different or alien).

### Study finding about this recent research field

- Online radicalization is very under-researched
- Most of the reviewed academic studies and grey literature reports remain predominantly descriptive
- Empirical data are of low methodological quality, small-scale and rely on limited data sets. Violent radicalization is mostly examined either in traditional ways (modes of recruitment, types of actions) or in terms of outreach capacity (focus on affinities, group identity).

## Paradigms

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Two major schools of theory can be discerned in the way that scholars approach the reception of Internet and social media. These schools largely originate in pre-digital media, but are applied (usually implicitly) to the Internet era.

The *effects-based school* perceives the Internet and social media as highly powerful means of communication and propaganda that over-determine other communication tools and processes. Social media are seen as highly effective drivers of propaganda, conspiracy theories and the rise of extremism through de-sensitization which leads to individuals accepting the use of violence.

The *uses-based school* sheds doubts on the structuring effects of social media by empirically identifying only indirect and limited effects. In this paradigm, the role of social media in violent radicalization and extremism constitutes a reflection of real offline social ruptures.

Between these two approaches are various other perspectives dealing with issues such as agenda-setting, framing, narratives, ideology, and identity-construction. Much research into radicalization neglects to recognize – let alone critically interrogate – such binary polarization. The result is that much research misses the potential of qualitative and quantitative approaches that integrate cognition and socialization theories.

This further compounds the lack of applied theory in the form of empirical evidence. In turn, the lack of data renders many studies as being more than normative statements than new knowledge. Where studies are grounded on explicit theory, rigorous research methodology, and actual findings, there is often inappropriate generalization of the significance. Besides, getting access to classified information or data generated by the social media is very difficult for researchers who want to carry deep and longitudinal studies as governments and Internet platforms are generally reluctant to share, and there are also ethical issues raised when dealing with young people under 18.

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## MAIN CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

- The literature reviewed in the study provides no definitive evidence on a direct link between the specificities of social media and violent radicalization outcomes on youth. Likewise, there is no definitive evidence about the impact of counter-measures.
- More is known about terrorist uses of the social media, while very little has been done in relation to researching the reception by users, specifically young people.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, the literature that was assessed points towards some possible understandings:

- Rather than being initiators or causes of violent behaviors, the Internet and social media specifically can be facilitators of radicalization. Internet's role seems more specifically one of decision-shaping rather than decision-making.
- Social media can facilitate youth access to Content, Contact and Conduct (the 3Cs) through the creation of an environment of like-minded people constituted in opposition to an "Other".
- Actual violent radicalization entails the mediation of several complex processes, including more complex social-psychological processes and person-to-person

communication in conjunction with other offline factors (feeling of injustice, alienation, anomie, poverty...).

- The online representation of women and the constructions of masculinity in radicalization are evolving.
- All these factors seem to be correlated, but direct causation is hard to pinpoint.

#### **Other pointers from the literature:**

- Social media should not be considered separately from other media and from other factors linked with offline conditions, even though online and offline dimensions become increasingly porous for young users.
- Social media have become a means of communication and information for violent extremists. Their modes of production, mediatization and dissemination are often sophisticated in terms of manipulation mechanisms. Their main uses are related to propaganda, recruitment and fundraising.
- Social media have digital characteristics (volume, speed, multimedia interactivity, horizontality, decentralization, cheapness, anonymity, global audience across time and space) that offer significant advantages to extremist groups that may otherwise have stayed marginal in terms of communication means. These channels can assist networks of recruiters, working horizontally, in all the countries they target due to the transborder nature of the Internet, unbound by national jurisdictions.

#### **The literature shows that violent extremists use other characteristics of social media to:**

- Create appealing, interactive user-friendly platforms to attract younger audiences.
- Offer spaces where groups can maintain secret but highly participative communication modes.
- Disseminate extremist, violent and criminal content, which would not be easily circulated offline.
- Identify potential participants and provide them with information about 'the cause' and the groups involved in defending it.
- Deliver massive publicity for acts of violence so as to enhance a perception of strength.
- Produce false information using the fact that all types of information on the Internet can be displayed on an equal footing, which can provide an illusion of credibility and legitimacy to extremist narratives.
- Exploit confirmation biases (which confirm and amplify people's previous opinions), reinforce filter bubbles, and aid the co-option or discounting of information that contradicts the narrative.
- Further the process of radicalization post-recruitment, by gathering data and planning attacks.
- Establish a 24-hour intimate communication that aims at developing relations of complicity and friendship.
- Foster one-on-one dialogue with young people, so as to isolate the young person at-risk and gradually induct him or her into a new community, where the violent ideology creates strong interpersonal bonds.
- Weaken offline social ties and replace with online or new offline ties from the violent extremist group to shape conceptions and inhibit disengagement.

*Caveat: It is important to keep in mind that social media with relatively open public interfaces exist alongside social messaging to closed social groups, sometimes also covered by encryption. Therefore, it would be a mistake to take a social-media-centric point of view*

*exclusively, and to overlook the likelihood that inasmuch as these online communications can contribute to radicalization, other communications are likely to be occurring in private small group communications, as well as via one-to-one messaging or email. However, these realms were not covered in this study.*

## CHALLENGES RAISED BY THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature has significance in several spheres:

### **Media and social media:**

- News and entertainment media risk propagating alarmist reports and political exploitation of radicalization, with disproportionate attention given to social media as an explanation to the detriment of other explanations (religious strife, alienation, geopolitics of terror, racism and segregation, youth unemployment...).
- The alarmist representation and diffusion of violent radicalization can lead to politics of fear and of fear-mongering by various interested parties, and create a chilling effect on dissent and critical expression.
- The spread of stereotypes transforms the “other” into an enemy and can affect the way minorities are viewed and view themselves.

### **Politics and law:**

States and social media platforms operate a series of counter-measures ranging from censorship to counter-narratives and education strategies.

- There are questions about strategies like censorship on the Internet such as blocking of access and filtering content. There is no clear evidence about the effectiveness of censorship as the counter-measure of choice. The impact of online surveillance on radicalization is a more complicated matter and is barely covered in the literature.
- Pro-active strategies tend to take two major forms: online counter- and alternative narratives, and grassroots anti-propaganda initiatives, offline and online. There seems to be a developing trend for online counter-measures that are context-sensitive and challenge extremist representations, claims and hate speeches. There is less evidence that there are alternative narratives that acknowledge genuine feelings of powerlessness and alienation, and which propose non-violent ways to address grievances. It is rare to find references concerning the issues of preserving the independence of civil society and media in regard to multi-stakeholder engagement in countering radicalization narratives.
- Education-centered solutions show few initiatives that have been documented and assessed for their efficacy. Many Media and Information Literacy (MIL) resources designed to be used by teachers in a classroom setting are focused on critical thinking, on debunking plot theory, “fake news” and rumors; and on extolling fact-checking. But their impact in terms of reducing risks of online violent radicalization is still not clear.

### **Academia and think tanks:**

The studies surveyed highlight that there are challenges, and opportunities, to:

- Raise the capacity of researchers to engage with theory and empirical research through courses, conferences and peer-reviewed publications.

- Include more inter-disciplinary collaboration, with joint projects between researchers who draw on different traditions of scholarship and operate in different contexts.
- Continue updating and sharing the mapping exercise of this study, and develop an effective online presence of researchers.
- Examine more precisely the distinctions, and interrelations, between different communications platforms (TV and newspapers – offline and online; social media channels; social messaging channels; private messaging), and the links between these and communications in homes, educational and religious institutions, workplaces, prisons and direct peer-to-peer networks.
- Consider a possible basis for producing a taxonomy of violent radicalization factors and risk and protection indicators to be used for early prevention.
- Revisit critically research on propaganda and effects theory as well as research based on uses and gratifications, and subsequent paradigms, and their applicability to radicalization in the digital age.
- Develop research partnerships to accompany programs on pro-active radicalization prevention and deterrence, including research into actors seeking to reduce stereotyping and minority anxiety, and to increase tolerance, reconciliation, and conflict resolution.
- Conduct research into the impact of censorship and surveillance as counter-steps to online radicalization efforts.
- Provide more attention to the gender dimensions of representations and uses of the Internet in relation to radicalization processes.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON ASSESSING THE RESEARCH LITERATURE

### General recommendations

- Violent radicalization of youth needs to be taken as a complex process, in which social media are not separated from other communication platforms, and from various offline factors.
- While reception of online radicalization efforts is still under-researched, the activities and uses of social media by terrorists are well known. Research confirms that many of these uses are meant to foster fear among Internet users in general, in addition to ambitions to recruit or incite individuals to join their cause and engage in violence.
- Attempts to combat Internet dimensions of the violent radicalization of youth do not have proven efficacy, but it is clear that they can damage online freedoms, especially freedom of expression, freedom of information, privacy and the right to association.
- More clearly theorized and evidence-based results are needed concerning both radicalization processes online and the outcomes of online prevention and policy measures.

### Recommendations for States to consider

- Foster positive measures to counter radicalization with a combination of strategies that range from awareness raising to global citizenship education and social dialogue, while not neglecting safety and strategic intelligence.
- Start a global dialogue about proportionate positive actions to counter radicalization. Place it within the remit of UNESCO's Internet Universality Principles (Rights, Openness, Accessibility, and Multistakeholder participation), which they promote a human rights-based approach and keep perspective on the overwhelming benefits of the Internet at the same time as mitigating abuses aimed at radicalization.
- Promote and evaluate MIL strategies to build critical thinking and debunk violent rhetoric, and strengthen the right to information and freedom of expression, online and offline, so as to empower young people to be masters of their own identity and to detect and resist radicalization online.
- Train teachers and youth mediators via one or several Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) dealing with online dimensions of radicalization, in partnership with the Global Alliance for Partnerships in MIL (GAPMIL), so as to develop materials and resources, and to research the impact of initiatives.
- Mobilize all actors about the changing status of women as both actors in, and targets of, online radicalization for violence. Support more women researchers and young researchers to engage in investigating and countering the trends.
- Support research institutions and scholars to study online violent radicalization, in wider context of other dimensions, at greater scale and quality.

**Recommendations for the private sector, Internet intermediaries and social media to consider**

- Sensitize news media online and offline to avoid pitfalls of fearmongering, stereotyping, confirmation bias, fake news and the creation of “media panics”, and to reassert the worth of media ethics in the face of conflict-sensitive coverage of radicalization of young people.
- Evolve social media guidelines of Rights and Responsibilities and Terms of Service in a consultative manner so as to ensure a legal and proportionate basis for action, especially in relation to governments or other third party pressures for tracking, disclosing or sharing information about young users.
- Define and manage expressions of hate speech without compromising to rights to freedom of expression, drawing upon the principles set out in the Rabat Plan of Action by the UN High Commission on Human Rights.
- Elaborate guidelines that do not lump together violent radicalization representations with other issues such as pornographic and graphic content, and gratuitous violence.

**Recommendations for civil society and Internet users to consider**

- Increase efforts of civil society organizations to work in spaces that can make young people more vulnerable to being radicalized online, i.e. work in spaces such as schools and universities, places of worship, workplaces, community spaces and prisons.
- Strengthen the online presence of youth and family associations and provide for evaluation of their work in the fight against the indoctrination of young people for violent actions.
- Foster both counter and alternative narratives to extremist discourses and representations, and promote literacies that favor non-violent conflict resolution and cultures of peace.