

HOW IMPORTANT ARE ONLINE SPACES TO RADICALISATION?

Summary of Key Findings

- ✦ Online spaces are important in radicalisation trajectories and encounters with radical content are perceived as such by individuals in radical milieus.
- ✦ Online spaces are sites for active information seeking, prompted by a sense that offline sources are insufficient or untrustworthy.
- ✦ Online spaces are sites of belonging, used to connect with likeminded individuals and seek community and friendship, leading to encounters with radical content.
- ✦ Online spaces are valued as sites of freer expression, but their limitations are acknowledged in the context of increasing restrictions and surveillance.
- ✦ Online content contributes to a sense of injustice or victimhood. Emotionally provocative videos are popular and international issues are used to illustrate strong narratives of global injustice.
- ✦ The study of radicalisation in online spaces illuminates understanding of radicalisation experiences in offline lives and vice versa.
- ✦ Our findings reinforce the importance of researching radicalisation, including online radicalisation, in context.

The DARE Research

This research briefing is based on qualitative data collected as part of the DARE (Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality) project. The project focuses on young people (loosely defined as those aged between 15 and 30 years) and on two strands of extremism, which we refer to as 'Islamist' extremism (ISE) and 'right-wing' extremism (RWE).

The DARE project uses a mixed-methods approach and has multiple research strands. In this research briefing, data are drawn from:

- 19 milieu-based ethnographic case studies (10 of ISE milieus, 9 of RWE milieus) in 12 countries including just under 400 semi-structured interviews;
- 7 country level online studies of Twitter profiles drawing on just under 600 Twitter accounts.

We cannot do justice to the complexity and contentious nature of many terms used in

this briefing. For brief conceptual definitions, see: <http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html>. For critical discussion and contextualisation of these terms, please consult the individual research reports: <http://www.dare-h2020.org/research-reports.html>



Further information on the project and participating institutions can be found at the end of this briefing.

The problem of online radicalisation

The internet and social media have been implicated in a number of cases of ISE and RWE, raising questions about the role of online spaces in radicalisation. Many studies collect and analyse extremist content online or quantify observable interactions such as 'likes' or 'shares', but few studies link these to offline lives. Tracing online content and behaviour alone, however, does not provide an in-depth understanding of the meaning of such media practices nor their role in individual trajectories of radicalisation. Overestimating the impact of online behaviour also risks ignoring the role of offline experiences, relationships and pre-held attitudes in radicalisation trajectories.

Are online spaces important to radicalisation?

We find that online spaces are significant to both types of radicalisation. Individuals we spoke to encountered radical content online, whether they actively sought it or not, and many participated in online RWE or ISE milieus. There is much variation between individuals and case studies, but a number of individuals understand online participation or online content as crucial to their ideological journey. For some, online spaces act as entry points into radical milieus.

ADRIAN AND ROMAIN (FRANCE, ISE)

Adrian and Romain are both in their early twenties and were in prison on terrorism related charges at the time of interview. About his radicalisation, Adrian says, *'This whole stage [of radicalisation] happened on the internet, there was no one who guided me. It happened in a really isolated way; just me and the internet... During that time, I learned about religion on the internet'*. Similarly, Romain, who affiliates with the Islamic State, tells us, *'I've never been to a mosque and I've never spoken with imams... But the internet is a way to connect with scholars... Online, if you follow the Qur'an and the Sunna, you can't go wrong... That's the source'*.

It is not only RWE content for those in RWE milieus and ISE content for those in ISE milieus that contributes to ideological development. Sometimes online encounters with graphic material from the opposite extremist milieu help shape negative views and a sense of cultural and physical threat.

Individuals in radical milieus are also aware of a huge volume of radical content available online and feel encountering it is unavoidable. Online spaces are not only significant in individuals' radicalisation trajectories but are understood as such when speaking about others. Many know of someone who has been influenced by extremism online and recognise the potential of online spaces to provide harmful or untrustworthy content.



How are online spaces important to radicalisation?

We find that online spaces are significant sites of/for:



Online spaces as sites of information seeking

Social media, alternative news sites, blogs and other online spaces are described as providing a wealth of resources for active information seeking. This includes information about issues and movements in which individuals are interested, about news and current events, or in the case of ISE, about Islam and conflict in the Middle East. The internet also provides individuals and groups with access to know-how in terms of political tactics, techniques and strategies. Occasionally individuals are approached by recruiters online, but, more often, online spaces are arenas for them to actively seek information. In the German ISE case study, those who actively searched for spiritual insights or knowledge about Islam tended to be more aligned with neo-Salafism than those who had incidentally encountered content.

Online spaces are understood as arenas where alternative information can be accessed. In one respondent's words, *'the internet presented me with thinkers that you couldn't find elsewhere'* (Bobby, France, RWE). In this sense, information seeking online was often prompted by a sense that offline sources were insufficient or untrustworthy. In the RWE case, traditional media outlets or political leaders are viewed as failing to provide information about happenings, events or ideas discussed online. This is accompanied by a broad sense of mistrust in offline media and in government.

DANIEL (MALTA, RWE)

Like all of the respondents in the Malta RWE case, Daniel has completely lost faith in mainstream political parties. He points to the fact that both main parties owned their own television stations, radio stations and newspapers. This control over information and ideas is of particular importance to him:

'Apart from "political party media" dominating the news outlets, it's the same with the mainstream newspapers – they all have their own political agenda. But thank God, the internet is a tool which, up till now, they still haven't managed to control (...) When it comes to social media I use everything, but mostly Facebook, because you know (...) That's the platform where ideas and news are really discussed with least restrictions.'

SAID (RUSSIA, ISE)

Said says he is against extremist activity but admits *'in some matters, I can be radical'*. He prefers religious content available online because it is more international than that available locally:

'I liked people like Khalid Yasin and Ahmad Didat more [than local preachers], one is an American, the other is from South Africa. Well, I often watched YouTube videos of Ahmad Didat and Khalid Yasin, they present everything in a more interesting way, it's more understandable for me.'

In the ISE case, individuals feel constrained by the limited range of perspectives and interpretations of Islam provided by their parents or by local religious institutions. More radical interpretations of Islam are more readily available online. Many young people are rejecting institutionalised religious teaching or that of older generations in favour of online preachers or 'scholars' who preach Salafism. For some this speaks to a broader desire to challenge the status quo. Others imbue individual religiosity with greater meaning, or have their first deep contact with Islam online.

This active process of searching, prompted by pre-held curiosity or concern, can sometimes lead to eye-opening 'discoveries' that significantly contribute to ideological development.

CASINO (FRANCE, RWE)

One of Casino's family members was assaulted by a migrant from North Africa and this, combined with hearing about terrorist attacks in France, affected him. As he began to develop Islamophobic attitudes and a serious opposition to multiculturalism, he turned to the internet:

'Anyway. I started to analyse things, I saw that we're being manipulated, they're not telling us everything, we're being lied to and taken for idiots... Basically lots of things, stuff like that, left and right, and I started watching videos, people who analyse things... on YouTube.'

The internet is sometimes seen as more independent and therefore a more trustworthy source. While information provided in mainstream media is limited and curated, online information is sometimes seen as boundless, unfiltered and more up to date.

ESPEN (NORWAY, RWE)

Espen is a member of the anti-immigration Independence Party (ShP). He started his 'political awakening' when he was in junior high school, using Facebook in particular. He became concerned about immigration and encountered groups like the 'Norwegian Defence League' online before becoming involved in gaming communities. He describes the internet as having been very important to his ideological development, and says that even now the online forum 4Chan is an important source of information for him:

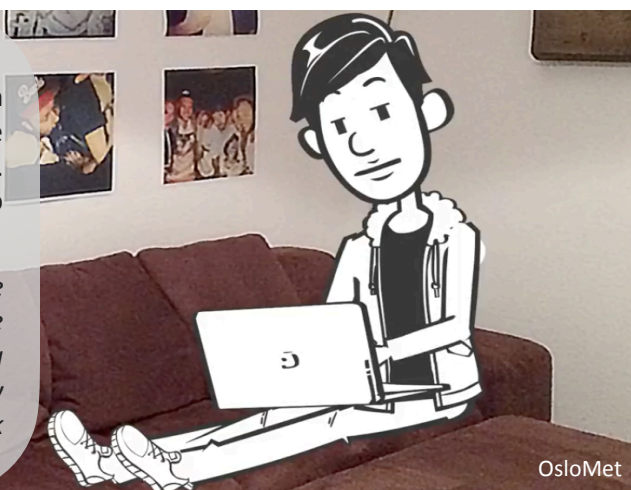
'I use 4Chan a lot because there is news there, for example, if there is a terror attack, then you can see videos about it hours before it is presented on the ordinary media [...] it happens very fast on 4Chan.'

Meanwhile, individuals are adamant they do not simply accept online information uncritically. They construct themselves as objective information seekers, albeit this is not always borne out in the type of content they say they engage with.

KAMIL (POLAND, RWE)

Kamil relies on the internet and social media as his main source of information about the world and does not use traditional media such as newspapers or television. However, he stresses the need for a critical approach to online sources of news:

'You can find everything there. I always double check the news, whether other media describe an event in the same way. I've learnt that at the university. I don't have a favourite source of information. In my opinion, every single one is biased. That's why you need to double check information.'



OsloMet

Online spaces as sites of belonging

The ability to virtually connect or belong with others is important to some individuals in radical milieus, particularly where they are experiencing social isolation. As one respondent describes, *'It's because I had often been disappointed by real people and I gravitated towards virtual people, Muslims...'* (Blaise, France, ISE). Online spaces are often social spaces where

networks and communities are formed, and some individuals recount seeking out connection online and positive experiences of belonging there. Others understand this appeal as something for those who are more naïve than themselves.

'Many people in the extreme right scene are in that scene because they do not have connections elsewhere, they are isolated, they have no social relationships. Suddenly they may join and belong somewhere, there is a "we". That goes for Achmed and the mosque and Pete and the neo-Nazis... if there is a "we" to join, then it does not take long.' R6 (Netherlands, RWE)

MAMUKA (RUSSIA, ISE)

'R1' Mamuka was born into a non-religious family and was introduced to the basics of Islam by a friend in judo club. After a serious injury, Mamuka was forced to stop participating in sport, meaning friends at the gym began to gradually move away from him. In search of new company, he began to actively engage with Islamic content on the Russian social networking site VKontakte and eventually contacted members of ISIS located in Syria.

'The choice was: either sitting alone in the canteen or going online in the computer class. That is what I did: looking for information, email with friends.'

Online spaces as sites of expression

Particularly for the RWE cases, online spaces are seen as offering opportunities to express one's true feelings where these are censored offline. In line with the recent focus on 'free speech' in these milieus, the importance of being able to voice their views is emphasised, and online spaces are comparatively risk-free arenas for doing so. Thus, online participation can provide space for the enactment of 're-information strategies', i.e. the promotion of opinions that are perceived to be excluded by traditional media. Some research participants also place importance on dialogue and the potential for social media to facilitate this.

However, individuals in these milieus are also critical of censorship online and recognise the constant danger of repercussions for remarks they make there. Individuals in ISE milieus recount negative experiences of securitisation due to their online involvement. Banning by social media platforms is commonplace in some milieus, and strategies are employed to circumvent this, including having multiple accounts under different names or favouring unmoderated platforms.

ALFRED (MALTA, RWE)

Alfred is affiliated with the far-right group Imperium Europa. He feels that mainstream media and those aligned with the left use labels to limit dialogue and delegitimise right-wing arguments from the outset. He says this has restricted him to dialogue within his social network:

'Facebook and YouTube are the pillars for social dialogue everywhere because they cannot be controlled. I used to comment regularly on the Times and Malta Today, because, you know that's why the comments section is there, or should be there, but then they deleted my comments or never uploaded them. Even in the media you need to know someone to have a voice. At least on Facebook I can speak and no one will stop me. They try, but it's more difficult.'

Some individuals not only participate in online discussions, but actively produce multimedia content to voice their opinions to their own online followings.

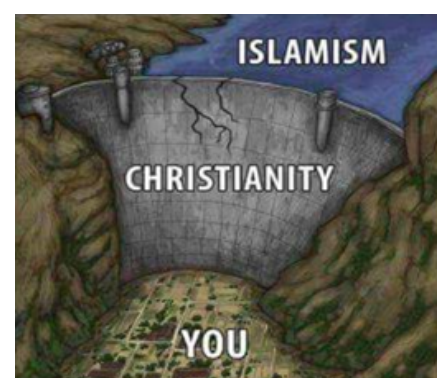
CONTENT CREATORS IN THE UK RWE MILIEU

Videoers and streamers are central to this milieu. They are present at all key events and are recognised and greeted by attendees as key 'influencers'. These are not people brought in to handle social media, but activists themselves taking on the video or streaming role. Moreover, even where the prime role of the individual is streaming events, they engage not just in publicising the offline activity – their presence embodies the cause in as much as they frame their activity as part of '*telling it as it is*' and challenging attacks on freedom of speech. As one individual states while live streaming from a demonstration, we are here '*because the government don't tell us the truth, the media lies*'.

Online spaces as supporting a sense of injustice or victimhood

Respondents' descriptions of online content reveal its emotionally provocative nature. The visuality of content available online contributes to emotions like fear, anxiety and anger. Videos are popular, and these often use powerful aesthetics to create an apocalyptic tone. Films produced by ISIS have high production values that make them very engaging to respondents in ISE milieus.

Much of the content online, across both types of radicalisation, paints a vivid narrative of injustice and a feeling that one should not simply sit back and let such wrong continue. In the ISE milieus, the victims were Muslims as a global category, while in the RWE milieus those being targeted were portrayed as white (Christian) Europeans.



An example of RWE visual content

R8 (NETHERLANDS, ISE)

Through his involvement in the Internet forum Marokko.nl, 'R8' was introduced to footage of war scenes. The online content he engaged with dehumanised unbelievers and led him to start to see them as the enemy:

'I first went to search for Islam [...] and I ended up on very radical sites. I was shocked. [...] Then I did some research [...] you get a lot of videos of Palestine, of Palestinian children being murdered, Gaza being bombed. [...] And they are trying to create a kind of awareness in you of helping your fellow Muslims. [...] And those movies started to work a bit in my system. I started to get angry. [...] We are the believers, we are the Muslims. And those are the "unbelievers", they are our enemies.'

These narratives of injustice or victimhood are highly international. The ability to connect with individuals and ideas from around the world means that individuals can engage with a broad range of content, including about situations in other countries. For example, first-hand accounts of hardship or injustice experienced by others (e.g. in the USA or Syria) adds to a sense of horror or urgency by framing the perceived injustice as a global war. Online content frames international conflicts as lenses through which individuals should reinterpret their immediate local context.

Online spaces allow individuals to follow international influencers. Alt-right or 'free speech' personalities in the RWE case and international Salafist preachers in the ISE case enjoy high levels of popularity. In the case of RWE, such influencers include national and international political leaders who legitimise extreme stances and claims and reinforce the sense of a global milieu.

In the RWE case, online spaces are also characterised by the use of humour and 'memes' especially in gaming and 'alt-right' communities.

Can online radicalisation be tackled separately to offline radicalisation?

We find that online and offline sites of radicalisation are mutually reinforcing, mutually dependent and interconnected – in many cases both online and offline experiences are crucial. Factors that impact online radicalisation include offline encounters, personal circumstances, pre-existing doubts or curiosities, and local and global political context. How this online-offline relationship plays out in radicalisation trajectories depends on the individual situation.

Online information seeking can be prompted by offline experiences, offline relationships, personal or moral crises, social isolation or pre-existing concerns. Content encountered can in turn confirm attitudes, or prompt reinterpretation of offline events, contexts or personal experiences. Online connections can be precursors to offline meetings and vice versa. The kinds of issues that find resonance in online communities are influenced by sociopolitical context. Online and offline content enable and constrain one another.



RESPONDENT X AND RESPONDENT Y (GERMANY, ISE)

A neo-Salafist friend of Respondent X, who challenged his atheism and asked him to watch a few videos, gave him the initial impetus to search for further explanations online. Offline contact was crucial in this case, but the online content was what fuelled his ideological development.

Respondent Y said it was God who had given her a sign that awakened her desire to learn more about Islam. The impulse came from within, and online content was crucial to channelling this impulse. She explained that she watched every German-language Da'wa video she could find on YouTube, naming a few that could be classified as neo-Salafist. When she saw others receiving Da'wa in these videos, she was also convinced of the truthfulness of a neo-Salafist interpretation of Islam.

R10 (NETHERLANDS, ISE)

R10 was involved in the first group of radicals to emerge in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks. He found inspiration from a Syrian who appeared in the local area, whose instruction led him to investigate further online, as well as to meet radicals offline:

'I went to the mosque on a Friday. I saw a man with a long, impressive beard. He talked to the guys in the neighbourhood, I remember it well, [...] He gave me a DVD [...], it shows all Muslims who are at war, Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Iraq. It was a propaganda film, you saw a woman being pushed to the ground by an Israeli soldier ... it is brutal, there is so much hatred towards Muslims. I started to study the Internet... came into contact with more people, also via the Internet. That man gave me a phone number of a guy ... they often meet, he said ... contact me, so I ended up in a living room where everything was discussed ... then in 2003 or 2004 there were more physical meetings, later it went on more via the internet.'

In RWE milieus also, participants reported watching numerous videos made or promoted by 'influencers' but the prompt to engage with them came from personal contact:

***'[...] they can do it on their own through the internet, can't they? But there will be people that push them towards it. You know, they'll show them the websites to look at and they'll suggest watching this video and that video.'* (Robbie, UK, RWE)**

ONLINE TO OFFLINE: THE UK RWE MILIEU

In the UK RWE case, offline events have become increasingly important. Online encounters regularly precede offline meetings, and online groups are the basis of organising offline events. Will (UK, RWE) tells us that the group he associates with *'began virtual and has become physical'* and adds that this *'is the trend I think we're seeing'*.

Adam says: *'When you see all that online, and you come to see the different causes then, [...] you look into it [...] And that's really how I saw Imogen on, I saw her page online somewhere, it kind of interlinked with something that we'd been doing. 'Cause there is, I think, victims amongst them, they've, they've been groomed and abused themselves. So, then you've kind of crossed paths then and then you get speaking and then [...]'*

Our understanding of online radicalisation is enriched by investigating what takes place offline. For example, our ethnographic findings on the importance within ISE milieus of a sense of belonging generated by virtually connecting with others contrast findings from our online study of Twitter users, which identified little evidence of cohesive ISE milieus in the Twitter-sphere. This suggests that regulatory practices have incapacitated ISE milieus in this particular online sphere although actors continue to value such communication in other online spaces. Comparing findings on RWE in the UK, we also found that the influencers most followed by UK accounts on Twitter only partially correspond with those who are most popular or influential with individuals we spoke to in the ethnographic case study, who were more nationally or locally based. This illustrates the way in which the study of online spaces tend to enhance the global dimension of extremist milieus.

Encounters with online content or participation in online milieus does not necessarily equate to aligning oneself with the radical ideas contained therein. Online content is seen as far more extreme than ideas and discussions offline, and this is also reflected in comparison of our ethnographic data with our social media analysis. In fact, in some ISE cases, respondents react to extremist content online by distancing themselves from it, e.g. leaving Facebook or WhatsApp groups, or even reporting it. The DARE country level studies of Twitter accounts show how users of social media practise self-regulation in addition to being subjected to horizontal and vertical regulations and how such regulatory practices have a much greater impact on ISE than on RWE activity online.

PAVLOS (GREECE, ISE)

Pavlos had made comments on social media against Assad that he felt may have been construed as supportive of ISIS but now describes this as misguided. He says he agrees with the condemnation of radical clerics by the Muslim community, and that those who killed in the name of Islam are heretical:

'If I knew someone who held views similar to ISIS and Al Qaeda, an imam or an ordinary Muslim, I would have mentioned this to the anti-terrorist authorities, as I already did. I saw someone, it doesn't matter from which country, a migrant, clearly writing various things [on social media]...he was trying to convince people that one [Islamic] organisation was right. I reported this to the police.'

Of course, the dangers of the availability of such content should not be underestimated. Those in the Dutch RWE milieu describe online radicalisation as a gradual process of normalisation or desensitisation, pointing to the risks posed by exposure to such content over time.

Our study of those engaged in 'Islamist' and 'extreme right' milieus both online and offline confirms that online spaces are an important site of encounter with radical(ising) content and in shaping radicalisation trajectories. Our findings also show that online and offline sites of radicalisation are interconnected and often mutually reinforcing. This suggests the importance of research radicalisation, including online radicalisation, in the context of offline lives.

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