

DRIVERS OF SELF-RADICALISATION AND DIGITAL SOCIABILITY

Understanding the nature of social media participation on Twitter in relation to (self-)radicalisation helps decision makers design counter-strategies and actions. DARE researchers investigated ‘right-wing extremist’ and ‘Islamist extremist’ discourse on Twitter between 2010 and 2019 in seven European countries. The research documented that, despite wide variation across individual accounts and limited evidence of overt calls to extremist action, online extremism exists. As a result of the lack of call to action, many online contributions fall under the radar of law enforcement or social media’s own standards to remove hateful content from their platforms. For these types of accounts, the challenge is to balance freedom of speech and the removal of extremist content.

DARE FINDINGS

- **The Twitter accounts analysed are far more likely to be *against* something than *for* something. This generalised negative attitude is more salient among the right-wing extremist accounts studied than among the Islamist extremist accounts.**

Right-wing extremism

Negativity not only pertains to immigration or Islam, but to a wide range of salient issues in national and European politics (e.g. cost of living, climate change).

Islamic extremism

Accounts discuss political issues in the West and Western involvement in the Middle East negatively but talk about religious affairs and the Muslim community in a positive manner.

- **There is an excessive focus on depicting collective identity under threat, with violations and injustices described as structural rather than incidental.**

Right-wing extremism

Perceived threats pertain to immigration, ‘Islamisation’, and the gradual devaluation and disappearance of national culture and identity. This is reflected in an obsession with crimes committed by immigrants and Jihadist terrorist attacks.

Islamic extremism

Discourse is framed around the discrimination of and injustice towards Muslims in European countries and around the world.

- **The state, the education system and the media are perceived as a single entity that contributes to or fails to address the threats.**

Right-wing extremism

Failures are seen as due to dilution of national political authority; EU membership; and political correctness in media and education that blindly promote equality regardless of differences. Together, this appears as a concerted effort by left-wing politicians, mainstream media, and the education system to cover the true extent of the threat posed by immigration and Islam.

Islamic extremism

The application of double standards is seen as meaning Muslims are judged more harshly and excluded from opportunities, despite claims that they enjoy equal rights.

- **National history, culture or religion are considered as the basis for a new societal order.**

Right-wing extremism

Refers to historical national heroes and to images of a glorious national or European past, underlining the perceived (sometimes racial) purity that existed and is currently threatened by immigration and 'Islamisation'.

Islamic extremism

Refers to religious scriptures (most notably the Qu'ran) to serve as guidance for a 'pure' lifestyle in a chaotic, depraved and unjust world.

- **Representatives of the perceived current ruling class are mocked and derided via caricature and hate speech, most notably political leaders, judges and media figures.**

Right-wing extremism

Political leaders, judges and media figures are mocked but also immigrants and Muslims.

Islamic extremism

Mostly refers to politicians and judges considered instrumental in applying perceived double standards.

- **Right-wing extremist Twitter activity increased over the period of study, while Islamist extremist twitter activity was scattered. The network structure and the role of influencers is also markedly different.**

Right-wing extremism

Twitter activity increased over the period of study. The research showed close-knit networks of contributors frequently sharing information and liking or retweeting each other's messages. A small number of highly visible political leaders - especially Trump, but also Bolsonaro, Salvini and Farage - have a considerable impact on the debates.

Islamic extremism

Twitter activity was scattered across the past decade with no evidence of upward trend. The research found limited sharing of information, liking or retweeting. The research did not identify particularly strong influencers who are mentioned and retweeted.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY AND DECISION MAKERS

The challenge of balancing inclusiveness with removing extremist Twitter messages

Broadening the criteria for removal of content could be perceived to be another attempt by the 'elite' to silence opposing voices and to hide the truth about threats and injustices committed against the community that the tweeters identify with. This may fuel rage rather than mitigate extremism. At the same time, although it is clear that the vast majority of people exposed to extremist ideas or even contributing to such debates will not engage in illegal acts, the extremist ideas they disseminate can influence at risk individuals to plan and conduct acts of violent extremism. This in itself should be a reason to be cautious about allowing extremist ideas on online platforms.

What measures contribute to ensure inclusiveness in terms of political participation whilst excluding extremism?

1. Improve the diagnosis of online extremism

- **Developing a broadly shared taxonomy** describing the common characteristics of online extremism and including variations of extremism is needed to help decipher what constitutes online extremist discourse.
- **Understanding the person behind online extremism** is key. There is a quite varied picture of the motivations behind social media participation and the extent to which the online world affects behaviour in the offline world, where extremism can have the most dramatic impact.
- **Identifying characteristics of individuals at risk of transitioning to extremism** following online involvement is imperative to adopting a targeted approach to counter extremism. Policy focus needs to extend beyond control of online content in isolation. Its likely effectiveness must be considered in the context of radicalisation processes taking place in the offline world and the risk of backlash to sweeping removal of online content or banning of individual users.

2. Promote dialogue rather than counter-narratives or removal of content

- Online social media communication is either allowed or taken down if deemed inappropriate (extremist) and individual users are banned from holding accounts or posting. **Greater transparency about decisions leading to the takedown of content or banning of a user may be a better way to address the issue of persistent offenders.** This might be achieved by social media platforms sharing sentiment scores with accounts indicating the extent to which they deviate from a platform's user community rules and regulations.
- **The excessive focus on threats in the communications studied indicates the presence of anxiety among these Twitter users.** Research on anxiety management warns against denial as a response suggesting a crackdown on extremist content may not be the most appropriate policy. Alternatives (promoting awareness, encouraging mindfulness) may prove more effective.
- Restrictive measures to curb online extremism are perceived as another indication that the state and its representatives (including media) are failing in their policies. **Promoting accountability may prove a more effective strategy to address the 'blame game'.** At present, online social media provides the optimal conditions to elude accountability (e.g. contributors can be anonymous, have multiple accounts, are not required to provide personal information).
- **Take alternative visions seriously, if only for their consequences.** What is perceived to be true can have real consequences whether or not it is true. In an effort to counter online extremism, a direct denial or devaluation of opinion as fake news or conspiracy may have a counterproductive effect. Dialogue that includes a genuine engagement with, and critique of, visions espoused by extremists, may be most effective in the long run.
- **Consider use of educational toolkits.** Awareness, courage, accountability and empathy, i.e. the skills required to promote moderation, need to be acquired by social media users through training. The use of educational toolkits can contribute to this.
- **Experiment with diversity and promote online contact between diverging views.** Many initiatives show how bringing together different viewpoints can have a constructive effect in the real world, but online initiatives attempting to do the same are currently lagging. The Erasmus+ online platform that brings together youth from all sides of the Mediterranean can be considered a good practice in this context.

SOME BACKGROUND ON THE DARE RESEARCH WORK

The **target group** for this study were **people from 7 European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom)**. A mixed-method approach was used combining digital ethnography, automated text analysis and social networking techniques. Twitter accounts in the sample were included on the basis of the following criteria: Anti-immigration, Ultra-nationalism, Superiority, Focus on purity, Violence, Misogyny, Ultra-nationalism, Promotion of distinct gender roles, Conspiracy, Racism, Authoritarianism, Anti-democracy, Victimhood (e.g. unjustly imprisoned), Militarism, Anti-system, Hate speech, Salafism, Religious fundamentalism (Catholic, Orthodox or Islamic extremism), Anti-politically correct, Anti-Semitism, Martyrdom, Jihad. Researchers also used a series of keywords in each national language that could potentially help identify radical ideologies.

DARE DEFINITIONS

Self-radicalisation refers to a type of radicalisation process that designates the radicalising individual as the instigator of the process. It should be distinguished from radicalisation whereby an individual is recruited by a radical organisation and is subsequently radicalised, or a radicalisation process whereby the individual follows the radicalisation process of a collective entity with which the individual identifies.

Right-wing extremism: A political ideology characterised by opposition to democracy and which frequently espouses biological racism and anti-Semitism.

Islamist Extremism: Violent expression of Islamism such as Jihadism.

PROJECT IDENTITY

Project Name DARE: Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality

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Consortium

- The University of Manchester (UNIMAN), UK
- Anadolu University (AU), Turkey
- Collegium Civitas University (Civ), Poland
- École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), France
- The Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI), Croatia
- Hochschule Düsseldorf – University of applied sciences (HSD), Germany
- European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Belgium
- The German Institute on Radicalisation (GIRDS), Germany
- The Higher School of Economics, St Petersburg (HSE), Russia
- Leiden University (UL), The Netherlands
- Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet), Norway
- Panteion University (PUA), Greece
- The University of Sfax (US), Tunisia
- Teesside University (TEES), UK
- The People for Change Foundation (Pfc), Malta
- The University of Oslo (UiO), Norway
- The University of Birmingham (UNIBHAM), UK

Countries Belgium, Croatia, Germany, Greece, France, Malta, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russian Federation, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom.

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Vision DARE proposes a new approach to radicalisation research as an alternative to traditional terrorism research that focuses primarily on acts and agents of terrorism. By understanding radicalisation as a *social* phenomenon, and through evidence-based research, DARE aims to broaden the understanding of radicalisation and non-radicalisation paths; demonstrate that it is not located in any one religion or community; and understand better the long-term origins, causes and psychological, emotional and social dynamics of radicalisation.

Goals

1. Understand radicalisation trends in historical, spatial and political context including their interaction and potential for cumulative effect.
2. Identify new trends in receptivity to radicalisation especially in relation to youth and gender and extend the field to the study of non-radicalisation trajectories.
3. Investigate the interaction of structure and agency in radicalisation through the intersection of societal (macro), group (meso) and individual (micro) factors in individual trajectories.
4. Enhance understanding of the role of inequality and perceived injustice in radicalisation.
5. Understand the relative significance of religion, ideology and extra-ideological (affective) dimensions of radicalisation, and how they are interwoven.
6. Develop new evaluation and intervention toolkits to counter radicalisation and maximise their impact through active collaboration with policy maker and civil society organisation stakeholders.

Website and more information

<http://www.dare-h2020.org>. The [research on “drivers of self-radicalisation and digital sociability”](#) was conducted by Nathalie Paton (EHESS), Anne Birgitta Nilsen (OsloMet), Mark Dechesne (Leiden University), Alexandros Sakellariou (Panteion University) and Grant Helm (Moonshot CVE).



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