Does online exposure to extremist content lead to violent radicalization?

The Internet and social media are often described as vectors for the dissemination of hateful and discriminatory speech, thus playing a significant role in the process of violent radicalization among vulnerable individuals. But to what extent is this claim supported by evidence? What does research tell us about this issue?

The Canadian Practitioners' Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) conducted a **systematic review** to evaluate the current state of evidence regarding **the link between exposure to extremist content on the Internet/social media and the risk of violent radicalization**.
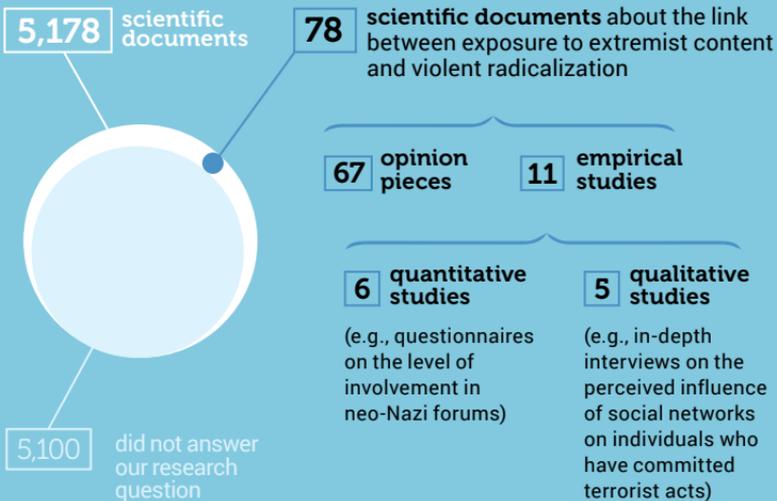
PREV

What is a systematic review? Why is it important?

A systematic review allows researchers to identify, synthesize, and evaluate the available literature on a specific subject. It makes it possible to determine the current state of knowledge, assess its reliability, identify its limitations, and ultimately define the needs of research and future practices. For these reasons, a systematic review is of critical importance to researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and also the general public.

A systematic review requires the application of a very rigorous methodology and predetermined research criteria. To this end, CPN-PREV followed the guidelines of the Campbell Collaboration (campbellcollaboration.org)—the benchmark for systematic reviews in social sciences ■

Bibliographic search results:

5,178 scientific documents

78 scientific documents about the link between exposure to extremist content and violent radicalization

67 opinion pieces

11 empirical studies

6 quantitative studies

(e.g., questionnaires on the level of involvement in neo-Nazi forums)

5 qualitative studies

(e.g., in-depth interviews on the perceived influence of social networks on individuals who have committed terrorist acts)

5,100 did not answer our research question

What are the main results of the reviewed studies ?

The integrated literature showed that online exposure to extremist sites or videos:

❱ Generally does not elicit positive **emotional responses** (e.g., being empathetic to or in agreement with conveyed messages or radicalized people) from people who are not engaged in a process of radicalization.

❭ However, some individuals —either because they lack a sense of belonging to a social group or because they feel a cultural/linguistic proximity to the person conveying the message— are more vulnerable and may show an increased receptiveness to extremist messages.

❱ Tends to be associated with the adoption of **radicalized attitudes** by individuals who may or may not be engaged in a process of radicalization, regardless of the type of platform (e.g., website, online discussion forum) or extremist ideas (e.g., neo-Nazi or radical Islamist).

❭ Online interaction with groups that have similar ideologies can exacerbate extreme attitudes and negatively shape opinions about other groups or communities that differ from one's own.

❭ When individuals with radicalized ideas are confronted by those who have opposing views, their attitudes tend to become more radicalized.

❱ Is linked to the adoption of **extremist behaviors** — online (e.g., posting hate content) or offline (e.g., planning an attack, joining armed groups) — among individuals who may or may not be previously involved in a radicalization process.

❭ Individuals **actively seeking** violent radical material online appear to be at greater risk of engaging in violence than those who have been unintentionally exposed to it. ∎

What is the key take-home message?

The Internet and social media play a role in the violent radicalization process of some individuals. Online exposure to extremist content, in conjunction with real-life factors, can influence or facilitate decisions to join a hateful or violent extremist group, to adopt violent extremist attitudes, or to act violently, particularly among individuals who actively seek such content.

However, the studies have not demonstrated an **independent causal relationship** because:

❯ The effect of the Internet and social media was not isolated from other factors such as personal crises, mental health problems, or belonging to a radical group.

❯ No study specified whether attitudes or behaviors follow, accompany, or precede exposure.

A distinction should be made between emotional responses (being receptive to extremist discourse), endorsed attitudes (promoting a radical message), and actual behaviors (taking action)—all different but potentially related phases of the violent radicalization process that must be taken into account in the design of prevention and intervention initiatives. ∎

What are the most significant limitations of the reviewed studies?

❯ The number of studies that address the link between exposure to extremist content online and violent radicalization is very low, thus making the conclusions of this systematic review tentative (the weight of the evidence may change as empirical studies accumulate).

❯ The wide range of definitions used by the surveyed studies to describe what constitutes extremist content and violently radicalized attitudes/behaviors makes integrating knowledge on the subject difficult.

❯ Most of the research is not based on conceptual frameworks that could help explain the process by which extremist content online can lead to violent radicalization.

❯ Some studies have significant methodological limitations and raise ethical concerns that affect the reliability of the results. ∎

What are the implications for practitioners?

Evidence-based best practice guidelines for practitioners are currently being developed through a rigorous Delphi process (www.rand.org/topics/delphi-method.html) in consultation with the Canadian Consensus Guidelines Committee (cpnprev.ca/canadian-consensus-guidelines-committee/) and the International Consensus Guidelines Committee (cpnprev.ca/international-consensus-guidelines-committee/).

In the meantime, CPN-PREV provides the following preliminary recommendations for practice:

❱ **Build and maintain your trust relationship** (or therapeutic alliance) with your clients. Trust remains the key element.

❱ **Be interested in the online habits of your clients.** Find out how, when, and for how long they use the Internet and social media. Ask:

〉 Which sites and forums they visit.

〉 How they react and respond to the content they consume.

〉 What content they share, and how widely they share it.

〉 What needs are being fulfilled by their use of the Internet/social media.

❱ Avoid direct confrontations if you do not have a strong enough therapeutic alliance and refrain from value judgements. If you want to challenge the extremist views of your clients, do so while being respectful and open. **Avoid escalation of conflict.**

〉 Acknowledge that the grievances of your clients and their group may be legitimate, even if their means are not.

〉 Do not only ask questions to your clients about their consumption of violent/hateful material; doing so may give them the impression that they are being investigated. Ask questions about offline and non-radicalized aspects of their lives.

〉 Seek an open dialogue by asking interactive questions that help develop your clients' sense of agency and problem-solving skills.

〉 Think about using non-formal settings to reduce wariness. ↓

❯ Pay particular attention **if you notice that your clients are actively consuming and/or propagating violent extremist content online** (e.g., regularly participates in radical forums, searches and shares violent or hateful content on social media, expresses violent intentions or threats). If so, before taking immediate action, **consult a local multidisciplinary team specialized in violent radicalization** and risk assessment of violent behavior (cpnprev.ca/themap/).

❯ **Pay attention to the overlap between online and offline behaviors**, as they are intrinsically linked in our modern world.

❯ **Help develop the critical thinking** and digital literacy of your clients by referring them to resources such as the following:

⟆ SERENE-RISK: www.serene-risc.ca/en/

⟆ Microsoft Digital Literacy course: www.microsoft.com/en-us/digitalliteracy/home

❯ **Ensure that as an expert, you are adequately trained** in issues surrounding violent radicalization, Internet/social media, risk assessment, and cultural competency/sensitivity, in addition to typical clinical training. Do not hesitate to ask more experienced colleagues or teams if you feel overwhelmed by a situation (while maintaining confidentiality) ∎

Useful links:

Join us at CPN-PREV: cpnprev.ca

❯ Access to this publication (via the journal portal): https://content.iospress.com/articles/international-journal-of-developmental-science/dev170233

❯ Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media – Mapping the Research: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002603/260382e.pdf