

**Title:** Assessment of the state of knowledge: Connections between research on the social psychology of the Internet and violent extremism

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**Research Question:**

How does social psychology contribute to our understanding of the link between the Internet and violent extremism?

**Importance:**

There seems to be little doubt that the Internet is increasingly implicated in radicalization processes. Yet the mechanisms underlying the link between the Internet and violent extremism, and their relative importance, remain largely undefined. The literature on radicalization to violent extremism is starting to establish central roles for concepts such as identity change and peer group reinforcements, which can best be understood from the lens of social psychology.

**Research Findings:**

The paper provides a comprehensive review of the mechanisms through which socio-psychological processes can be associated to patterns in Internet usage and online behaviors, including those related to trajectories of radicalization and violent extremism. Guided by this review, the paper proceeds with a detailed analysis of fifteen case studies representing known violent extremists whose trajectories were believed to have included a role for the Internet. This led to a classification of the role of the Internet into three trajectories: 1) *Pure online radicals*, characterized by the central role of the Internet throughout the radicalization process towards violence; 2) *The Internet as a reinforcer of radicalization*, where the Internet reinforces offline radicalization processes; and 3) *The Internet as an initial trigger of radicalization*, where the Internet is an entry point for radicalization, which is then proceeds through offline interactions.

**Implications:**

The analysis demonstrated that processes of radicalization towards violence are neither sudden nor abrupt. Rather, individual trajectories towards violence are almost always gradual, and the result of the convergence in time and space of several factors, including relational and developmental configurations that may occur online and/or offline. If social influence is the important driver of radicalization that some scholars believe it to be, there is no reason not to include online interactions on the same grounds as any other interactions occurring in one's life. The implication for countering violent extremism is that programs should be tailored according to the specific methods through which violent extremists, or individuals at-risk of violent extremism, use the Internet—differentiating between those who use it as a key resource to develop and shape radical beliefs and those for whom the Internet is a trigger or reinforcer of radical beliefs.



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**Extended Summary**

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## EXTENDED SUMMARY

Currently, a gap in the literature exists on the link between radicalization processes and the social psychology of the Internet. While radicalization processes are increasingly becoming subject to empirical studies, only a subset of these studies have taken into account online dynamics, and even fewer have approached this issue from a social psychological perspective. However, the literature on radicalization to violent extremism clearly establishes the central role of social psychology. It also suggests that the Internet is increasingly salient for understanding processes of radicalization. It follows then, that understanding radicalization processes requires an explanation of how the Internet may influence beliefs and behaviours; that is, of the social psychology of the Internet.

This report outlines the link between the social psychology of the Internet and violent extremism. It is divided into two parts. The first part, provides a review of the literature on the social psychology of the Internet, including its potential applications to the understanding of violent extremism. This section examines both the individual and collective dimensions involved when individuals reach out and interact online with like-minded virtual peers, and their effects on individual and collective behaviours. Concepts defined in the literature review are then applied to analyze fifteen case studies of individuals whose involvement in violent extremist acts has been confirmed, and where the Internet played a role, small or large, in their radicalization trajectory. These fifteen cases aim to achieve maximum variance in regard to the role the Internet played in radicalization processes across individuals. All cases are from open sources, all are relevant to Canada although some cases selected include individuals active in (or coming from) other countries. The aim is to provide a clear assessment of the aspects of the literature from the research field of the social psychology of the Internet that has been shown most relevant to violent extremism.

The second part of the report builds off the literature review and case study analysis, looking at programs that aim to counter violent extremism online. This section can be broken down into two sub-sections. First a review of the literature on countering violent extremism online is



conducted, outlining different approaches to designing counter-narrative programs. Second, six programs that aim to counter violent extremism are presented. These programs are not intended to be representative or exhaustive. Rather, the aim is to offer a scan of the breadth of available online programs, with a focus on Western-based programs that appear to contain many of the elements associated with “best practices” as outlined in the literature review. Lastly, these programs are assessed in light of the literature, identifying similarities and differences across their application.

### **The social psychology of the Internet and violent extremism**

Findings from our case study analysis of violent extremists illustrated that many of the socio-psychological processes present in the literature were also at play in the fifteen case studies.

Across the fifteen case studies, the extent to which the Internet played a role in the radicalization process ranges, with the most extreme case involving a former student who attributes her extensive viewing of radical sermons as directly connected to her radicalization. For others, the Internet served as a venue for first exposure to radical material, or as a means to obtain radical material that reinforced already held radical beliefs. Despite the disparity in the degree to which the Internet can be said to have facilitated radicalization processes, all cases represent individuals who were extensively involved in using online venues to facilitate or support their move towards terrorist activities. The individuals selected represent a range of ideological motivations, including jihadism inspired ( $n=11$ ), right-wing ( $n=3$ ), and anti-establishment ( $n=1$ ).

Results from the case study analysis demonstrated consistencies with literature, the broadest finding being that the Internet is in itself only one variable among dozens that are associated with individual trajectories towards violent extremism. Focusing on violent extremism and the Internet, our results highlight the different ways in which the Internet could play a role in radicalization trajectories. While our purposive sample precludes us from generalizing this to the wider population of violent extremists, we found that the role of the Internet could be classified into one of three trajectories, as shown in Figure 1: 1) ‘pure online radicals’ where the Internet not only played a central role in the initial exposure of individuals to radical views, but also in

the gradual adoption of belief systems that legitimize violent actions. This trajectory is characterized by the central role of the Internet throughout the radicalization process towards violence; 2) ‘The Internet as a *reinforcer* of radicalization’. This trajectory consisted of cases where the Internet serves to reinforce offline radicalization processes; and 3) ‘The Internet as an *initial trigger* of radicalization’. This trajectory involved cases where individuals’ are first exposed to radical discourses and interpretations through the Internet, but where these digital spaces are slowly complemented by interactions with similar others in the real world. In this trajectory, the Internet serves as an entry point for radicalization, but it is reinforced and developed through offline interactions.

**FIGURE 1. TYPOLOGY: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET ACROSS RADICALIZATION TRAJECTORIES**

		Entry	
		Online	Offline
Throughout	Online	<p><b>Trajectory 1</b> ‘Pure online radicals’ (<i>n</i>=4)</p>	<p><b>Trajectory 2</b> The Internet as a <i>reinforcer</i> of radicalization (<i>n</i>=4)</p>
	Offline	<p><b>Trajectory 3</b> The Internet as an <i>initial trigger</i> for radicalization (<i>n</i>=2)</p>	<p>No online component</p>

Note. Five cases could not be classified because too little information on the role of the Internet was available.

Our findings also support literature that suggests violent radicals experience events or possess conditions that make them pre-disposed to radicalizing environments. While pre-conditions for radicalization across the violent extremist cases were diverse, ranging from political grievances to psychological fragility, all the cases within our sample had experienced, prior to their radicalization, a pre-disposing event or trait that made them at greater risk for radicalization. However, consistent with the literature, this was not a sufficient factor to explain the radicalization process, rather serving as an explanatory indicator of why these individuals may have been more



vulnerable, or willing than others to be drawn into radicalizing environments.

Further, initial exposure to radical material followed one of two pathways, individuals were either exposed to extremist ideas actively/passively through their social milieu, or they came across extremist material autonomously in online contexts. This exposure to online material also reinforced findings in the literature on the social psychology of the Internet and social identification. Across case studies, individuals used the Internet to explore their identity, such as accessing religious questions—e.g. what it means to be a Muslim—and identifying with a larger group.

However, sustained exposure to online radical material was experienced differently across the fifteen individuals. For some, continued exposure was attributed to the benefits derived from the Internet. This included *cognitive* incentives, such as receiving knowledge about extremist perspectives, as well as *social* incentives, which included interacting with like-minded peers. However, for only a few was this sustained exposure key to developing perceptions of the acceptance of violence as a legitimate means. Specifically, public sources, indicated two accounts where material found on the Internet led to the acceptance of violence: Choudhry and Khan. These individuals found that the Internet convinced them that “violence was the answer” and an “Islamic duty”, respectively.

Lastly, the Internet played a prominent role in the re-structuring of networks. For instance, spending an increased amount of time online, individuals started to filter individuals from their social circle; removing themselves from more moderate individuals, with online resources providing support to marginalized views that could not be found offline (Braithwaite et al., 1999; Wright, 2000; Wright & Bell, 2003). This was illustrated in the case of Couture-Rouleau who tried unsuccessfully to convert his friends to Islam. Similarly Andre Poulin’s offline social milieu did not appeal to him or include people who held extremist beliefs. This possibly led both to the Internet, where they were able to build online relationships with like-minded extremists. Their trajectory supports the body of literature that suggests the Internet can be an important tool for developing quality relationships. This is also exemplified by cases, in which initial relationships formed online led to offline interactions, such as the case of Ahmad who met with two of the

individuals he encountered online, and Hammami who travelled to Somalia with a key contact he had originally met online. Further, this finding may assist in explaining why many individuals who experience pre-disposing factors (e.g. traumas) do not actually experience trajectories toward radicalization. Rather it is these pre-disposing factors in combination with situational inducements, such as the re-structuring of their personal networks, a finding consistent with our research and the literature (e.g. Sageman, 2004).

### **Countering violent extremism online**

The six countering violent extremism (CVE) programs presented in this report provided a range of venues through which organizations have attempted to counter radicalization processes. All programs have an online component; however, they vary in the extent to whether they are delivered in online or offline contexts. Across the six programs, the majority targeted jihadist-motivated extremists ( $n=3$ ), while two targeted all types of violent extremism, and one focused only on white supremacist motivated extremists. The programs also differed in terms of how they attempted to counter violent extremism. Most programs aimed to provide counter-narratives, offering evidence-based arguments to counter extremist voices ( $n=4$ ), while others focused on educating youth on appropriate Internet behaviour ( $n=1$ ), or educating and providing recommendations to policymakers on violent extremism ( $n=1$ ). All programs were implemented in Western contexts, including Canada, Australia, and the United States.

The aim is to offer a scan of the breadth of available online programs. But even this modest sampling provides some important insights into how we should be thinking about these programs. One of the key findings of this section of the report is that CVE programs, as they are currently conceptualized, have tended to overlook critical elements of social psychology.

A lack of consensus with regard to the causes of radicalization greatly complicates efforts to counter violent extremism. Despite, the appearance of a general agreement in the literature that radicalization “is a complex and highly individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors” (Vidino, 2010, p. 3), this was not reflected in the six online CVE programs outlined in this report. While almost all of the programs targeted a



group or an ideology, none made any mention of social processes or socioeconomic, political, or cultural drivers. Further, very few of the CVE programs were firmly grounded in the “causes” of radicalization to violent extremism. That is, there would appear to be a substantial gap between what is known about the factors that are purported to animate the radicalization process and the factors that CVE interventions attempt to address. While this report does not attempt to evaluate these CVE programs, given their incomplete theoretical underpinnings, it would be difficult for these programs to meet their desired aims.

Of importance given the purpose of this report, the CVE programs reviewed generally lacked the means by which to distinguish the role of the Internet in the radicalization process for the violent extremists they targeted. Whether the Internet plays a central role in the radicalization process, acts as a trigger to violent ideas, or reinforces already held extremist beliefs may be an important factor when creating programs, especially programs targeting individuals online. For instance, counter-narratives may be more effective for individuals who are initially using the Internet to seek out new information. In contrast, individuals who are using the Internet to reinforce already held violent extremist beliefs may be more resistant to counter-narratives. It may even have a negative impact for them, assisting in forming out-group beliefs. Much more research is needed on CVE programs to understand their impact on the variety of individuals for which they are targeted.

Lastly, findings from the CVE programs also emphasize the need for 1) counter-narrative programs to be guided by theory; and 2) development of systematic evaluations of these programs. The first point extends from the above discussion that CVE programs should be built on strong theoretical foundations. This is particularly important for a phenomenon for which there are relatively few empirical studies on either radicalization or counter-radicalization processes, and where this process has been described as a “poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors” (Vidino, 2010, p. 3). Theory can guide the most effective measures, rather than using measures that are argued to be intuitive, which is particularly important in a misunderstood process. This leads to the second point, evaluation of programs. Given the poorly understood nature of CVE programs, we encourage systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of such



programs. This is particularly important in light of allegations that these programs may even be counter-productive.<sup>1</sup>

## Concluding thoughts

Our analysis demonstrates that processes of radicalization towards violence are neither sudden nor abrupt. Rather, individual trajectories towards violence are almost always gradual, and the result of the convergence in time and space of a multitude of factors. Pathways towards radicalization appear as much the result of several identified pre-conditions as the product of relational and developmental configurations that may occur online and/or offline. This finding illustrates the need to pay close attention to the multiplicity of causal factors involved in such processes as well as the ways they interact together (Ducol 2015). Indeed, our analysis indicates that the Internet is in itself only one variable among dozens that are associated with individual trajectories towards violent extremism.

The detailed analysis of fifteen violent extremist case studies has led to three main findings on the role of the Internet on the radicalization trajectory. First, as mentioned above, given the variety of roles taken by the Internet in our case studies, it would be wrong to think of the Internet as a monocausal and homogeneous factor that impacts individual trajectories towards clandestine political violence in the same way. Second, the social and psychological effects of the Internet can neither be considered linear nor constant. While the Internet might play an important role at the beginning of the radicalization trajectory, it does not necessarily play a continuous or cumulative role throughout the trajectory. Third, the Internet should not be perceived as a monolithic pathway to radicalization, but rather as multi-dimensional, reflecting the various practices that lead people to expose themselves and use the Internet along the radicalization trajectory.

Our report suggests that the Internet is rarely a driver of the radicalization process, but we also believe that current research designs are ill-suited to properly assess the role played by the

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see Edelman, A. (2014, September 16). State department's 'embarrassing' 'Think Again Turn Away' Twitter campaign could actually legitimize terrorists: expert. *New York Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/state-department-embarrassing-turn-twitter-campaign-legitimizes-terrorists-expert-article-1.1941990> (Accessed June 15, 2015); Katz, R. (2014, September 26). The state department's Twitter war with ISIS is embarrassing. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/> (Accessed June 15, 2015).



Internet in the trajectories of violent extremists. One key development in that regard would be to embrace a network approach that would systematically collect all social interactions (online and offline) for individuals in the same way, at the same time. Understanding an individual's interactions online may only be accurately interpreted within the context of their offline interactions, and vice versa. The Internet comes into play at various times for different individuals. It may reinforce existing ideas and play that role even after face-to-face social interactions with fellow extremists living close by have occurred. If social influence is the important driver of radicalization that some scholars believe it to be, there is no reason not to adopt the most suitable set of methods to study it, and no reason not to include online interactions on the same grounds as any other interactions occurring in one's life. This report hopes to have served as a further step towards understanding this evolving landscape, and how these online contexts may influence radicalization processes.

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