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 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 Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media. 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 full report can be found at: http://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-freedom-expression
THE STUDY

The study 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 effective.

This emerges from reviewing more than 550 published studies from scientific and "grey literature", covering titles in English (260), French (196) and Arabic (96) languages.

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".1

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.

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 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 – offline and online – play a part in radicalization processes, along with events and how individuals interpret their life experiences. Yet distinctions 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, there are three main recurring characteristics in the way that they conceptualize specifically violent radicalization. In this sense, the concept of violent radicalization covers an observable process involving (not necessarily consecutively):

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

PARADIGMS

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 still being 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. But much research into radicalization overlooks these more nuanced approaches.

**Further limits on the research**

A gap in the reviewed literature is a lack of applied theory leading to empirical evidence. There is also a lack of data, which renders many studies as being normative statements rather than new knowledge. Where studies are grounded in explicit theory, rigorous research methodology and actual findings, there is often inappropriate generalization.

Another challenge is that getting access to classified information or data generated by social media is very difficult for researchers. There are also ethical issues raised when dealing with young people under 18. The overall result is that most studies reviewed have scientific limits.
MAIN CONCLUSIONS

❌ 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.

❌ Much is known about terrorist uses of the social media, but there is scant knowledge about the reception by users, specifically young people.

Nevertheless, as a whole, the literature does point towards some possible understandings:

❌ Rather than being *initiators* or *causes* of violent behaviors, the Internet and social media specifically can be facilitators within wider processes of violent radicalization.

❌ Thus, 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 is not reducible to Internet exposure, but generally entails the mediation of several complex processes, including complex social-psychological processes and person-to-person communication in conjunction with other offline factors (feelings of injustice, alienation, anomie, deprivation etc.).

❌ The online representation of women and the constructions of masculinity in radicalization are factors to consider in the identity dimension of radicalization.

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

❌ Create appealing, interactive user-friendly platforms to attract younger audiences.

❌ 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 promoting 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.

❌ 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.

❌ Further the process of radicalization post-recruitment, by gathering data and planning attacks.

*Caveat:* 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 occur in wholly private small group communications, as well as via one-to-one messaging or email. However, study of the role of these realms outside of social media was not evident in the reviewed literature.
CHALLENGES RAISED

The literature has significance in several spheres:

Media and social media

- News and entertainment media give disproportionate attention to social media as an explanation of violent radicalization, to the detriment of other explanations (religious strife, alienation, geopolitics of terror, racism and segregation, youth unemployment etc.).
- An alarmist representation 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 a potential 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 blocking of access and filtering content, because there is no clear evidence about the effectiveness of these steps. The impact of online surveillance on radicalization is complicated to research, and is barely covered in the literature.
- There seems to be a developing trend for online counter-speech that challenges extremist representations and hate speech. There is less evidence of alternative narratives that acknowledge feelings of powerlessness and alienation, and which propose non-violent ways to address perceived or real grievances. It is also rare to find references to the value of preserving the independence of civil society and media in regard to multi-stakeholder engagement in countering violent 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, especially into reception and effects.
- Include more inter-disciplinary collaboration, and give more attention to gender dimensions.
- Conduct research into the impact of censorship, surveillance, counter-speech and Media and Information Literacy as counter-steps to online radicalization efforts.

KEY POINTS

- 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.
- The use of social media by violent extremists is often sophisticated in terms of manipulation. The main uses are related to propaganda, intimidation, recruitment and fundraising.
- Social media qualities (volume, speed, multimedia interactivity, horizontality, decentralization, cheapness, anonymity, global audience across time and space) offer advantages to extremist groups that may otherwise have stayed marginal.
KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Member States could consider to:

- Strengthen the cooperation with the international community and all relevant actors in order to join efforts to prevent violent radicalization and combat violent extremism in all its forms.

- Develop and implement comprehensive effective measures for preventing radicalization that leads to violence, and to elaborate national policies and/or action plans dedicated to this end.

- Reinforce a global dialogue about proportionate positive actions to counter violent radicalization, and place it within the remit of UNESCO’s Internet Universality Principles (Rights, Openness, Accessibility, and Multistakeholder participation), which promote a human rights-based approach, and keep perspective on the overwhelming benefits of the Internet at the same time as mitigating abuses.

- Strengthen the overall education sector responses to violent extremism, including through human-rights based Global Citizenship Education (GCED) programmes and teachers and other youth mediators’ trainings.

- Promote and evaluate MIL strategies, recognizing that new technologies are also a tool that can be used for: preventing violent extremism; encouraging counter and alternative narratives; advancing citizen education; and developing critical thinking. In this way, MIL can support human rights, dialogue, mutual understanding and tolerance, and empower young people to be masters of their own identity and to detect and resist online violent radicalization efforts.

- Take into account and encourage the participation of youth in decision-making processes, in line with the UN General Assembly Resolution 2250 and empower them to lead new digital projects in favor of peace, tolerance and mutual understanding.

- Recognize the changing status of women as both actors and targets of online violent radicalization, and support greater representation of women (and young people) in relevant research projects.

- Deepen engagement with civil society organizations, relevant local communities and non-governmental actors, acknowledging their role in contributing to the effectiveness of the implementation of counter-terrorism national plans and strategies.

- Support research institutions and scholars to study online violent radicalization, in the wider context of other dimensions, at a greater scale and quality, and through regional and global networks.

Private sector, Internet intermediaries and social media could consider to:

- Ensure professional and conflict-sensitive journalistic coverage by providing verifiable information and informed opinion and be cognisant of language and narratives that can foster division, hatred and violent radicalization.

- 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 importance of media ethics in the face of radicalization of young people for violent extremism.

- Evolve social media 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, and for removal of content aimed at inciting radicalization towards violent extremism.

- Define and manage expressions of hate without compromising 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.

Civil society and Internet users could consider to:

- Increase efforts of civil society organizations to leverage social media to drive the formulation and dissemination of peaceful messages, alternative and counter-narratives that challenge terrorist propaganda and hate speech.

- Promote literacies that favour non-violent conflict resolution and a culture of peace.

- Educate Internet users about ethical online behavior, privacy issues and the risks associated with the disclosure of personal data and other potentially sensitive information (through social media), as well as how to recognize and flag terrorist abuse of social networks.