



Danish Centre for
Prevention of Extremism

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Four levels of online extremism

Knowledge synthesis of a survey on
the prevention of online extremism
among children and young people

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Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism

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Foreword

The internet and social media have created a new social reality where users can interact with each other and potentially create new kinds of communities while sharing knowledge on an unprecedented scale. However, the internet has also become an arena where extremist groups and individuals are able to share hateful or polarising content and connect with children and young people who may be drawn into and/or be manipulated into sharing racist statements, for example, that are directed at a particular group, or videos with violent content.

Children and young people are now more likely to encounter content or ideological attitudes in their online lives that can be characterised as extremist.

This can include unpleasant conspiracy theories or jokes that pop up on gaming platforms and display dehumanising perceptions of others. Furthermore, it has become easier for children and young people themselves to seek out social media and platforms with extremist material, e.g., on 4Chan, closed Discord channels or hate groups on Facebook, where they can contribute hateful content themselves.

New phenomena such as echo chambers, trolling, grooming, misinformation and fake news have come to the fore, and research has become increasingly aware of the mechanisms that lead to polarisation and extremist behaviour on online fora.

Background for the desk research

In partnership with University College Lillebaelt, University College Absalon has worked on a task set by the Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism to undertake desk research into the current prevailing knowledge around preventing online extremism among children and young people.

This knowledge synthesis provides an introduction to new tendencies in online extremism that have been pervasive in the literature selected and incorporated into the desk research.

Two accompanying knowledge syntheses have also been produced - one focusing on phenomena related to online extremism and the other on new tendencies within online extremism.

To get the most out of the gathered knowledge, it is recommended to read the full version of the desk research.

THE PURPOSE OF this desk research is to unearth and identify existing knowledge about online extremism with a focus on prevention in order to gain a broad overview of what has been worked with on a national and international level, as well as how significant phenomena are defined and understood.

The primary target group for the desk research is professionals in the municipalities and elsewhere with contact to children and young people, e.g., SSP consultants and social workers (SSP refers to a partnership between school, social services and police), mentors, club employees, educators and so on.

This knowledge synthesis highlights the knowledge gathered in online extremism on four levels:

- Societal level and IT approaches
- Local level
- Individual level
- Educational level

Coming from a Danish perspective of prevention of extremism, a number of choices have been made in relation to the focus and delimitation of the desk research. The findings, therefore, do not by any means completely cover the prevention of online extremism among children and young people. Instead, the desk research provides the most relevant knowledge to explore from a Danish point of reference.

The desk research itself has followed the general practice for systematic literature studies, which means that the literature search has been carried out within a defined area in relation to subject, time and place.

A total of 611 publications were reviewed in the broad screening. Of these, 39 publications were selected as a basis for preparing the report, and a further 13 documents were selected in relation to the chapter on IT approaches to prevention.

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Understandings and actions at the societal level

The selected literature is grouped into two main research areas when it relates to the societal level. On the one hand, a broad field examines combined efforts by authorities, web providers and other actors to curb hate speech at the societal level, and, on the other hand, a newer field examines various software and IT solutions for identifying and preventing hateful rhetoric.

A relatively large part of the selected literature maintains a critical attitude toward authorities removing extremist online material – both in terms of available options and the difficulties involved in doing so. Issues include whether authorities and social media providers should remove extremist content and hateful rhetoric or use their resources to be actively present on social web fora to monitor and intervene.

One suggestion is that it may be beneficial for the authorities not to remove and block certain senders or groups but rather monitor and follow the activities of the groups online and be actively present on the web. Others believe that flagging, i.e., user reporting, is a flexible option. Another suggestion is for social media and other platforms to take a more active role and even remove content. However, the weakness of that approach is that it can be difficult to distinguish between illegal content and radical statements.

When it comes to preventative campaigns, there is broad research consensus that it is important to have accurate knowledge of the target group, including its grievances and frustrations, and to target campaigns at specific groups or actions. Campaigns designed according to the 'one size fits all' principle risk falling between two stools.

Campaigns should address and take into account the underlying conflicts and feelings of injustice that underlie some extremist viewpoints. However, counter-messages should avoid adopting the binary 'us and them' narrative that many extremist groups cultivate.

Several of the selected publications highlight how campaigns should avoid using direct counter-propaganda or counter-narratives, which either have no effect or, in a worst case scenario, pave the way further into extremism. Instead, so-called 'alternative narratives' should be formulated that seek more open dialogue while at the same time establishing a limit for when extremist, propagandistic content becomes illegal.

IT approaches to prevention

Much of the research into online extremism examines methods and tools for monitoring, identifying and removing extremist messages, political grooming and hateful rhetoric targeted against individuals or groups based on race, religion, gender, appearance (e.g., a disability) or sexual orientation.

The selected literature largely concludes that the future will see an increasing demand for smart software, data methods and IT tools

that can be used to identify and eliminate hateful rhetoric and develop effective preventative measures.

However, the IT methods generally have a number of inherent weaknesses. For example, quantitative data methods make it difficult to identify all forms of hateful rhetoric, especially when expressed more subtly in the form of symbols, slang or when

integrated into videos, as this typically cannot be identified through semantic computer models. In addition, the results will typically contain many false positives, i.e., instances that cannot actually be considered as extremist. This means that data methods to identify hateful rhetoric and extremist narratives cannot be automatic, as the findings from the data sets must be validated by experts who assess them manually (Oboler & Conelly, 2015 and Arpinar et al. 2016).

In general, more mixed methods are needed that combine quantitative and qualitative studies to create a more holistic picture, including combining the methods of IT approaches with existing humanistic and social science research into online extremism and violent radicalisation (Poole, Giraud & de Quincy 2019; Fernandez 2018; Chetty & Alathur 2018). The field is relatively new and there are still many knowledge gaps and uncertainties in the research.

Knowledge and preventative measures at a local level

When children and young people find themselves excluded and left out of the local community, it can make sense for them to find communities online. That is why local actors can have a role in creating communities and spaces that can impact on young people's sense of belonging.

The conclusions show that the local environment plays an important role in preventing online extremism, and that it is important for close cooperation between national authorities and this environment.

State and civil actors should cooperate more closely, as local actors such as schools, mosques, Islamic associations, etc., can help increase trust among citizens and authorities (Holt, Freilich and Chermak 2015). Another study shows that generally there have been

positive experiences with police presence in the local environment where people can voice concerns, and where municipal actors have become involved (Bjørø (ed.) 2018). Sundes (2013) also highlights how police in Norway have had good experiences with direct contact with those who appear to be attracted to online extremism.

In general, Bjørø emphasises how absolutely crucial it is to gain knowledge of the problems that appear to dominate local environments before effective action can be taken. Here he highlights how different local environments can have different needs and require different measures, and why it is important, therefore, to organise preventative work based on the opportunities and needs of the local context.

Knowledge and preventative measures on an individual level

The research suggests that children and young people in vulnerable positions appear to be particularly at risk from finding their way into online extremism, and there are different explanations and suggestions as to how and why this is the case.

The conclusions on the individual level rest upon the conclusions that are also presented in "Knowledge Synthesis – A Survey of Knowledge on Extremism and its Prevention" from 2018, but when the online perspective is added, there is an extra focus on how self-radicalisation seems to be an overlooked phenomenon.

The conclusions of a study by Lange, 2018, show that young people in vulnerable positions and with a longing to belong to a community can be drawn to online sites and environments with extremist content because they offer a sense of community that young people may have long been searching for and/or have lacked.

The risk factors are related to the internal structures of the individual, while children and young people who consider themselves excluded, outside and/or lonely may be particularly vulnerable to online extremism (Halverson and Way 2012).

A study focusing on self-radicalisation clarifies how self-radicalisation is an overlooked phenomenon that is often linked to young people's experience of exclusion and marginalisation. The study also suggests that young people who are supported by their families and schools, and who feel accepted by society, have the necessary elements of protection to avoid being radicalised. Here the focus should be on building up the resilience of children and young people so they can resist online extremism (Hayes 2017).

There is, therefore, a strong focus on belonging, acceptance, participation and community as factors of particular importance for children and young people when it comes to being drawn into online extremism; but emphasis is also placed on self-radicalisation as an underexposed phenomenon that calls for more research.

One study concludes that young people who are bystanders of online hate are also more likely to become perpetrators of online hate. The study also shows that the less a young person is able to mentalise, the greater their risk of becoming perpetrators of online hate (Wachs & Wright 2019).

Knowledge and preventive measures in education

A number of studies in the selected literature of the desk research have a particular focus on how professionals, most often in the field of education, can help prevent children and young people from entering into online extremism.

Overall, there is an emphasis on how children and young people should be taught to be critical thinkers and have better strategies to resist online extremism, while there should be a more democratic culture in schools more generally.

A study by Wachs, Wright, Sittichai, Singh et al (2019) points out that children and young people need to be educated to understand that retribution is not a good response to online hate, while teenagers need to be educated to develop better strategies to counter online hate.

The study confirms that bystanders of online hate are more likely to become perpetrators of online hate, and how assertive strategies (the ability to respect one's own rights and needs) are highlighted. Based on their findings, they emphasise the need for children and young people to receive self-confidence training and be trained in media literacy and social skills – enhanced through online hate prevention programmes.

The study also identifies measures more specifically related to the role of the school. For example, the authors highlight how media literacy training can help teach young people to pay more attention to who has access to their data, how they can block people sharing online hate material, how they can store messages/images as evidence (e.g., by copying or taking screenshots) and how they can report online hate material on social web fora.

One article presents a discussion of whether counternarratives are the right way to combat online radicalisation, and concludes that this is not the case. Instead, prevention work should start offline by educating young people to understand the workings of social media and to develop critical thinking skills and an open, democratic culture.

Recommendations suggest that young people should be trained in digital skills to provide them with a better understanding of the workings of social media and the ability to see through online manipulation (Gemmerli 2015).

Schools should therefore be understood as a democracy-promoting authority whose task is to counter online hatred by teaching appropriate skills, such as media literacy, conflict strategies and democratic and social skills, which can be improved through prevention programmes that help children and young people understand democratic values and how basic human rights also apply to the online world.

However, these programmes should also focus on promoting empathy with victims, taking the victim's perspective, embracing diversity and teaching young people to recognise and tackle online hate, as well as raising awareness of how the online environment affects their own behaviour.

There is also a recognition of how individual teachers are limited by their personal resources. Nonetheless, they still have the ultimate duty to ensure preventive practices, and they must therefore be offered appropriate training and opportunities for professional development.

Where can I read more?

Here you can read more about online extremism:

- **Desk research:** Survey of existing knowledge on preventing online extremism among children and young people in a Danish context, and a description of the knowledge landscape in the field.
- **Knowledge synthesis editions of the desk research:** The desk research is further summarised in two other knowledge synthesis editions. One looks at the knowledge of tendencies in extremism and the other looks at relevant phenomena related to online extremism.
- **Knowledge publications:** The Centre publishes a number of knowledge publications at <https://stopekstremisme.dk/en/extremism>. Here you can read more about propaganda, extremist digital communities, conspiracy theories, etc.

The **Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism** supports preventive work among municipalities, regions, crime prevention partners, educational institutions, housing associations and other organisations.

The centre is part of the Danish Agency for International Recruitment and Integration, which operates under the Ministry of Immigration and Integration. Read more about the Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism at <https://stopekstremisme.dk/en>

