



Danish Centre for  
Prevention of Extremism

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# New phenomena in 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 a 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 knowledge of the prevention of online extremism at community, group, individual and school level, and the other focussing on new tendencies related to online extremism.

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

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 following phenomena that, in terms of the research, have begun to attract increasing attention in relation to online extremism:

- Political grooming and online recruitment
- Misinformation, disinformation, fake news and trolling
- Propaganda, mobilisation and extremist narratives
- Conspiracy theories
- Hate speech and dehumanising tendencies

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 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 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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## Political grooming and online recruitment

As with sexual grooming, political grooming is a complex and individual process that can involve longer or shorter lengths of time to entice or manipulate those affected not only to participate in certain online activities but also to adopt the views of a group or network that are central to the community (Omtanke Online 2019).

Children and young people are particularly vulnerable because, especially in one's youth, identity is a fluid and changing entity that can be influenced by interactions with different communities (Turner-Graham 2014; Nettets Vildveje/Medierådet 2018: 46).

A groomer acts as a 'recruiter' for a movement to which the young person is

slowly attracted as the groomer gradually begins to gain trust by giving the young person a sense of being specially selected and important for both the groomer and the movement (Nettets Vildveje/ Medierådet 2018: 47-48).

The preventative measures that the publications point to in relation to grooming all align with social psychology group and identity theories. The need to offer young people who have been recruited to online extremism some alternative, strong and inclusive communities with non-extremist identity markers is also pointed out (Lange 2018; Sunde 2013).

### Example of a grooming case

In a case study, Lange (2018) describes a boy who, for a number of years, moves along the fringes of an online life with tendencies to extremist attitudes and opinions. Based on interviews with the boy, the study concludes that social media and platforms where extremist attitudes

are playing out tend to attract young people in search of belonging. The trend is confirmed in Nettets Vildveje/Medierådet (2018), which highlights how unmet needs can drive young people towards alternative communities, where praise, recognition and positive attention become a major attraction.

# Misinformation, disinformation, fake news and trolling

Fake news pretends to be correct information or real news, and often appears trustworthy, but in reality is erroneous (Mehlsen & Hendricks 2019: 127-129). Fake news thus consists of false or unsubstantiated claims, distortions and manipulated images and videos from serious-looking web addresses, which taken together acts as misleading misinformation (Mehlsen & Hendricks 2019: 132).

When misinformation is deliberately disseminated, it becomes disinformation (Mehlsen & Hendricks 2019: 129). Contrary to disinformation, misinformation does not always have a deliberate intention – it may be that those who pass on misinformation actually believe that the information is true and pass it on in the belief that it is based on facts (Omtanke online 2019).

The phenomenon of trolling is where people or robots with known or anonymous online profiles take part in social media debates to provoke and whip up some emotions (Omtanke online 2019). The profile automatically spreads information within the network, resulting in 'norm hacking', i.e., a form of automated peer pressure in which

certain attitudes or norms are hyped up so they appear far more widespread and popular than they are in reality (Mehlsen & Hendricks 2019: 143; Nettets Vildeveje/Medierådet 2018: 28). Misinformation poses an increasing threat to democracy by sowing divisions between groups and increasing distrust in democracy and politicians, leading to a relativism in which the difference between true and false is blurred (Mehlsen & Hendricks 2019).

Psychology research has uncovered how cognitive bias affects our perceptions – i.e., the extent to which we tend to select and believe in information that confirms our worldview and ignores the sources that do not align with our existing beliefs. Most of us tend to believe in information that confirms our beliefs, although often unconsciously.

As they are often part of extremist groups' deliberate attempts to create certain (false) narratives about the 'enemy', phenomena such as misinformation, disinformation, fake news and trolling should be considered in the context of the spread of extremist narratives and propaganda.

## Political grooming and online recruitment

Propaganda refers to the dissemination of information that spreads certain ideas and prompts people to act in a certain way. Propaganda and the spread of polarising narratives are actively used by extremist groups and pose a challenge to preventative work (Richards 2019).

It has also been noted how propaganda today plays a special role through new communication technologies, which have made it easier to reach a much larger audience and have made it possible to spread much greater volumes of misinformation that can be used effectively in propaganda (Lenos & Krasenberg 2017).

The three essential elements of propaganda are anxiety, emotional impact and the

construction of narratives of hope and redemption, all of which draw upon dark and deep-seated emotions in human consciousness, such as powerlessness, fear, anger and frustration (Richards 2019).

Successful propaganda plays on an underlying fear or frustration that is already present in some individuals or groups and which, through strong narratives, can be further amplified with the aim of making individuals resistant to alternative ideas that challenge or cast doubt on the ideology in question. It is built around simplistic binary narratives that divide the world into friends and enemies/good and evil, and it both builds on and nourishes an underlying fear or anger (Smit & Meines 2019).



# Conspiracy theories and alternative explanations

Conspiracy theories can be defined as the belief that a group of individuals is secretly working towards various destructive ends (Bjørgero (ed.) 2018).

Conspiracy theories can reinforce the demonisation of the other and promote self-isolation and small group radicalisation, as seen, for example, in certain threads on 4Chan or in closed Discord channels (Brockhoff, Peters & Thorup 2018).

In some cases, the idea that society is controlled by an evil and illegitimate power can reinforce a conspiracy theory's image of a close, imminent threat that must be fought through armed resistance and rebellion.

Conspiracy theories form a closed worldview where ideas are combined in a mutually affirmative network that excludes all information that does not conform to beliefs (Bjørgero (ed.) 2018).

The relationship between conspiracy theories

and extremism is complex. One can easily believe and share conspiracy theories online without being an extremist – but people in extremist environments will often believe in and use some conspiracy theory or other to affirm their dualistic worldview and legitimise their struggle (Brockhoff, Peters & Thorup 2018).

Finally, conspiracy theories create a shared sense of fear and unity within a group or network, and, in this sense, the authors suggest that conspiracy theories can contribute to extremism and legitimise the use of violence, even if there is no direct causal link between conspiracy theories, extremism and violence.

Digital education can help prevent online extremism, especially in terms of empowering children's and young people's critical thinking skills and their ability to understand propaganda, fake news and conspiracy theories (Lenos & Krasenberg, 2017).

## Hate speech and dehumanising tendencies

Online hatred is expressed through offensive, hurtful or threatening texts or language in the form of posts, comments, text messages, videos or images. It is directly or indirectly targeted at individuals or groups defined on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, religion or disability; or against individuals who otherwise represent a particular group (Wachs et al. 2019).

The research has examined the polarisation that takes place in online fora between different groups, where derogatory and extremist content leads to the undermining of democratic freedoms and/or the dehumanisation of groups or individuals categorised by virtue of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, skin colour, beliefs and social status.

The extremist content can often take the form of so-called 'hate speech' against certain people or groups, and sometimes these fora develop into outright echo chambers that are allowed to live out their own secluded lives (Lenos & Krasenberg 2014).

Echo chambers are small, partly-public groups or subcultures where certain attitudes and norms of behaviour are allowed to dominate, and where participants mutually affirm each other in a particular perception or worldview that is further cultivated and developed in the community. Examples of fora where this kind of rhetoric can play out include closed Facebook groups, Reddit, 4Chan and Snapchat.

Echo chambers can lead to the normalisation of attitudes and forms of language that are usually considered unacceptable. This leads to problematic behaviour among young people because the subculture has a negative socialising effect where the most extreme attitudes come to represent the group (Bjørgero (ed.) 2018). Various polarising and transgressive dynamics have also been pointed out where, because the harshest statements provide the greatest recognition within the group, young people attempt to outdo each other in terms of harsh rhetoric (Lange 2018; Turner-Graham).

## 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 new tendencies in online extremism and the other looks at the four levels of 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>

