



Danish Centre for  
Prevention of Extremism

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# **New tendencies 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  
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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 synthesis editions have also been produced; one focussing on knowledge of the prevention of online extremism at community, group, individual and school level, and the other focussing on the phenomena 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 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 three new tendencies in online extremism that have also begun to attract increasing attention in the research:

- The Incels movement
- Anti-Semitism
- Gamer Culture

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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# The Incel movement

Incels, which is an acronym for 'involuntary celibates', is a term for extremist male online subcultures, rooted in data-geek culture, where the focal point is an extremist hatred of women and sometimes minority groups. Discussions on Incels fora, including social media such as Reddit or 4Chan, or the website Incels.co, often revolve around how people feel unfairly treated by society in general and women in particular, the latter being referred to with derogatory terms and inside slang, such as Stacy (attractive woman) and Becky (average woman) (Mogensen & Rand 2019: 18).

## A self-hating movement

Incels form a self-hating movement whose members suffer from an immature sexuality and sense of identity, which they channel into misogyny and a cult of childish, scat-fixated sexual obsession. For example, there are frequent posts about bowels and faeces on Incels fora that contain a mixture of both sadistic and masochistic elements in their descriptions of how women are physically disgusted with Incels but become sexually aroused by smelling the flatulence of 'Chad' men (i.e., attractive, sexually active men) (Krüger 2019).

Incel figures behind a series of murders in the United States and Canada have a cult-like status in Incel forums and are glorified in memes and merchandise as martyrs of the movement, while the sharing of images of women covered in faeces serves as a common reference point.

## Racism and misogyny can gradually take on an extremist form

A characteristic of these subcultures is a process by which members initially express themselves with an ironic and playful distance, after which racism and misogyny gradually take on a more extremist form, such that language use and willingness to act can eventually coincide (Krüger 2019).

The political grooming process that has typically taken place among Incels on 4chan, for example, has revolved around how to outdo each other in sharing repulsive and extremely offensive images, often with references to faeces, anal-fixation and the shaming of women.

4CHAN is an internet forum or social media where users can anonymously post and share text and images. On 4Chan, there are numerous groups or so-called sub-fora, some of which are geeky, subculture communities.

Some groups are also home to offensive material and racist and misogynistic attitudes, often mixed with the hatred of Jews, which is widely shared among users.

The function of the images is to serve as an initiation ritual that signals an affiliation with the group, while at the same time acting as a test of outsiders. Excrement becomes a weapon to keep outsiders at bay. Here too there is an element of group acceptance and pressure through transgressive actions.

### **A virtual community of like-minded people**

Incels form a subculture that, due to their extreme attitudes, is "at very high risk of becoming radicalised", although far from all who, in one sense or another, associate themselves with the phenomenon and cultivate it online are willing to commit violence (Mogensen & Rand 2019).

Incels provide an example of online extremism insofar as they form a virtual community of like-minded people who cultivate a common identity centred around a hatred of women and minorities, and they can be considered an extremist and potentially violent group.

Incels' sense of exclusion, being misunderstood and treated unjustly has its own sense of justification and should be seen as a manifestation of how certain groups who find themselves easily excluded by established society can foster a desire to form subcultures where members can mutually reassure each other that it is not their fault. However, the way Incels express their frustration is not legitimate; it is extremist and potentially violent (Mogensen & Rand, 2019, and Krüger, 2019).

The selected research literature does not elaborate on the scale of the phenomenon in Denmark and the Nordic countries, but Incels are high on the security policy agenda in the United States as several perpetrators of crimes against female college students, including assault and murder, have proven to be closely linked to the Incel movement and ideology.

## Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism has flared up again – and not just in physical actions such as the desecration of Jewish burial grounds on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, for example, or death threats against Jews and threats of attacks on Jewish institutions. Clearly anti-Semitic statements have also appeared on various social media and other platforms (Bjørge (ed.) 2018). This is especially apparent in neo-Nazi circles, such as the Nordic Resistance Movement (NMR), and in various discussion threads where allegations and narratives concerning Jews reflect classical anti-Semitic tropes.

### Conspiracy theories of a global Jewish plot

A key element of anti-Semitism that distinguishes it from more general xenophobia is the combination of a crude characterisation and stereotyping of Jews alongside conspiracy theories of a worldwide Jewish plot – which is also rooted in National Socialist ideology (Bjørge (ed.) 2018).

In short, conspiracy theories claim that, since time immemorial, all Jews have worked to destroy Christian civilisation and establish a Jewish form of world domination.

Anti-Semitism, however, is not limited to neo-Nazi circles. It is also part of the extremist Islamist mindset as well as left-wing extremism, where hatred is more reflected in the identification of all Jews with the politics of the State of Israel and what is perceived as its expansive and oppressive role in the

Middle East, and Jews are being attacked against this backdrop.

Many far-right fora have an ambiguous relationship with Jews and anti-Semitism. Islamophobic, right-wing radical fora seem mostly Israel-friendly initially, but the idea that Jews are behind Muslim immigration to Europe is emerging more and more frequently (Bjørge (ed.) 2018).

### Normalisation of extremist and hateful narratives

In a study based on qualitative analyses of a number of far-right websites, Facebook pages, YouTube accounts and Twitter accounts, the researchers twice came across conspiracy theories that Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, was behind the attacks in Oslo and on Utøya on July 22, 2012. According to the theory, Anders Breivik was simply used as a 'false flag', i.e., a scapegoat to hide the fact that the massacre was planned as an act of revenge after Norway recognised Palestine as a state.

The conspiracy theories and narratives are examples of how anti-Semitic conspiracy theories thrive best on extremist fora, where they are promoted via memes, posts and commentaries that help to normalise extremist and hateful narratives.

The limits of what is acceptable to speak publicly about Muslims and Jews have shifted significantly over the last 10-15 years, partly due to the massive presence of the far right on social media and various platforms (Bjørge (ed.) 2018)

## Gamification and gamer Culture

Gamification is an example of an online culture among young people that is rapidly changing. It is attracting the interest of extremism research due to the dehumanising tendencies, misinformation and trolling phenomena that move onto the platforms, as well as on gaming services, where young people interact, and because the age of those at risk of being affected is gradually decreasing.

There is a gap in the research about how bloggers, YouTubers and influencers are weaved into or contribute to the problems themselves, and there is also a lack of systematic knowledge of how children and young people who are part of gamer culture are affected by extremist content.

### Young people cultivating the idolisation of terrorists

The idolisation of terrorists such as Anders Breivik or Nazi generals from the Second World War provides an attractive source of identification for some young people who cultivate a political counterculture and create a community around being against the 'correct' attitudes of society and parents. This is reflected in the use of certain skins, usernames or avatars that signal admiration for Nazi soldiers, certain types of weapons or people that you can roleplay in games (Turner-Graham 2014).

**AN AVATAR** is a character or person in a computer game or in cyberspace, whereas a skin is a form of virtual camouflage that gamers use to make weapons look cooler, for example. Among gamers, there is prestige in having certain skins, and skins can have a high value or a special meaning within an online community.

### Extremist content and misinformation are rife on gaming platforms

The popular gaming service Discord, which enables communication between players and

teammates during games, is also used to create groups or channels where the exchange of far-right views in particular takes place. Several Danish gaming networks are organised through Discord, and on the Danish Discord channel, race theories as well as conspiracy theories about the so-called Great Replacement, which is rife in far-right groups, are evidently also discussed (Mogensen & Rand 2019).

Although Discord is primarily a service for gamers, it is a great example of how extremist content and misinformation flourish on the services and gaming platforms where young people interact – although Discord actively tries to ban and shut down extremist groups and offensive content.

## 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 trends 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>

