Y-EX
Youth Extremisms

Evidence Briefing

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Youth Extremisms

Social media, corporate responsibilities and youth extremism

On the heels of significant electoral successes and several instances of extraordinary extremist violence, there has been renewed political, media, and scholarly attention to the growth of extremism in Europe and, in particular, to the role of youth in domestic and foreign extremist movements and violence.

In the second of our six seminars on 'Youth Extremisms: Understanding across Ideological and Religious Contexts', participants from a wide range of academic disciplines and from European NGOs and government agencies working in the counter-violent-extremism area considered how violent (and non-violent) extremist individuals and groups use a plethora of social media platforms. The seminar explored what impact the consumption of violent extremist material has for the development and outreach of extremist subcultures in the 'off-line' world and thus its broader societal impact. It considered the ethics of on-line monitoring for the academic community as well as the role and responsibility that Internet companies and social media platform providers have in combatting on-line extremism.

Key Discussion Points
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- Social media crackdowns are succeeding in shutting down extremist especially pro-IS, accounts.

- This prevents messages spreading but hinders a fuller understanding of phenomena and evaluation of which are the really serious threats.

- We might learn from wider media studies and psychology literature to understand how images and messages are consumed and received. Violent extremist material may be consumed like other violent images (e.g. of internet porn) for excitement, pleasure and fantasy or in ways recognisable from studies of fascination with serial killers or school shooters.

- The 'internet' consists of a plethora of different platforms, which must be disaggregated for effective understanding and intervention. Rather than blaming 'the internet' for creating an appetite for extremist material we need to understand the structural underpinnings of demand for it.

- We must distinguish clearly the different purposes and agents of 'counter' narratives, 'alternative' narratives and government strategic communications. Credible counter narratives recognise legitimate grievances and so we should think beyond the binary of 'extremist' and 'counter' narratives to construct 'shared' narratives.

- Challenges to effective counter narratives include: upscaling counter/alternative narrative efforts; sustaining counter-messaging campaigns; connecting online and offline interventions; developing positive government-industry-practitioner partnerships; and monitoring and evaluating the effect of campaigns.

- The shift in discourse on extremism from people's behaviours to their opinions raises the urgency of studying the supposed correlation between attitudes and behaviours. This may help understand the connection between online and offline worlds and whether there are generational differences between the nature of these connections?

- The boundary between the so-called mainstream and extremism is blurring, especially in the case of the extreme right.

Implications for Policy

- Too active a role of governments or corporations in diminishing digital footprint can, paradoxically, hinder effective work by counter terrorism intelligence agencies. Shutting down accounts may just push the problem underground.

- Dislike or distrust of the government can obscure important debate about the purpose and mandate of intelligence agencies.

- The rapid development of new, and increasingly more difficult to trace, platforms means counter-terrorism services are constantly catching up; in practice most policy recommendations are based on the monitoring of open rather than closed groups.

- 'Big data' companies (e.g. software platforms) can generate information without the legal constraints government agencies are bound by. Access to such data is frequently seen as the answer by intelligence agencies but effective intervention needs also focused analysis and resources for their interpretation.

- There exist many excellent counter narratives; resources and energies might be best invested in finding mechanisms of 'redirecting' individuals looking for extremist material to them rather than creating new counter messages.

- The most effective counter narratives are not those that criticise extremist organisations (e.g. IS) but that address the same themes as those used in their videos.

- Counter narratives that work tend to employ: emotional content and storytelling; facts and numbers; surprise; humour and satire; and strong opinions.

- Educational interventions must be based on open dialogue unfettered by counter-terrorism strategies. We must also be aware that increasing dialogue can have undesired consequences (c.f. suicide awareness campaigns).

About the Project