



# EXTREMISM ONLINE



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Save the Children

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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM DETERIORATES CHILDREN'S WELFARE AND RIGHTS

Children and youth all have a universal right to a safe life, as well as to live in an environment that promotes welfare – irrespective of their background or circumstance. Today, our lives are coloured by novel societal and transnational tensions. An escalation in conversations and hate speech create a foundation for ideological violence that threatens children's rights and welfare.

Extremism affects children and young people in myriad ways. Hate speech chips away at the target's welfare, sense of security and trust in authority – particularly in children that are already in a vulnerable position. To be subject or witness to harassment and violence are especially traumatic experiences for children and young people. Indeed, all violent extremist groups target young people with their propaganda and recruitment.

By ratifying the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the state of Finland has committed to protecting children from physical and mental violence. Violent extremism is best countered by building a society that is as equal and participatory as possible and resolute in intervening in extremist issues.

This report is aimed at parents and professionals working with young people. It covers information on violent extremism and radicalisation, what kind of effects they have on the welfare of children and youth, as well as what can protect them from absorbing destructive mindsets. In particular, the report delves into how these intricate phenomena appear online.

We hope this report provides you with information on not only violent extremism, but tools for understanding and encountering youth that have assumed black and white thinking as well. Respectful and considerate encounters have immense impact. On us all.

**Hanna Markkula-Kivisilta**



Secretary-General  
Save the Children Finland

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## SUMMARY

Violent radicalisation and extremism threaten the rights and welfare of children. In today's global world, they have become frequent topics of conversation, partly accelerated by the internet – the commonality of its use has enabled real-time information sharing and equal communication. By use of social media, violent extremist groups are able to extensively reach potential supporters and spread propaganda that normalises the use of violence.

By its nature, violent extremism is rigid and pronouncedly black and white – it includes uncompromising notions of right and wrong, us and them. It opposes diversity, human rights, democracy and rule of law. It is typical for extremist ideology to see itself as absolute and other ideologies as wrong or false. Violent extremism cannot be reduced to one particular ideology, religion or set of values, but rather a consequence of multiple different factors. However, extremist thinking always follows the same pattern: the views of a jihadi and a neo-Nazi are structurally the same.

In addition to violent extremism manifesting as physical violence, it can also appear, for example, as hate speech as well as disseminating propaganda. In an online environment, violent extremism is mostly visible as the latter. Online, the use of violence is legitimised and normalised through violent speech, which is targeted at minority groups in particular – immigrants and sexual minorities, for example. Social networks of similar-minded people form online, where violent and dehumanising opinions are met with little to no resistance. This creates a so-called echo chamber, where violent thoughts are acceptable and disclosing them is encouraged.

Children and young people who have lived in or returned from conflict zones are particularly vulnerable to violent radicalisation. However, in society, the effects and reach of violent extremism are far more extensive. Growing up under the influence of or inside an extremist group is damaging to the balanced development of a child or young person. The narrow social models produced by extremist thinking endanger the normal psychosocial and cognitive development of a child or young person, in addition to threatening their right to safety, equality and general well-being. Extremist, small-minded thinking that opposes diversity endangers a child's right to a living environment that supports individual development as well as the possibility for moral and responsible growth into a well-balanced member of society.

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## TO START

In recent years, violent radicalisation and extremist group activity have become progressively more visible. The explosive growth of social media has increased hate and violent speech considerably. Furthermore, alternative truths and fake news have gained more and more visibility, and are even circulated in a professional manner. All this is ideal ground for pitting different groups of people against each other and polarising society even further<sup>1</sup> – polarisation increases the feeling of insecurity, which can create a foundation for ideological violence, normalised by hate and violent speech. When society is sharply polarised and in an explosive state, it provides ample breeding ground for violent extremism.

Online, extremist groups target youth in particular with their propaganda, because young people not only use the internet more than older people do, but they are also more susceptible to social influences in this phase of their development. So many insecurity factors affect this phase in people's lives – such as building one's own identity and separating from one's family. However, stark and black and white thinking are typical for a young person, which is why the severe rhetoric of extremist groups can appeal to many. With age, cognitive (thought-related) skills improve and thinking becomes more flexible – but a young person whose thinking is black and white is a fruitful target for extremist groups' uncompromising propaganda. At a young age, the mechanisms that control the brain's strong impulses have not yet fully developed, which can increase the likelihood of violent behaviour. Especially marginalised and socially outcast young people are a convenient target for extremist groups, because a lack of options and hopelessness can drive youth to look for new opportunities and thus assimilating to extreme ideologies.

Violent extremism violates children's rights and damages their welfare. As is stated in the 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child:

*“The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious and any other form of discrimination. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood...”*  
Article 10.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989, is based on this Declaration. It is a convention on human rights with a focus on children. The most important aim of this Convention is to ensure essential rights to, among others, health, education, equality, and safety. One of the guiding principles of the Convention is non-discrimination: children cannot be discriminated based on his or her race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, nationality, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. According to the guiding principles of the Convention, every child also has an inherent right to life, survival, and development. Violent extremism damages a child's right to fair treatment and a safe living environment, one that supports children's individual development to fully assuming responsibilities of society.

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<sup>1</sup>By polarisation, we mean the escalated division of collective thinking and/or phenomena becoming increasingly extreme. As a thought process, it is based on substantial duality: us and them.

Despite radicalisation and political violence not being new phenomena, violent radicalisation is still a fairly new area of research<sup>2</sup>, especially in Finland. Violent extremism and radicalisation are gaining new forms online, and social media channels are used to disseminate them – this is noted increasingly in research on the subject. The aim of this study is to provide information on violent radicalisation and extremism by reviewing and collating the most recent research on violent radicalisation. This study, conducted as part of Save the Children Finland's RadicalWeb project, aims to increase understanding of violent radicalisation, as well as how it manifests online. The project utilised Finnish online sources, and this review mirrors those observations with current, justified and well-reasoned research.

The first section of this review delves into relevant research by presenting key observations made by researchers in the realm of violent extremism – what we know about violent radicalisation and extremism, what can lead up to it, and, conversely, what factors can protect from it. The second section of the review is based on the outcomes of the research done by RadicalWeb. Central to this section are observations from the research – how violent extremism and radicalisation manifest on the Finnish web, and how these observations mirror current research.

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<sup>2</sup> Check Kundnani, 2012.

# PART 1 – VIOLENT RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM

**Extremism** describes thinking that is, by its nature, markedly stark, absolute, and black and white. Typically, it involves stiff and uncompromising views on right and wrong – which in reality manifest as generalising classifications and strong separation of groups, with an idea of “us” and “them”. An extremist mind does not accept the complexities of the social world, but rather resorts to rigid and strict categorisation and simple truths.

**Violent** extremism describes the process of rationalising the use, threat and incitement of violence by ideological means<sup>3</sup>. Extreme measures – the use of violence – are seen as justified by means of extremists’ worldview and values. Typically, violent extremism opposes diversity, human rights, democracy and rule of law. It is also usual that one’s own worldview is seen as superior and other ideologies as wrong or false. Violent extremism cannot be reduced to one single ideology, religion, or set of values, as it is a result of a variety of factors.

**Violent** radicalisation describes the process that can lead to violent extremism. This process is always an individual one, which is affected by a variety of different psychological, social and societal factors. Moreover, this is not a linear chain of events with a particular beginning and endpoint, but rather a complex and multifaceted process, which may or may not lead to action motivated by violence.

**Radicalism** describes the beliefs and actions that aim for thorough or complete political or social reform. Violent means are sometimes used as possible agents of change, but typically, radicalism does not perpetuate the use of violence, even though violence may be seen as acceptable. However, radicalism can also have positive effects and it can function as a driving force for society. For example, many of the things we take for granted today, such as women’s right to vote or the five-day workweek, were once radical ideas. Radicalism becomes threatening when one is ready to advance one’s own beliefs by means of violence – this is when it is considered violent extremism. At the centre of this review is extremism that condones and/or incites violence.



*Violent radicalisation is always a sum of many factors. It is a complex process with no single simple explanation.  
Picture: Marker Wizards Ltd.*

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 15/2016.



## Violent extremist groups in Finland

The summaries presented in this section were compiled based on the most recent data upon writing (2019). The statements made in this section are based on the yearly situation report on violent extremism of the Finnish Ministry of the Interior. The first report was published in 2013, the most recent in 2018 – this is based on 2017 statistics. The summaries in this section have utilised several years' worth of publications.

Violent extremism and extremist-motivated violent activity has increased in recent years. Extremist groups have gained greater visibility through traditional as well as social media, where their stark and uncompromising rhetoric is reaching more and more people. The increase in violent extremism manifests not only through the growth in media coverage but police crime statistics as well. Extremist crimes (i.e. criminal cases that fulfil the characteristics of violent extremism as it relates to criminal law) have increased five-fold in four years<sup>4</sup>. While violent extremist movement has increased on a national level, it has ever more clearly concentrated to a few operational groups<sup>5</sup>. For example, radical animal rights and environmental groups have become significantly more moderate during the past decade – their activity is channelled mainly through non-fanatic routes<sup>6</sup>. The ideological views represented by these groups has become more mainstream, which has likely affected their modes of operation. Conversely, the radical far right have increased their visibility significantly in recent years<sup>7</sup>. The effects of the so-called refugee crisis<sup>8</sup> is one factor in the increased activity of the radical far right. As a result, the far left have become more active as it is typical for it to challenge the radical far right<sup>9</sup>.

**Violent extremist groups that operate in Finland can roughly be classified into four groups:**

- 1) violent far right
- 2) violent far left
- 3) violent radical alternative groups
- 4) violent religious extremist groups

In Finland, **the violent far right** is fairly splintered and consists of multiple different actors, but is still a widespread syndicate. On an ideological level, it does not seem to be particularly structured even though the basic principles between different actors are shared. Typically, the racist skinhead groups are the main practitioners of violent far right activity, which manifests mainly as street violence as well as hate and violent speech<sup>10</sup>. Cases that reach officials and police statistics are mostly assault and incitement of racial or ethnic hatred<sup>11</sup>. In 2017, approximately 50 of these cases were recognised by officials<sup>12</sup>.

Even though people who practice violent activity are in the minority, the extremist far right and anti-immigration ideology has a significant amount of passive supporters. This is made evident in particular by the abundant far right online communication and social media channels, in which far right groups have far more supporters than “street actives”<sup>13</sup>. Extreme far right social media forums entail fiercely polarising conversations, which include justifying and glorifying violence.

The most prominent far right actor in Finland has long been national socialist Nordic Resistance Movement (Pohjoismainen Vastarintaliike, PVL). However, in recent years, NRM's official activity has weakened due to a suit from the National Police Board of Finland. In its ruling, the court has ordered NRM to be dissolved by making the following statement: “The Movement slanders and insults ethnic and racial groups, disseminates hate speech, uses violence and urges its supporters to utilise violence and harassment against alleged enemies”<sup>14</sup>. NRM has appealed the ruling to the Courts of Appeal. However, NRM is currently banned from operating until further notice.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 24.5.2015; Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 13/2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 13/2018.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Refers to the 2014-2015 increase in refugee flows to Europe.

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 13/2018.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

**Violent far left** activity has typically not been particularly organised in Finland. By its nature, it is mainly anarchic, and in recent years in particular, it has focused more intensely on antifascist activity – i.e. opposing the far right – with NRM as its main target<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the activity of the radical far left is most visible at opposing demonstrations aimed at the far right. Approximately 20 cases reached officials and police statistics in 2017 – these were mostly affiliated with demonstrations organised in Helsinki, which entailed violence such as assault and illegal threats<sup>16</sup>.

**Violent radical alternative groups** represent, for example, radical animal rights groups and environmental groups. Especially environmental groups were active in the early 2000's and were mainly focused on opposing nuclear development. In the 2010's their activity has become significantly more moderate, and violence has not been a part of their mode of operation. Likewise, radical animal rights activists have largely become passive and their illegal stunts have ceased almost entirely.

**Violent religious extremism** is not bound to any particular religious movements, and any belief systems' broad symbolism and semantics can be used as justification for violent activity. However, in Finland, violent religious extremism mostly relates to radical Islam<sup>17</sup>. In 2017, a stabbing occurred in Turku, and it was Finland's first terrorist act motivated by radical Islam. According to Ministry of the Interior statistics, the most typical extremist crimes motivated by religion are illegal threats and assaults, which mainly occur as confrontations between Shia and Sunni Muslims or encounters between more moderate immigrants and Islamic radicals<sup>18</sup>.

The unstable situation in the Middle East and the prolonged civil war in Syria have caused radical Islam to be at the centre of a media frenzy. The spillover effects of the Middle East conflict have increased the threat of religiously justified violence in Finland as well – this manifests, for example, in an increase of home-based radicalisation<sup>19</sup>. So-called foreign fighters also have a part to play in this equation, i.e. people who have travelled to conflict zones from Finland or other European countries. According to the Finnish Security Intelligence Service, at least 80 people have travelled to Syrian and Iraqi conflict zones from Finland – likely more<sup>20</sup>. This group of people are diverse, and no reliable generalisations can be made of this group. However, from an extremist point of view, it is undeniable that people who return to Finland from conflict zones belong to an at risk group<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 13/2018.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 14/2018.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 13/2018, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 14/2018.

# WHAT CAUSES VIOLENT RADICALISATION?

Certain recurrent themes can be observed in the causes of violent radicalisation, but there is no one all-inclusive explanation. Most of the world's population never uses violence to advance their aims, however hopeless their situation or background. Conversely, to others, violence can seem like the only possible option in a situation, which, to an outsider, looks to be regular and balanced.

An individual's activity is guided by their social environment, which provides different influences and operating models. These significantly affect what kind of actions people channel their thoughts and energies towards. Moreover, even though an individual seemingly shows signs of radicalisation, it does not mean they will inevitably be driven to join an extremist group – they can also take a completely different route. It is thus vital to remember that radicalisation is a marginal phenomenon, and the path to radicalisation is never the same for any two people. Violent radicalisation is the sum of myriad social, psychological and societal factors, thus always a complicated process.

→ **Violent radicalisation is a marginal phenomenon and the path to radicalisation is never the same for any two people.**

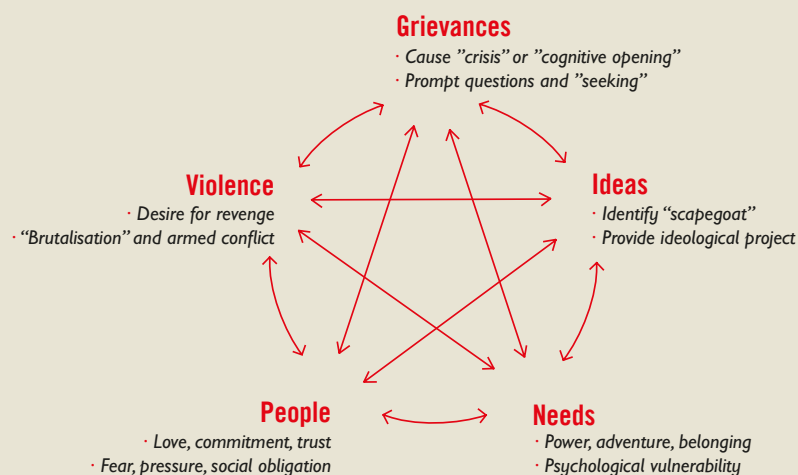
## Push and pull factors

Factors that make one susceptible to radicalisation can be observed through various push and pull factors. The former refers to factors that seemingly push an individual outside society, thus driving them to find meaningful experiences elsewhere, from, for example, marginalised violent extremist syndicates. Discrimination, experiences of injustice, a sense of alienation, personal losses, and different psychological and social problems as well as a feeling of unfair treatment from officials can be seen as factors that thrust individuals to the fringe of society and towards radical extremist groups. Conversely, longing for a sense of belonging and meaning, social networks, a charismatic leader, a certain status or searching for a thrill are factors that extremist groups can appeal and use to pull an individual towards them.

However, most of the aforementioned factors are part of normal young peoples' behaviour and overall humane life, which means the prognosis value of violent radicalisation for this type of division is relatively small. Furthermore, recognising different influences provide valuable information on radicalisation as a phenomenon and increases understanding of its complex nature. Researchers have outlined factors that contribute to violent radicalisation and their diversity through, for example, the following diagram:

## WHAT DRIVES VIOLENT RADICALISATION?

A summary of academic literature



### Key points

- Radicalisation is a process
- There is no single driver, factor, or formula
- Each factor's relative importance differs according to context and individual

Source: Peter R. Neumann, *Der Terror ist unter uns: Radikalisierung und Dschihadismus in Europa* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2016)

## Perceived injustice as justification for the use of violence

Radicalisation is often influenced by strong feelings of injustice, which typically brew over a long period. On the one hand, these feelings are personal, and on the other, they connect to the larger social, ethnic, or religious group to which the individual belongs. Research suggests that an important factor in radicalisation is perceived injustice – i.e. the feeling of your own peer group having less than it should. This factor can play an even more substantial role in violent radicalisation than individually experiencing that you have less than one should (e.g. economic resources, political power, and overall opportunities). Essential to these experiences are specifically their relativity, which means they do not necessarily correspond to the reality of a situation, but are rather based purely on an individual's feeling of their peer group's status and appreciation in society. These experiences of injustice function as fuel for societal criticism and questioning the current status quo. Perceived grievances also encourage and justify acting to change the situation. Violence can appear to be a means and solution for change, providing the opportunity for revenge as well. Overall, research suggests that an individual's experiences of injustice and humiliation have a strong connection to violent behaviour.

## Ideology provides answers and social meaning

Radicalisation is often influenced by a person's need to understand their surroundings and find answers to life's big questions. Radical ideologies provide straightforward and easy responses to difficult and complex questions, which is why they can appeal to people desperately searching for answers. Uncertainty causes an unpleasant sense of losing control, to which a shared ideology can bring clarity by providing complete answers. At its core is people's basic need for a uniform worldview with no contradiction and they are inclined to gravitate towards a social environment that does not clash with one's own values and thoughts<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, radical ideologies can offer a new identity and social meaning, which presents a convenient exit for an individual wrestling with difficult questions. It thus responds to fundamental psychological needs of social belonging and meaning, and radical groups often appeal to this exact humane social need.

## Social networks act as glue

Social relationships are one of the most crucial influences in violent radicalisation. A sense of belonging and significance are natural humane needs – ones that meaningful groupings and social relationships offer. Indeed, many might stray into the realm of radical extremism through their social networks, inspired by, for example, their friends or family. Conversely, a lack of and longing for social contacts may drive someone towards an extremist group. Social contacts that drove an individual towards or gained through an extremist group effectively bind this person to the group. A positive sense of belonging and trust, or conversely, a sense of obligation, force or even fear can act as glue – sometimes an individual stays in an extremist group against their will due to fearing for their own or their loved ones' lives and wellbeing.

→ **Different illustrative diagrams aim to describe an incredibly complex phenomenon, and their complexity is an important indication of the intricate nature of radicalisation.**

Many of the factors stated in the aforementioned model relate to humane basic needs, and it is impossible to arrive at airtight conclusions on the causality of radicalisation. Influencers in this complex equation can be similar to the abovementioned exposing factors as well as different protective factors.

## What protects from radicalisation?

One significant perspective on radicalisation is protective factors. Generally, this is described as *resilience*, which signifies psychological recovery. Research shows that strengthening positive attributes and skills (i.e. resilience) is a more effective way to influence a young person's development – as opposed to correcting detrimental modes of operation. This also applies to the issue of violent radicalisation. Protective factors are those that support and advance the balanced development, psychological wellbeing, and societal attachment of a young person. For example, positive relationships and experience of significance are key shielding factors. Additionally, individual factors, such as interpersonal skills as well as self-regulation and cognitive skills, positively affect a young person's ability to perceive their surroundings.

Of course, factors that protect from radicalisation are not limited to an individual, but they form a much more multi-dimensional entity as does radicalisation as a phenomenon in general. On a social level, relationships with family and friends are significant protective mechanisms, which strengthen a young person's social and emotional skills and experiences of self-reliance. Self-confidence and self-regulatory skills are shaped within the most significant close relationships – they support a young person's autonomy and ability to think independently. In general, socio-emotional wellbeing and social skills decrease susceptibility to outside incitement.

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<sup>22</sup> E.g. Festinger, 1954; Festinger, 1957.

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN VIOLENT RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM?

Pivotal to the activity of violent extremist groups is social media and the online communications enabled by it. Social media platforms enable extremist groups to organise in practice and provide a place to communicate internally as well as drive the ideological message further outside the group itself.

Current understanding states that the internet itself does not radicalise, but it creates more possibilities for it. Through online channels, communication with like-minded people is possible regardless of the time of day or geographical location. Where creating social relationships used to be geographically limited to one's approximate surroundings, the internet has enabled working around these confines to discover like-minded people on a larger scale. In an online environment, information sharing is fragmented and communication channels form around specific issues, towards which like-minded individuals gravitate. When information sharing zeroes in on thematically separated forums, opposing views are not met as easily as is the case with real-world social contacts – a lack of counter-arguments thus makes issues appear more convincing. Hence, researchers refer to the internet as an echo chamber, where an individual can get affirmation to their own (extremist) thoughts. Furthermore, the online environment can easily create an illusion of a group of like-minded people being larger than it is in reality.



*On the internet like-minded people can gain affirmation for their own thoughts and network. Picture: Marker Wizards Ltd.*

The role of the internet in normalising extremism and its rhetoric is significant. The internet is not a separate environment from the rest of the world, but is very much a part of people's social reality. Similar social conformity to law affects the online environment as much as it does the real world, which means that online forums gradually form their own codes of conduct. Like-minded people gravitate towards others that think in a relatively similar way, and social groups form around specific issues. Expressing opinions that are generally frowned upon in the real world (e.g. racist or prejudiced attitudes) are enabled in a different way in these online groups of like-minded individuals. In addition to the company of like-minded people, the anonymity that the internet provides facilitates expressing controversial opinions in an easy way – the threshold for posting questionable comments is lowered when it can be done from behind an unrecognisable screen name. Uninhibited and radical outputs are fuelled by the internet's flat and mostly uncensored structure, which creates an experience of acceptability for the participants.

Additionally, the internet simply brings information and new ideas closer to the individual – it is easy and effortless to find interesting content that corresponds to one's own worldview. In the real world, individuals are more likely to encounter differing opinions and different people, but online, the concentration of discussions to specific forums eliminates this particularly important truth of the physical world. The online environment can thus strengthen an individual's thoughts, provide new social networks as well as supplement already existing ones. Indeed, the internet, social media in particular, can function as a channel in creating significant social relationships that are essential to radicalisation.

The first contact between an individual interested in extremism and an already radicalised extremist can sometimes happen, and often does, on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Telegram. Similar communication happens on video game platforms and their related chatrooms as well. However, the first contact is rarely direct recruitment, but rather sharing ideological or religious material. If contact continues and the interested party joins restricted channels, the offered material becomes increasingly radical and more direct in inciting violence. However, detecting this kind of activity on the open web can be difficult, as content that is more radical is often shared on the dark web. For example, most jihadi content has shifted off the public web – this is partly due to technology companies increasingly investing in removing violent content since 2015.

When considering the radicalising influence of the internet, it is important to remember that research has not shown that the internet radicalises in its own right. It instead seems that online contacts rather complement in-person interaction and ease contact with like-minded people. Most cases that have led to violent action have included real world social contact. Research does not support the claim that an individual can radicalise solely by influence of online content – the process of radicalisation always looks to include some kind of offline social contact.

## Content bubbles and appealing to feelings

The spread of social media has turned it into one of the most influential forms of communication. Traditional media houses have lost influence and visibility as people increasingly resort to social media and other more fragmented news channels to share opinions. The thought of the global web connecting people and enabling the exchange of different opinions seems rather naive in light of recent research. Almost all social media giants, Facebook and Google included, direct users to information they are assumed to enjoy. Recommendation algorithms collect a colossal amount of user-specific data, which is used to deduce what kind of content to show to whom. A social media user can thus both consciously and unconsciously define what kind of content is visible on their newsfeed and, for example, hide the kind of content they no longer want to see. This mechanism enables “filter bubbles” on social media platforms, which are further strengthened by recommendation algorithms that filter user-specific content.

The functional logic of social media is based mostly on rousing strong emotions. Users become hooked on emotional stimulus, which algorithms aim (and are able) to provide on an unlimited basis. In order to incite an intense emotional reaction, the user is directed towards increasingly shocking and radical content. Research shows how different emotional states can be transmitted online – hate, annoyance, and prejudice often work as fuel for colourful online discussions.

→ **It is good to be aware that images and sensational internet memes have their own communicative purpose as well.**

The majority of social media content is mainly harmless, but it is good to be aware that images and sensational internet memes have their own communicative purpose as well. They can deal with and criticise (and often do) current societal issues. Especially memes often influence through a veil of humour, with an aim of inciting strong emotions of identification and creating a common identity. The sharing of many viral memes began on alternative media platforms, from which they gradually shifted to more mainstream platforms. Indeed, research has indicated that conversation on the fringe of the web (e.g. Reddit and 4chan) have an influence on what kind of content is shared more widely. Fake news and other propaganda can end up in the online mainstream through aforementioned alternative media. A study<sup>23</sup> noted that fake news spreads faster and is shared more on Twitter than factual and verified information, especially when the content is political. The appeal of fake news is partially based on the presented information being new and radical, thus inciting strong emotions. Appealing to emotions is the main aim of many radical groups’ online communications.

<sup>23</sup> Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018.

## Online hate

”The term “hate speech” shall be understood as covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin”<sup>24</sup>.

Extremism does not always manifest as physical violence, but can appear as speech that idolises, incites, and encourages violence. Hate speech and propaganda can be considered as an embodiment, or at least a supportive factor, of extremism. Conversely, however, one must be aware of the fact that not all hate speech is ideologically motivated, but can rather be used for other means. In any case, the rhetoric of extremist groups is pronounced, strongly polarising, and often justifies the use of violence. With the rapid growth of social media and spread of online communications, online hate and hate speech are increasingly common phenomena. This is evident in, for example, police hate crime statistics: in 2015, reported hate crimes increased over 50% compared to the previous year<sup>25</sup>, and online messaging services clearly show no decrease in such activity. Studies have shown that a significant portion of online hate content is shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube. Hate content on online forums is particularly common in Finland.

Online conversations are not separate from the rest of the social world; rather they directly mirror current societal situations. As the societal atmosphere escalates and polarises, so does online discussion. Face-to-face interaction, which is missing in online communication, lowers the threshold for expressing negative thoughts and emotions – which, of course, lowers the threshold for hate speech as well.

Hate speech purposefully violates another person’s rights, and its repercussions are far-reaching. Constant exposure to hate speech shapes an individual’s understanding of targeted groups, increasing prejudice in such a fundamental way that the targeted party may be seen as inferior. Studies have observed this happening on an emotional level as well: when one is constantly witness to hate speech, it no longer invokes the same negative emotional reaction. The lack of this negative reaction then affects the absorption of the message content; without the negative reaction, an individual is more likely to believe the content of the received message. Studies have also shown that the younger the internet user, the more likely they are to end up among hate content. What makes this particularly risky is the fact that a young person’s preparedness to distinguish and critically review encountered content is lower than an adult’s, which can lead to absorption of hate content.

Studies on hate speech<sup>26</sup> have noted that hostile messages are most often written by men. Writers of hate speech generally have weak social skills in the real world and they strongly identify with online communities. Many “online haters” experience victimhood, which is not necessarily a new phenomenon – studies on victims have noted that the personal experience of victimhood among perpetrators of violence are common<sup>27</sup>. According to experts, these same factors can be found as contributors to radicalisation. As phenomena, hate speech and online hate are thus not inconsequential when considering radicalisation and extremism.

<sup>24</sup> Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, Recommendation No. R (97) 20

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 3/2017.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> See Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen & Räsänen, 2017.



### **Web influence on violent radicalisation in a nutshell**

- The internet creates opportunities for radicalisation, but does not radicalise on its own: real world contact is almost always affiliated with violent radicalisation
- The internet creates an echo chamber by enabling a conversation environment where opposing views are not accepted
- The internet normalises and builds on extremist groups' rhetoric based on prejudice and intolerance that violates human rights
- The internet creates an illusion of a group of like-minded people being larger than it actually is
- The internet dispels and/or eliminates possible geographic challenges and differences in communicational hierarchy

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## The effects of extremism on children and youth

Violent extremism threatens children's rights, wellbeing and development in myriad ways. Secured by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have a right to grow up in an environment that supports their individual development and moral growth.

Bigotry and violent extremism is detrimental to a child's development as it exposes them to black and white, stark categorisations that oppose diversity and equality. Violent extremist groups violate children's rights to wellbeing and a safe growth environment exposing them to witnessing hate and violent speech, or, in extreme cases, physical violence. A child can end up being a target of the violence these groups perpetrate, or grow up in a conflict zone where they operate. Concerning children's rights, it is also problematic if the child grows up within an extremist group and is forced into isolation from the rest of the social world from a young age. Another factor in this equation is recruitment, of which children or young people can become a target.

A child's development is strongly dependent on other people and the stimulus provided by a social environment, which is why children and young people are particularly at risk in terms of social influence and propaganda. Children take after their environment: first adults in their own close circle, then their peers, such as their siblings, and later their own friends as well. With age, social learning emphasis shifts progressively over to a young person's own friends as well as social models from outside the home. In today's global world, intertwined by the web, these admired social models are increasingly found online. Consequently, all extremist groups target their propaganda more and more at children and young people online.

The effects of violent extremism on children and young people are most plainly observable in children that have lived in conflict zones. A constant fear of violence, being witness to it as well as violence targeted at oneself or family members creates a massive amount of insecurity and exposes children to continuous toxic stress. This is known to be harmful to both the child's psychological as well as physical health, for example, their brain development. Additionally, perpetual fear of violence and stress limit a child's social life. At its most extreme, this can lead to a lack of critical stimuli that are a prerequisite for a child's healthy development, which, in turn, can lead to problems in **psychosocial** development. In addition to fear, anxiety, aggression, and worry are typical experiences for children who have lived in conflict zones – there is an undeniable connection between traumatic experiences and psychological problems.

An extreme and black and white atmosphere causes a child's **social** development to become tightly confined. Extremist groups do not tolerate diversity and, for example, gender roles are often strict and absolute. When a child or young person grows up in an environment like this and absorbs the essential ideological principles, they can easily become unconscious repeaters of these intolerant patterns – this can lead to the development of a narrow worldview, as there are no alternative modes of operation available. On the other hand, this kind of situation can cause a child to endure internal conflicts if he or she feels they represent something that is not accepted within the extremist group. A child that has grown up in a narrow-minded environment is left with very few options for creating their own identity, which often directly serves the aims of the extremist group.

Violent extremism also has an effect on a child's or young person's **cognitive** development. The thought process of a pre-teen is typically fairly black and white and stark, but with age, their thinking becomes more flexible and they learn to become more considerate and gradually accept a variety of different views. Indeed, environmental influences have a significant role in this stage of development. The simplified worldview and easy answers provided by extremist groups can be appealing to a young person, which is why it is important to offer them alternative modes of thought. Social environments are key in challenging and advancing a young person's thinking.

However, it is important to remember that the fate of children living in conflict zones is an extreme example of the effects of extremism. Effects in Western countries are somewhat similar, but do not manifest in such radical ways. In Western countries, such as Finland, key concerns are associated with hate and violent speech perpetrated by extremist groups, which have two-fold effects: they aim to legitimise hate towards certain groups of people as well as appeal to possible new supporters. From the perspective of an extremist group, a worthwhile target for appealing communications is especially youth who, for one reason or another, experience frustration towards the current societal order. Additionally, people who live in Western countries but are targeted by the hate perpetuated by violent extremist groups (e.g. immigrants and sexual minorities) are not separate from this phenomenon.

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## PART 2 – OBSERVATIONS ON THE WEB

One of the aims of this report was to investigate how violent extremism manifests and spreads in the Finnish online environment – this was executed by an online review. The Crawler tool was used to aid data collection, which enables a more systematic review of open source online data. The study reviewed Finnish language online forums<sup>28</sup>, blogs and comment sections of news sites. Additionally, data collection was extended to those global social media platforms that enable conversations in Finnish as well<sup>29</sup>. The observed online data was published during 2015-2018 and the first half of 2019. Searches were made with individual words and terms, as well as a few different word groups, which appeared together noticeably often. To add focus, a publication on hate speech by the Finnish Government<sup>30</sup> as well as studies focusing on far right rhetoric<sup>31</sup> were utilised. An additional criterion was incidence: attention was paid to discussions that were recurrent.

The objective was to examine the kind of discussions that happen in an online environment, and how these conversations relate to other social commentary. Research pertaining to violent radicalisation was used as a premise to explore whether ground rules observed in research apply to the Finnish online environment as well.

The paragraphs in this section contain excerpts from open source online discussions. The presented quotes are meant to demonstrate the derogatory, dehumanising and violence inciting content that can be found online. Quotes have been attached in their original format (translated from Finnish), and contain derogatory and violent rhetoric. However, they exhibit the type of discussions that happen on Finnish online forums. The intention of these quotes is not to give open racism and offensive comments more visibility, but rather demonstrate the nature of online discussions by example.

Our research suggests that ground rules inferred by international studies for the most part apply to Finnish online environments as well. The internet seems to function as a so-called echo chamber, where like-minded people can gain support for their radical thoughts. Online communities build a common social identity amongst like-minded people – simultaneously striving to normalise violent and hate speech. Finding violent content online is rather easy, and it would appear that extremism is finding a stronger foothold through violent speech. Violent extremism is apparent on forums that are clearly profiled as such; i.e. ones that were created as a communication channel around a certain theme or issue.

Our research suggests that discussion on open source online forums conforms to the distribution of extremist groups in Finland: ideologically, far right discussions are most common, and these are challenged somewhat in far left forums in particular. Religious and jihadi violent speech can be found only very marginally in Finnish on open source websites. Scarce incidence of religious extremist content may partially be a result of systematic online counterterrorist efforts in recent years. Social media platforms have developed their algorithms to better identify openly violent content, and, for example, jihadi content is removed from open source websites efficiently. This, in part, has forced religious extremist groups to develop new modes of communication; according to research, violent jihadi content has steadily migrated to anonymous (e.g. Tor) or closed online platforms in recent years. It is also probable that religious discussions happen mostly in other languages besides Finnish.

Online conversations on the fringe of the Finnish political spectrum seem to conform to observations made in research. Discussion on online forums popular with the far left seem to focus predominantly on opposing far right ideology with mocking tones. Hostile rhetoric in far right online forums appears more pronounced and it contains more traits of justifying violence.

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<sup>28</sup> E.g. Suomi24, Vauva.fi, Kaksplus, Hommaforum, Ylilauta.

<sup>29</sup> Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Google+.

<sup>30</sup> Finnish Government, 57/2019.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. Sakki & Petterson, 2016.

*“Hey I have an idea: THROW NAPALM ON THEM! why don’t we simply just obliterate that religion and its supporters”*

*A user on the website Riippumatonmedia, 17.4.2016<sup>32</sup>*

*“Fucking fat pig traitor could stand to make the same decision as Judas. I just hope hell exists so that fucking piece of shit catholic ends up in the ninth circle of hell with Judas”*

*A user on the Ylilauta-forum, 13.6.2017*

Direct and open recruitment for members of violent extremist groups was not found through this research. Indeed, although violent extremist content is openly shared online, joining the groups’ activity and incitement of violence occurs mostly on other platforms. This corresponds to the Finnish Ministry of the Interior’s<sup>33</sup> observations as well.

## The internet as an echo chamber

Online communities have formed around certain topics (e.g. immigration, multiculturalism, and misogyny), where like-mindedness is very apparent. Conversations often focus on one point of view, and presenting an opposing one is not well received – multiple users may target these by using fierce and degrading language. It seems that certain ways of expression and thinking dominate these online communities, as well as unique conversation cultures (e.g. Ylilauta, which has its own slang).

Online users grab onto their peers’ comments and take their viewpoints further, as though provoking them towards more radical and daring commentary. However, in online environments it is difficult to distinguish how many comments represent their writers’ genuine opinions, as so-called trolling (i.e. sending messages that are meant to harass and escalate the conversation) is strongly present on most online forums. The online environment legitimises certain manners of speech, and trolling thus serves the aims of extremist groups and maintains violent conversations. Based on this research, comments that can clearly be interpreted as trolling are found on far right forums in particular.

*“My dream is that they walk towards me in a dark alley. Fucking whore would fucking rape her. Fucking skinny bitch! I would burn down her house and eat her children.”*

*User on Ylilauta, 1.12.2018.*

*“If it would be an adult whore, who consciously went around to a nigger rapist’s suburb and got raped, then the whore got what she deserved.”*

*User on Ylilauta, 10.12.2018.*

<sup>32</sup> All excerpts are taken from Finnish online forums. They were written in colloquial Finnish and have been translated as accurately as possible.

<sup>33</sup> Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 14/2019.

When conversation focuses tightly to a certain forum used by like-minded people, it is inclined to increase the echo chamber effect. One's own ideology is seen not only as supreme, but prevalent as opposed to others. Hostile and offensive outputs are not questioned, but rather supported and propped up, creating a common identity for the group. Central to creating a common identity is the users' shared understanding of the world and its principles – our research shows that it seems this shared worldview is increasingly based on a shared target of hate or a jointly created threat.

**User 1.** *"Women's studies started by positioning itself as just activists. A field that has no meaningful research, with only an aim of producing as many radical activists as possible. Other fields are following suit. The first being environmental "science" of course."*

**User 2.** *"Besides, fear of population change and the Islamisation of Europe is much more concrete and relevant than some climate change, no one even knows if humans can influence it in any way. It is useless to fight against forces of nature."*

**User 3.** *"True. Population explosion compared to climate change is a Z-grade problem, which is perpetuated by the left-green media to avoid talking about the actual problem."*

**User 1.** *"We have pushed the world's climate to an irreversible state with red-green politics, and it has no quick fixes. Especially not led by some 16-year-old Asperger + fetal alcohol syndrome patient. What a gross case Greta is, she is an exploited retarded child."*

**User 4.** *"The point is exactly that, Greta is the greens' prophet, because challenging the declarations of a retarded little girl by repealing them with factual arguments is hate speech."*

**User 3.** *"There is not the smallest chance that a girl that age would have come up with those ideas herself, or possess enough education or understanding, let alone experience, to be able to even defend her ramblings."*

**User 5.** *"When the problems aren't even REALLY caused by population growth. The fact that niggers keep floating in is the problem. Africa's problems are a completely different issue, and floating niggers are collateral irrespective of how many of them are in their home countries."*

**User 1.** *"[...] A real problem, migration and religious war, threatens us immediately."*

**User 6.** *"Greta is a complete manifestation of the devil, when she creates fear and anxiety out of nothing. She shouldn't even exist."*

**User 3.** *"[...] To climate believers and apocalypse prophets I recommend group suicide. Best climate action for them."*

*Conversation on Hommaforum, 03.11.2019.*

## Normalisation of violent speech

It is worth noting how broadly extreme speech is legitimised online, and how expressing attitudes that are normally frowned upon (such as prejudiced and racist attitudes) can be seen as acceptable and sometimes even encouraged activity. Some online forums seem to be dominated by an atmosphere of extreme speech, where more moderate views that consider a variety of different ones are condemned and belittled. Some online environments have formed a kind of atmosphere and set of norms that encourage expressing black and white and stark views.

A great deal of very small and subtle distinctions are made in online conversations, which, on a larger scale, can be seen as normalising extreme ideologies and violent speech. For example, when immigrants are referred to as invaders, it creates a completely different tone in the conversation and influences its content as well.

*“Gel hairs and other land invaders have now been cleaned off the stage and the media has turned its audience’s gaze to climate change [...] So the ultimate motive of the climate fuss is to shift focus from the negative effects of harmful immigration.”*

*User on Hommaforum, 21.9.2019.*

*“[...] when matut<sup>34</sup> rape in any case, then it would be right if the rape would happen to those that want matus in this country.”*

*User on Hommaforum, 19.9.2019.*

*“They forgot one side of this issue. Some people’s daughters hang around matut and offer their pussies to them. Then the matu organises this pussy for his friends too. How can we get the sluttiness out of some of our daughters?”*

*User on Suomi24-forum, 1.1.2019.*

These small rhetoric measures have a significant role in normalising dangerous speech. Room for extreme outputs is made through small, sometimes even unnoticeable variations in speech formats. Indeed, this affects the atmosphere of online discussions and the norms that develop on forums. As stated, social media is not separate from social reality, which is why the described formation of conversation culture is not inconsequential. A step from the online world into the real world is a relatively small one, which has been proven through many a tragic incident.

The dehumanising of groups of people seems to be noticeably common in online conversations. Especially online forums where discussion is focused on immigration and refugee issues, is dehumanisation made a visible phenomenon. Intense juxtapositions and generalising one-off events to entire groups of people seems to be fairly recurrent in online environments.

*“An Aryan will always win niggers in intelligence. Sub-humans make decisions based mostly on primitive instinct. [...] the behaviour of Arabs and niggers disgusts me.”*

*User on Ylilauta, 30.8.2019.*

*“The officials in Finland constantly let these animals rape little children. They themselves are only tools of pedo-judges, because as animals they don’t understand they’re doing anything wrong.”*

*User on Suomi24-forum, 21.8.2019.*

<sup>32</sup> “Matu” comes from “maahantunkeutuja”, i.e. country invader.

*“There is a war on bearded children now. Bearded Iraqi children are soon game to be shot in Finland. War has been waged against that bunch of bearded kids and now begins the street war against that bearded bunch. A dead Iraqi is a good Iraqi. Bearded kids out of our country.”*

*User on Suomi24-forum, 9.6.2018.*

*“The shittiest possible people. Fucking animals.”*

*User on the Riippumatonmedia-site, 3.2.2016.*

## Online hate and hate speech vs. freedom of speech

Online hate and hate speech are widely visible on Finnish online platforms. A quick glance at the most popular online fora is enough to prove that online hate is targeted at a multitude of minority groups. Refugees and immigrants are repeated targets of hate and violent speech in online discussions. According to our research, hate speech targeted at women is also very common. It is typical for this hate speech to stigmatise the entire group: people who have been in a societally or historically weak position are targeted by the kind of hate speech that brands the entire group and does not consider individual differences. This relates to typical human cognitive miscalculations<sup>35</sup>, and it conforms to societally prevalent power relations: the majority group is often seen as much more diverse than minorities, which are often typically and mistakenly perceived as a homogenous group. Denying individual features and seeing people predominantly as representatives of their groups is a dangerous step towards an inhumane conversation culture.

According to our research, online hate speech manifests as a very one-sided phenomenon: mainly the majorities of society practice it. It seems to be most visible on far right forums, where the conversation culture looks to prefer extreme outputs, and their norms enable the expression of prejudiced and intolerant opinions. It also seems to be typical to constantly equate hate speech to freedom of speech.

*“Unemployed Finns and realistic calculations are forgotten consistently in propaganda aimed at population change. The truth is not hate speech. That’s the truth.”*

*User on Hommaforum, 24.11.2018.*

Provided hate speech is prohibited, online discussions will typically see it as a narrowing on or violation of freedom of speech. In online discussions, it is mostly forgotten that freedom of speech also includes liability for words spoken, and using it to offend another person’s dignity or honour is unacceptable. Indeed, the uncensored nature of online discussions seems to be a particularly important aspect to online users. If conversations have their comments deleted, a wave of criticism follows on many forums – the realisation of freedom of speech is questioned in an avid and escalated manner. When it comes to freedom of speech and hate speech, online users often saw themselves as messengers of truth who are opposed by the mainstream media and the so-called elite.

*“The project is then a huge success. All other things are now second-rate. Theoretical and potential climate threats have pushed concrete and acute population change and Islamisation threats to the backburner and out of minds.”*

*User on Hommaforum, 21.9.2019.*

*“[...] The aim of all responsible actors is of course the same as it has been for a while: the change of the Finnish population for a majority of niggers and muslims.”*

*User on Hommaforum, 18.9.2019.*

This seems to be a repetitive interpretation in far right and nationalist discussions, where the so-called elite is associated mostly with leftist human rights advocates.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Fiske & Taylor, 1991.



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# RADICALWEB

RadicalWeb is a project implemented by Save the Children Finland, and it aims to prevent online extremism and radicalisation that threatens young people's welfare and rights. The main target of the project is training youth workers and other professionals working with young people on the issue of violent radicalisation. Many youth workers have experience with extremism and facing escalated and problematic rhetoric, but according to surveys done during the pilot project, more information and understanding is needed regarding the phenomenon.

The pilot organised face-to-face, daylong trainings for youth workers. The trainings aimed to convey understanding of the phenomenon, its possible manifestations and tools on confronting it – these trainings additionally aimed to convey the idea of youth work being key in preventing violent radicalisation. Respectful and understanding encounters are at the core of youth workers' competence, which is why they are in such a unique position to discuss various, even difficult subjects with young people. Supporting development of social skills and attention from a reliable adult protect young people from radicalisation. Indeed, supporting the development of a young person's critical thinking and media literacy as well as understanding of global diversity are important antidotes to extremism.

Additionally, research was conducted on how violent extremism and radicalisation manifest online, and this report is the main output. The project aimed to increase understanding on the manifestation and spread of extremism online. The purpose of the study was not to provide scientifically proven information on the phenomenon, but rather support the trainings by deepening understanding of the matter. For example, it is important for youth workers to understand what kind of material young people can come across online.

The project is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

## TIPS FOR CARETAKERS

- **A young person's interest in ideologies, a change in appearance and style, or political awakening are all a part of normal youth – these changes can give cause to positive attention.** It is also normal for a young person to think in a black and white manner or use stark language. However, it is problematic if a young person piques interest in violent extremist groups, uses dehumanising rhetoric or justifies using violence against a perceived threat (a group of people).
- **If a young person uses problematic, stark, and black and white rhetoric, it is worth discussing it with him or her in a gentle manner.** One should be delicate in condemning, for example, the choice of words rather than the young person themselves. Respectful, friendly, and curious encounters are far more fruitful than tiptoeing around a young person's problematic thoughts or words. Aim to provide a more mature and diverse perspective to colour their black and white views and increase understanding of diversity.
- **It is important to have reliable and intelligent adults discussing complex and sensitive themes with young people.** If concerns that may feed extreme ideologies (e.g. immigration) are not discussed with young people, someone else will speak to them about them – this someone may be found on a forum that coerces youth into extremism. To be able to discuss complex issues, one does not need to become an expert; an understanding and respectful encounter is much more essential than ideological arguments.
- **Be interested in what kind of content a young person comes across and consumes online.** If you are not familiar with apps that young people use or their favourite YouTubers, for example, you can easily ask; young people may readily tell you about their favourites. Steer young people towards critical thinking concerning media by reflecting on various content together. What is the meaning of the messaging? Whose point of view or interests does it represent? What is left unsaid?
- **Remember that positive relationships, experiencing significance and socio-emotional wellbeing protect young people from violent radicalisation and other social problems.** As a term, violent radicalisation is threatening, but as a phenomenon, it does not develop in an uncontrollable manner separate from the rest of the social world. The same factors that support a young person's wellbeing in other parts of life protect from violent radicalisation as well.



*Positive relationships, experiencing significance and socio-emotional wellbeing protect young people from violent radicalisation and other social problems.  
Picture: Marker Wizards Ltd.*

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## CONCLUSION

The premise of this report and its related research has been that extremism is threatening and societally detrimental when it conflicts with human rights and challenges democracy and rule of law. The aim of the study was to provide the reader information on the factors behind and effects of violent extremism, as well as how it manifests in Finnish online environments.

At its core, radicalisation is not an individual phenomenon, rather connecting strongly with the current societal status quo and development. During societally unsure times, it is typical for people to depend more vehemently on clear and simple information on their surroundings in order to maintain a sense of control. Social reality and its uncertainty is easier to control and understand through strict and well-defined categorisations, as it can be viewed through unchanging “truths”. To counter uncertainty of social reality, a person thus wants and needs something regular, foreseeable, and easy to understand so their reality does not become too chaotic and stressful. However, depending on uncompromising and strict categorisations only highlights differences between groups, and increases confrontations between societal troughs, which provides fertile breeding ground for violent radicalisation.

→ **At its core, radicalisation is not an individual phenomenon, rather connecting strongly with the current societal status quo and development.**

On a societal level, radicalisation is a very marginal phenomenon, and it does not always lead to violent acts. This is why it could be fruitful to observe radicalisation through different dimensions. Reasoning, action, and social networks all create their own dimensions in the complex puzzle of radicalisation.

Based on this study, it can be noted that violently radicalised content is widespread on open source websites. The extent to which the outputs of users on open online forums correspond to their genuine views is impossible to say, but based at least on speech, violence towards certain groups is justified by ideological means. In turn, it is worth noting that speech amounts to some degree of action. Cultivating hate rhetoric and dehumanising commentary online is active action: authors have the opportunity to choose their outputs, and thus act differently. Hate speech is not entirely comparable to violent terrorist acts, and does not automatically lead to them, but it has a role in legitimising a culture of violence.

→ **Cultivating hate rhetoric and dehumanising commentary online is active action.**

Violent and degrading speech is thus detrimental in itself, as it normalises such speech and its influencing attitudes. Because of this, it is of paramount importance to distinguish between hate speech and freedom of speech. A functioning democracy includes the right to express opinions that are unpleasant or disturbing in light of generally accepted norms. Opinions that violate another person’s basic rights and humanity do not belong in a functioning democracy – one must respect basic human rights when criticising societal norms. Speech that opposes equal rights also violates the Finnish constitution, and is therefore included in the realm of hate crimes, not freedom of speech.

When discussing radicalisation, one aspect that is important to consider is the nature of radical activity. Aiming for societal change by highlighting and discussing problem areas is a developing force, which is usually referred to by the term activism. Aiming to change societal order by any means necessary is referred to by the term extremism. The latter is not included in the basic pillars of democracy, rather conflicting with its core principles. Distinguishing whether said action is radical activism (radicalism), which drives society forward, or a violent extremist group that aims to transform society in a fundamental way, is essential when addressing radicalisation.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

→ Ministry of the Interior of Finland: Violent radicalisation and extremism in Finland (in Finnish)  
<https://intermin.fi/poliisiasiat/vakivaltainen-radikalisoituminen>

→ Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Issue and Policy Papers: [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers_en)

→ The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR):  
<https://icsr.info/publications/>

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