Save the Children

YOUTH AS A TARGET FOR EXTREMIST RECRUITMENT

FOREWORD FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Foreword from the Secretary-General
The international community has grown increasingly concerned about youth recruitment into extremist and terrorist groups. Young people are in a very vulnerable stage in their development and are thus susceptible to, for example, grooming and manipulation. In order to prevent young peoples' exposure to extremism, it is important to produce information on the different phases, methods, and platforms of recruitment that extremist groups use. To gain more supporters and followers, extremist groups utilise a myriad of tools and tactics in both offline and online environments.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[1], children are to be protected from actions that might increase their vulnerability to racial, religious, or other types of discrimination. Children should be brought up in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples.

The purpose of this publication is to increase the readers' understanding of the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation as well as aid in recognising risk factors related to violent radicalisation. The main focuses of the publication are the roles of both online and offline interactions in recruitment. Additionally, it delves into the effects of conspiracy narratives and the COVID-19 pandemic in radicalisation processes.

This publication is targeted primarily towards professionals working with youth as well as parents and guardians, who have a significant role in supporting young peoples' wellbeing and creating a safe environment for growth. As the people closest to youth, they can identify possible worrying signs of change in a young person's thinking, social relationships, or behaviour. Systemic collaboration between different actors and increasing awareness are key – preventive work involves our society as a whole.

Hanna Markkula-Kivisilta
Secretary-General
Save the Children Finland

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[1] United Nations, UN, 1989.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtually all extremist groups target their propaganda and recruitment at youth in particular, as they are in a phase in their development that makes them vulnerable to social influence. In addition, young people utilise the internet more than older generations, which makes them more susceptible to extremist groups' online communications. Minority youth, and those estranged from society, are an opportune target for extremist groups. A lack of options and hopelessness can drive a young person to look for new opportunities, through which they can adopt extremist ideologies.

Violent extremism infringes children's rights and damages their wellbeing. The UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child[2] ,proclaimed in 1959, states:

"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 – –." (Principle 10).

The later ratified UN Convention on the Rights of the Child[3] is based upon this Declaration. It is a human rights convention that focuses on children, and its most important aim is to guarantee essential rights related to health, education, equality, and safety of every child. One of the guiding principles of the Convention is non-discrimination: a child shall not be discriminated against, irrespective of the child's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic, or social origin, property, disability, birth, or other status. According to the guiding principles of the Convention, every child has the inherent right to life, survival and development.

Violent extremism damages a child's right to equal treatment and a safe and supportive growing environment that ensures the child's individual development as a responsible member of society. Guardians, as well as professionals working with youth, have a particularly important role and opportunity to prevent violent radicalisation in young people. They can create a safe and supportive environment for children and youth, which strengthens their resilience – i.e. the psychological recovery and survival in the face of change and adversity. Furthermore, guardians and professionals working with youth are in a good position to identify changes in a young person's thinking or behaviour early on, which gives them an opportunity to intervene at an early stage.

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[2] UN, 1959.
[3] UN, 1989.

The aim of this publication is to give guardians and professionals working with youth information on the factors that lead to, and conversely protect from, radicalisation, as well as the methods and channels extremist groups use for recruitment. This publication is based upon information compiled from studies and expert interviews as well as online data collection by Save the Children Finland. Various experts working in the field of prevention of violent extremism were interviewed for this publication, providing valuable information on the different themes. The interviews are presented anonymously because of the sensitive nature of the topics. Save the Children Finland warmly thanks all the experts that took part in this work.

The first part of the publication summarises the promotive and protective factors of radicalisation. The second part centres around recruitment channels and methods that extremist groups utilise in their operations. This review was carried out as a part of Save the Children Finland's RadicalWeb project. One of the aims of the project is to increase understanding of violent extremism and its effects on children and youth. The project is funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture.
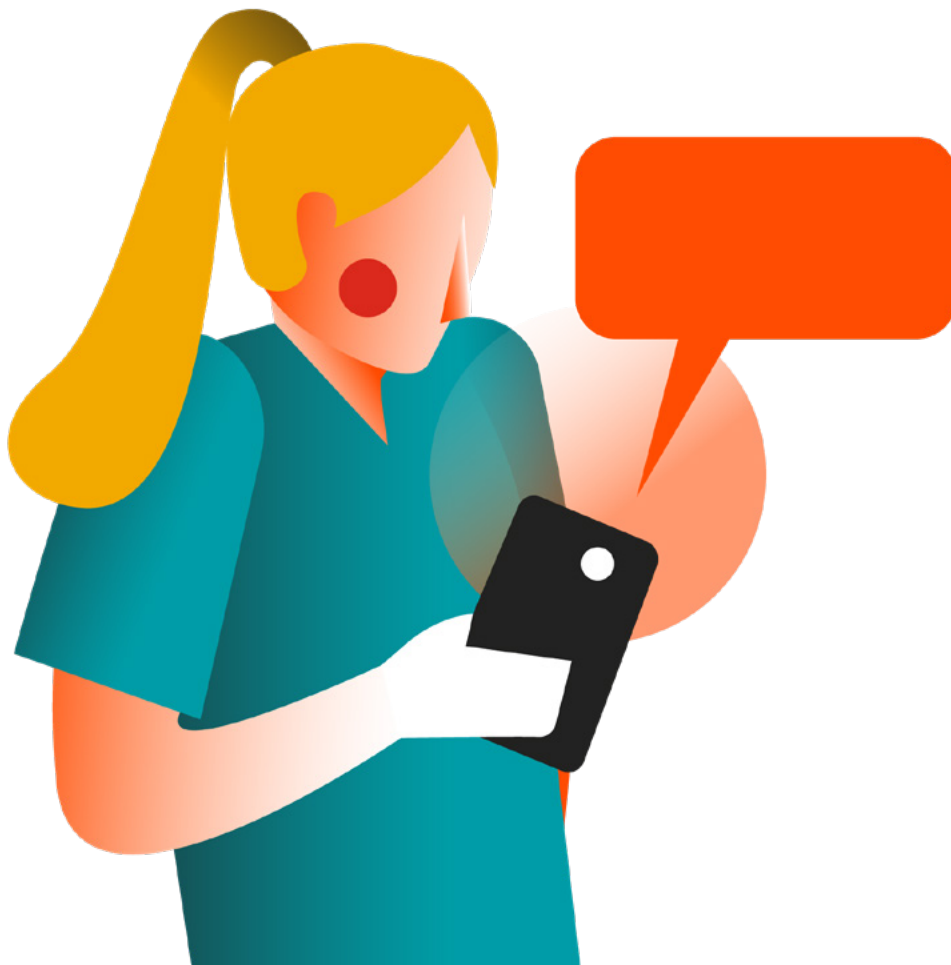
CONCEPTS

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[4]. 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.

> **Content warning:** This publication contains material and information about violent extremism and violent speech that might upset sensitive readers.

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[4] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2016.

WHAT CAN LEAD TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND RADICALISATION?

RISK FACTORS

Radicalisation is a gradual and individual process, which is influenced by a multitude of factors. It is not only an individual phenomenon, as it reflects the development of society as well. The radicalisation process can take a long time or it can advance quickly. However, recognising the phenomenon is often challenging, as there is no predetermined path or list of factors that would predispose someone to it. Anyone can become radicalised, but a young person struggling with their identity and finding their limits is particularly vulnerable. A young person is susceptible to various influences, and essential to this life stage is contemplating one's own values, the need for acceptance and desire to belong to a community or group.

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External as well as internal motivational factors can increase an individual's interest in joining extremist groups and use violence as a means of influence. However, it is important to remember that assuming the ideology of an extremist group does not automatically lead to violent activity – nor does the use of violence always require internalising an extreme ideology. According to terrorism researcher Magnus Ranstorp, one should think of risk factors as a kaleidoscope, which includes a multitude of thematic categories:

individual psychological, social, political, ideological, cultural, religious factors, as well as factors related to group dynamic, social media, and recruitment.[5]

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[5] Ranstorp, 2016.
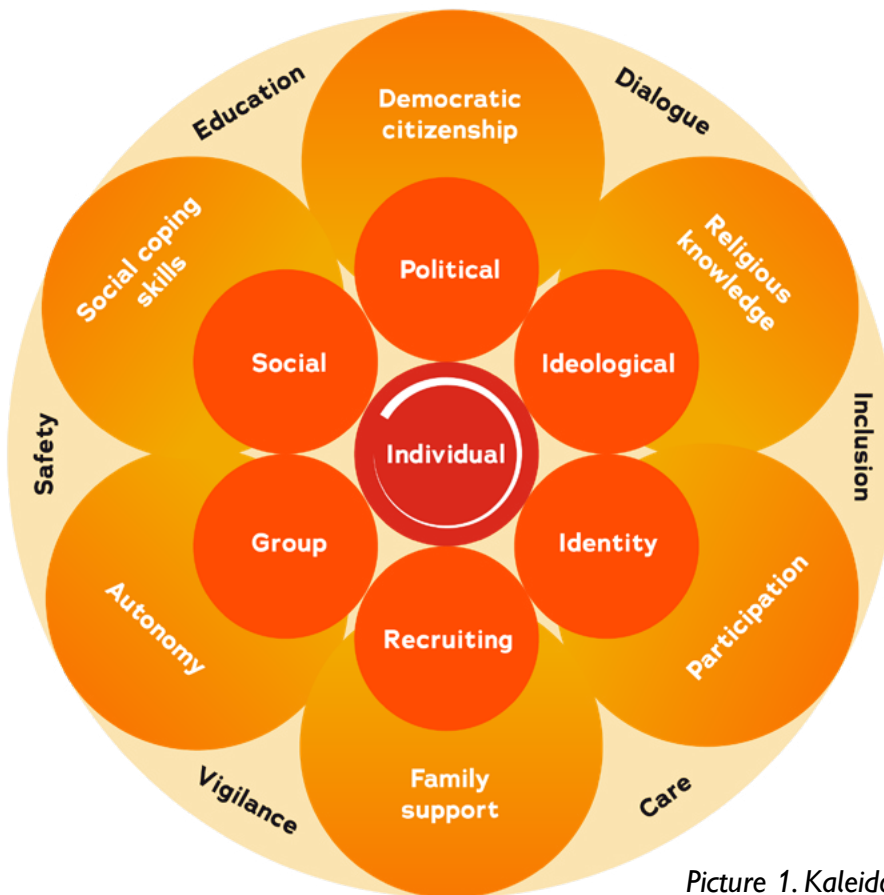
Picture 1. Kaleidoscope

As Ranstorp's kaleidoscope shows (picture 1. kaleidoscope), push-factors related to violent radicalisation and extremism include:

- alienation
- marginalisation of the individual or community
- social exclusion
- exposure to one-sided views
- a weakened socio-economic position
- disappointment in democracy and political processes
- frustration
- limited social networks or losing a loved one
- experiences of injustice (real or perceived)
- lack of acceptance
- idolising violence or
- personal crises.

Pull-factors include:

- a sense of belonging
- longing for a sense of adventure and excitement
- a promise of respect
- social network
- a romanticised view of heroism or ideology or
- a sense of purpose and commitment.[6]

Professionals are often tempted to use templates to illustrate radicalisation when making risk assessments. However, this presents considerable uncertainty. When it comes to young people's behaviour in particular, there are traits that can be interpreted as radicalisation, even though it is activity or symptoms related to youth or a difficult life situation.

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[6] Ranstorp, 2016; Sieckenlick et al., 2018.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Protective factors (picture 1. kaleidoscope) function as an opposing force to risk factors and they have a significant role in supporting an individual's psychological wellbeing. They increase **resilience**, i.e. the psychological recovery and survival in the face of change and adversity. Both professionals working with youth in addition to guardians have the opportunity to increase protective factors in a young person's life, thus decreasing their vulnerability to violent extremism and radicalisation.

As is demonstrated in Ranstorp's kaleidoscope, protective factors include social coping skills, autonomy, family support, inclusion, participation, religious knowledge, and democratic citizenship. All these protective factors strengthen an individual's resilience in relation to certain risk factors:

- Strengthening social coping skills helps young people face social problems.
- Critical, independent thinking as well as developing self-esteem protects young people from the negative effects of group dynamics, such as peer pressure, which can prevent a young person from being critical of prevalent ways of thinking.
- Family support is key in protecting a young person from the effects of extremist environments and recruitment.
- Supporting a young person's personal participation and psychological coping skills helps in preventing cultural and identity crises.
- Sharing religious knowledge that respects equality, justice, and peace in teaching and online has an important role in protecting young people from religious extremists' ideological propaganda.
- Supporting a young person's active democratic citizenship by, for example, strengthening their non-violent conflict resolution skills and increasing awareness on their civil rights can protect a young person from political alienation or apathy.[7]


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[7] Sieckenlick et al., 2018; Lehtinen, 2018.

THE SITUATION IN FINLAND

"Lone actors, whose motive can broadly be associated with violent extremism, pose the biggest threat of violence – such as a mass killing. Individual actors rarely act alone – they are often part of a social environment on the internet.".[8]

According to the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (Supo), the threat of violent radicalisation in Finland is small compared to many other countries and the main risk is associated with lone actors. Supo's national security overview from 2020 states that the terrorist threat level is at two, i.e. elevated (picture 2.) on the four-point threat level scale. An elevated threat level means that there is "significant activity supporting terrorism and identified individuals as well as groups that have the motive and ability to carry out a terrorist attack".[9] Violent radicalisation and the violent activity it drives has increased in past years, which is evident from police crime statistics.

Among other things, social media has facilitated the spread of violent speech and ideologies as well as enabled reaching a larger audience. The global online environment is considered a significant factor in the spread of, for example, far-right ideology. Connections to international far-right networks have been identified in Finland as well. Chat rooms for terrorist organisations and extremist groups have actively been shut down on social media platforms, which is why communication is mostly conducted through encrypted messaging. In general, activities in online environments are actively encrypted.[10]

4. Severe
3. High
2. Elevated
1. Low
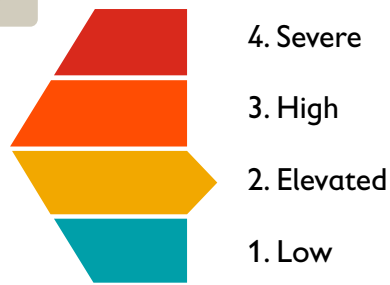
Picture 2. Supo's national security overview from 2020 states that the terrorist threat level is at two, i.e. elevated

Violent extremist groups operating in Finland can be divided into four categories:
1. violent far-right
2. violent far-left
3. radical alternative groups and
4. religious violent extremism. [11]

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[8] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2018.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, 2020.
[11] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2020.
[12] Ibid.

VIOLENT FAR-RIGHT

The biggest threat to Finnish national security is currently posed by the violent far-right. Although the far-right is fairly fragmented, it is widespread. In 2019, activity related to far-right groups and individuals was observed in almost all police department areas.[12] Most commonly far-right activity manifests as spontaneous violence and protests, and far-right communications can be found extensively on Finnish platforms. The copious amount of messaging demonstrates that the ideology has passive supporters, of which there are far more than so-called street actives. For years, the most prominent actor has been the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), which the police have pushed to be disbanded since 2017. The Supreme Court placed a temporary activity ban on the organisation in 2019 to be in force until a legal verdict was announced – the organisation was ordered to be disbanded at the end of 2020. General Courts had previously ordered the disbanding of the NRM and its sub-organisations. The NRM has since broken up into smaller organisations of which, for example, Kohti vapautta! (Towards freedom!), a Nazi organisation, became active after the disbandment. The threat of violence associated with these organisations and their followers is high, as violence towards an individual categorised as an enemy is considered justifiable. Indeed, an enemy can be anyone who opposes the Nazi ideology or organisation.

Additionally, Soldiers of Odin, an anti-immigration street patrol organisation became active again at the end of 2018. Related activity has been observed in around 30 cities around Finland, which has induced fear especially among immigrant communities. Skinhead activity has continued somewhat actively, but there is little central leadership and ideologically the movement is rather unstructured. The movement's activity manifests notably as spontaneous street violence and abuse.

VIOLENT FAR-LEFT

Structured organisation is not typically found in the activities of the violent far-left. This movement refers particularly to anarchism and antifascism, which manifests mainly as anti-far-right protests. The main mode of operation for radical antifascists is online networking, through which they often aim to, for example, expose the personal information and issues of far-right individuals.[13]

RADICAL ALTERNATIVE GROUPS

According to the Ministry of the Interior, radical alternative groups include radical environmental movements as well as animal rights movements. Activity related to radical animal rights movements has been more moderate for over a decade, as their mode of operation has gone from attacks on fur production sites to secretly filming factories and spreading awareness. Activity related to radical environmental movements has decreased significantly after 2016, when the latest anti-nuclear campaign ended. Elsewhere in Europe, radical environmental movements have focused on protesting large construction projects. Activity has mainly been peaceful, but sometimes clashes with the police as well as violent protests of building projects have occurred[14].

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[13] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2020; Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2018.
[14] Ibid.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Religious extremism cannot directly be linked to only one religious movement, and it is defined in different ways in different countries. In Finland as well as in Europe more widely, religious violent extremism is most often related to violent Islamist extremism. The stabbing in Turku in 2017 was the first terrorist act related to violent Islamist extremism in Finland. Two people died and several were injured in the attack. Those that actively support the ideology of violent Islamist extremism are largely individual actors or small groups – attacks such as the one in Turku are extremely rare.

The conflicts and unstable situations in Syria and Iraq have had a global effect, particularly due to ISIS. Over 80 foreign fighters have left Finland for the conflict zones during 2012-2016. A few dozen have returned to Finland, but there are still tens of people in the area, including children. A large portion of the returnees will likely continue activities within violent Islamist networks by, for example, recruiting supporters and spreading the extremist ideology. [15] At the end of 2019, over 10 women and over 30 children that had ties to Finland were at the Al-Hol camp in north-eastern Syria. The government aims to repatriate children from the camp. Children born and living in conflict zones are in a particularly vulnerable position and have possibly been exposed to propaganda, violence, and extremist activity for years. Finland is prepared to integrate them.[16]

EXTREMISM ONLINE

A study[17] that reviewed the manifestation of extremist speech in Finnish online environments and national news media was published in early spring 2021. According to this study, discourse that endorses violence and inhuman treatment is present on open-source Finnish online platforms and image boards. This is concerning, as it can normalise extremist viewpoints and transition into public discourse causing polarisation. Far-right and anti-immigration discourse are more visible online than far-left violent speech.

This phenomenon is evident on platforms through degrading rhetoric, nationalistic thinking as well as anti-immigration discourse and it targets factions that are thought to oppose far-right ideology (immigrants, sexual, religious, and ethnic minorities, etc.). However, material that condones and glorifies violence has been removed from various platforms quite effectively in recent years. Radical Islamist online content on Finnish websites has been sparse and it mainly appears on dark web platforms.

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[15] Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, 2020.
[16] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2020.
[17] Malkki et al., 2021.
[18] Ibid.

RECRUITMENT METHODS AND CHANNELS

Recruitment is an operative, structured, and rational process, in which an individual is lured into joining an organisation or group. Recruitment always happens in a certain kind of social, cultural, and political context, which is why understanding the recruitment process requires considering the issue from multiple angles. It is important to increase understanding on the background motives which cause people to look for, accept, or reject certain social roles.[20] Extremist groups often have a deliberate action plan, or recruitment strategy, with which they aim to identify and recruit suitable candidates by utilising various methods and tactics. Similarities have been observed between strategies of different extremist ideologies. [21] Similarities have been observed between strategies of different extremist ideologies. [22]

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According to expert interviews as well as reports and studies related to this phenomenon, Finns and young people living in Finland are recruited mainly through online communications, social media, gaming platforms, dark web forums, and physical encounters. Additionally, visual communications, humour, conspiracy narratives, as well as grooming are used as luring methods. The focus of this section is the incidence and dynamics of these recruitment methods and channels.

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[19] Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Health and Social Care (H&SC), 2019.
[20] Bonelli et al., 2014.
[21] RAN H&SC, 2019.
[22] Yayla, 2021.

GROOMING

Children and young people are systematically lured online, into extremist groups as well. This kind of luring is often called **grooming.** Typically grooming is used to denote an individual luring a child or young person into sexual purposes (online, offline or both environments). This method is based on finding individuals susceptible to luring based on their online activities, which demonstrate their interests. Using this information, the groomer can tailor the correct approach and build a close attachment to and trusting relationship with the victim. Violent extremist groups utilise similar methods and tactics, such as gradual coercing, which is why grooming related to radicalisation is rather referred to as recruitment.

Much like recruitment, grooming is a process through which an individual has been persuaded, often by pressuring and manipulation, to join extremist activities. The emotional side is highlighted in grooming: groomers/recruiters aim to create a strong emotional bond with their victims and abuse control or power to their own benefit.

The first step of the process is choosing the victim. This is a highly strategic and well-planned phase. The aim is to find mutual interests and delve into the individual's personality. A victim can become a person who is looking for in-depth information on an ideology or demonstrates leadership skills, for example. Groomers/recruiters generally look for easy ways to keep in touch with their victims and utilise various manipulation tactics to support their persuasion. The aim is to create a confidential bond with the victim in order to make them feel important and appreciated, which in turn helps with the manipulation.

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Additionally, the purpose is to isolate the victim from their former life and get them to cut ties to friends and family members, who can complicate the recruitment process or affect it negatively. Overall, defining the beginning and end of the grooming process is challenging. [23]

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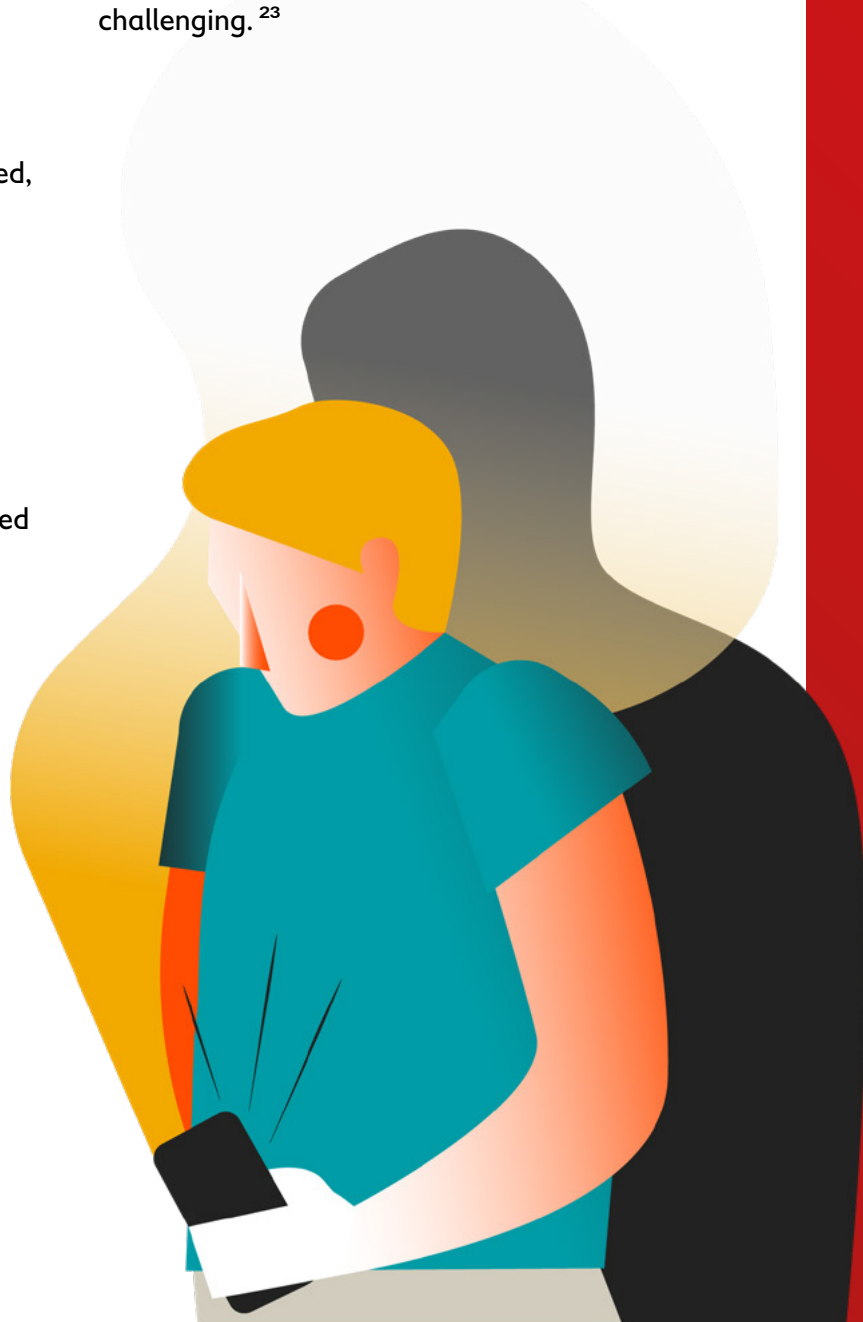
[23] RAN H&SC, 2019.

RECRUITMENT IN PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

To understand the entirety of the radicalisation process, we must consider both online and face-to-face interaction.[24] The online environment forms only a fraction of the radicalisation process. It does not replace an individual's need to encounter people in person during the process, nor can one form a similar confidential relationship online.[25]

Today, extremism increasingly manifests as an online phenomenon, but somewhat as street propaganda and campaigns by organised far-right groups in particular as well. Violent acts by the far-right often happen spontaneously, and they are usually carried out by lone actors or smaller groups.

Young people typically end up involved with extremist groups by getting to know the subculture. Music culture is an important channel for neo-Nazis in particular and is the first contact with extremist activity for many members. Far-right actors organise some public events, the aims of which are to spread propaganda and recruit new members.[26]

In Finland, neo-Nazis have attempted to lure young people into joining their activity by, among other things, putting up flyers on lampposts and slipping propaganda material into peoples' post boxes during the pandemic. Recruitment has been prominent and active.[27]

Recruitment occurs moderately through direct contact, but primarily young people are lured into extremist activity through their friendship groups, relatives or hobbies, and not proper recruiters.[28] Recruitment is thus largely based on personal relationships. Physical contacts and social networks have a significant role in radicalisation, as people seek acceptance and justification for violent modes of operation in these groups. One might take part in violent activities because of, for example, loyalty to friends or relatives. People respond much more openly to joining an extremist group if the coercer is someone the individual already knows and trusts. For example, Finnish foreign fighters who left for Syria and Iraq had a friend or relative already in the conflict zone who managed to lure them to the region. [29]

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[24] Von Behr et al., 2013.
[25] Von Behr et al., 2013; Schils and Verhage, 2017.
[26] Expert interview 16.04.2021.
[27] Lumme, 2020.
[28] Expert interview 16.04.2021.
[29] Expert interview 13.04.2021.

Recruitment also happens at gyms and hobbies, amid mixed martial arts and boxing for example. Because of their fighting skills, those that practice these sports may be more susceptible to messages that require self-defence and protecting other people.[30] Experts on preventative police work[31] state that extremist groups mask violence within mixed martial arts and justify the use of violence to defend themselves against external threats.

However, little is known of the role of mixed martial arts within recruitment.

Youth groups can become street gangs as well, utilising violence. These youth gangs can be an opportune target for violent extremist recruitment.

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[30] RAN, 2019.
[31] Expert interview 08.04.2021.

RECRUITMENT IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Extremism, radicalisation and hate speech that manifests online, particularly among youth, has been of interest to researchers in recent years.[32] Additionally, the relationship between social media and violent radicalisation has also piqued the interest of numerous researchers. However, there is little scientific evidence on the actual effect of recruitment strategies in online environments and social media on young people, and even fewer studies focus on gender differences in radicalisation.

The stereotypical notion of primarily men being active within extremist groups has slowly begun to change.[33] For example in Europe, women's roles in far-right movements has changed from passive to more active participation in the past three decades.[34]

With digitalisation, different thought patterns and ideologies have garnered more and more publicity. Digital channels are used by organisations and individuals that support extreme ideologies, who utilise online platforms to, among other things, recruit, disseminate propaganda as well as manipulate. Particularly young people, who are forming their own identities, are susceptible to online recruitment. Myriad viewpoints and opinions are easily available online, which can drive people into the depths of scams, lies, and disinformation. One can also stumble upon individuals who incite negative stereotypes and thus aim to increase confrontation between different groups.[35]

> **Myriad viewpoints and opinions are easily available online, which can drive people into the depths of scams, lies, and disinformation.**

One can also stumble upon individuals who incite negative stereotypes and thus aim to increase confrontation between different groups. The internet can function as an echo chamber, in which a young person will have others echo and support their radical thoughts. It is thus of great importance to guide young people in evaluating the credibility of different information sources,

[32] Hawdon et al., 2015.
[33] Alava et al., 2017.
[34] RAN, 2019.
[35] Geeraerts, 2012.

when they have not yet assumed an extreme ideology or taken part in extremist activities.

Even though there is little scientific evidence to show how much extremist material found in the online world contributes to a young person's radicalisation, it has been possible to demonstrate that it has a role to play. A significant amount of research has focused on the content of radical messaging online, however, much less is known about who is actually exposed to this material. Being exposed to violent media content can have attitudinal and behavioural consequences, even though this extreme content in itself does not radicalise.[36] Additionally, one must be aware of online platforms on which potential extremist members are approached and recognise the criteria by which members are chosen.[37] While extremist groups do carry out recruitment, voluntary joining occurs as well.[38]

Extremist groups utilise various online platforms in their operations, which enable networking, building a collective identity, rapid information flow, strengthening solidarity, as well as continuous communication with those that are interested in the outlook of these groups.[39] Online recruitment can happen anonymously, and a global audience can be reached more easily than through face-to-face interaction. The anonymity of the internet can fuel polarisation and animosity – the threshold is lower to introduce opinions that go against the mainstream, which can normalise extremist viewpoints. According to the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, even though extremist movements may not have clear groups that produce this material, there are various discussion groups online that exchange information and idolise violent acts.[40]

Recruiters use interactive platforms when looking for young people that could be receptive to the group's message.[41] These sites are tailored according to the interests of young people and can include colourful animations and games, for example. In their communications, extremist groups utilise online forums and (closed) chat services that provide young people the possibility to actively take part in the conversation, strengthen their own identity and simultaneously be influenced by others.[42]

Various messaging applications are used for internal communications as well as recruitment. The encryption that some applications use in addition to automatic message deletion within a certain timeframe make it significantly more difficult to track messages.[43] A 2020 study on terrorism trends and the situation in the EU demonstrates that extremist groups often utilise encrypted messaging applications, such as Telegram, in their operations. Telegram is currently the most popular application and communication channel – Finns are active in radical Telegram groups, and they also administrate English chat groups.[44] Sporadic visitors rarely frequent these groups, and outsiders do not have access to them.

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[36] Frissen, 2021.
[37] Bonelli et al., 2014.
[38] Expert interview 13.04.2021.
[39] Schils et al., 2017.
[40] Finnish Security and Intelligence Service, 2020.
[41] Weimann, 2004.
[42] Bott et al., 2009.
[43] Expert interview 13.04.2021
[44] Expert interview 16.04.2021

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can aid in the spread of a message or ideology especially in countries that have extensive access to the internet.[45] Navigation amid a flood of information on social media can be challenging for young people, and false notions can increase the spread of conspiracy narratives. Hidden messages that circle online can lead particularly younger internet users astray and aim to direct their thinking and actions. Critical media literacy is key in countering this kind of misleading information. The radicalisation of young people is a global and complex phenomenon, in which social media can function as a strategic instrument in inciting violent behaviour, for example.[46] The way in which social media changes in the future will also largely define the way extremist groups operate. [47]

> **The radicalisation of young people is a global and complex phenomenon, in which social media can function as a strategic instrument in inciting violent behaviour, for example.**

Social media is generally considered an environment that rather encourages than causes violent radicalisation. Radicalisation can take place within private small chat groups as well as bilateral email communication.[48] Repeatedly shared similar content between like-minded individuals acts as an example of consensus bias. **Consensus bias** refers to the tendency to believe that one's own beliefs, values, and customs are more common than they might be in reality. When something becomes more familiar, it begins to appear more popular and truthful, which is why a young person may become exposed to propaganda, hate speech, racism, or misleading information within online environments. If a young person cannot have an open and structured conversation about their thoughts on ideologies or beliefs with a trustworthy adult, they may resort to social media looking for answers and acceptance. [49]

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[44] Thompson 2012.
[45] Alava et al., 2017.
[46] Expert interview 16.04.2021.
[47] Alava et al., 2017.
[48] Benjamin et al., 2021.

It is important to consider that young people can come across online and social media content without actively looking for it. Social media algorithms collect an enormous amount of user-specific data – based on this, they deduce what kind of content to show to which user. The aim is to improve users' experience and have them dwell on advert-filled websites and applications for longer to provide the platform owners with more advertising income. YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms, and its recommendation algorithm is key in how viewers utilise content on the video sharing site. YouTube restricts publication of harmful and illegal material, but simultaneously permits content that can be viewed as potentially radicalising either accidentally or due to lack of surveillance resources. Social media recommendation algorithms can thus function as a manipulation tool, wherein the user targeted material can contain biased and even radical viewpoints.[50]

[49] Benjamin et al., 2021.
[50] Ledwich et al., 2020; Haavisto, 2020; Auvinen 2021.

VIDEO GAME PLATFORMS

There are over two billion gamers in the world, many of whom look for new experiences and excitement as well as to connect with other players. These days, especially young people spend a significant amount of their day amid various entertainment media, such as the internet and video games.[51] Playing video games can have many positive effects on a young person's development, but this activity can have adverse effects as well – the success of video games has made them a tempting recruitment channel for extremist groups. [52]

The use of video games as a tool for extremist recruitment is not a new phenomenon: in 2003, the jihadi organisation Hezbollah created their own video game to recruit new members. ISIS and violent far-right organisations have created their own video games for recruitment purposes as well.[53]

Violent extremist groups modify and utilise different features of popular video games (such as changing playable characters or environments) for their own purposes. This can arouse gamers' interest in extremist activities. For example, ISIS has used video clips from Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V) and advertised carrying out similar acts as in the game, thus offering a real-world version of the game. The chat functions in video games also provide extremist groups the opportunity to communicate with gamers and lure vulnerable individuals into the group's activities. Recruiters can pursue supporters through the video game chat functions in order to create a bond with the player before inviting them onto more closed platforms.

> **Playing video games can have many positive effects on a young person's development, but this activity can have adverse effects as well – the success of video games has made them a tempting recruitment channel for extremist groups.**

As extremists have been driven out of social media channels, some of them have modified their propaganda and recruitment to similar gaming platforms, such as Discord[54]. These platforms were originally used by the gaming community but have quickly increased their popularity within the wider social media user base.[55]

Furthermore, extremist groups utilise gamification in their activities and terrorist attacks in the real world. The perpetrator of the 2019 terror attacks on mosques in Christchurch,

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[51] Saukko, 2020.
[52] Kfir, 2019.
[53] Kfir, 2019; RAN, 2020.
[54] Discord is a VoIP, instant messaging and digital distribution platform. Users communicate with voice calls, video calls, text messaging, media, and files in private chats or as part of communities called "servers".
[55] RAN, 2020.

New Zealand, streamed the attack live on Facebook. Around 4000 people managed to see the video before it was deleted off the platform, but it was disseminated onto several online forums and platforms before tech firms reacted. The perpetrator's manifesto had copious references to video games and gaming culture, and the attack itself imitated first-person shooter games. The gamification of terrorist attacks has since been imitated in other far-right attacks.

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[56] Gamification is the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts.
[57] RAN, 2021; Macklin, 2019.

VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS AND THE USE OF HUMOUR

Digital culture has become a substantial part of our everyday lives. The significance of the internet in communications, organisation, as well as mainstreaming, is massive. The digital and analogue hardly differ, and various cultures and subcultures have formed online.

Humour and visual communications are firmly present in digital cultures, and various memes and images spread quickly. It is much easier and more efficient to present feelings and humour through images than it is by text. Serious issues and events are widely handled with humour online. Even extreme thoughts have been veiled by humour in order to make it easier for the wider population to accept and even execute them. If an individual is continuously exposed to playful images and jokes that support an extreme ideology, antisemitism or racism, or belittle violence, these issues are easier to normalise. Indeed, extremist groups use these trends and cultures efficiently and have thus been able to disseminate their ideology around the world.[58]

> Humour and internal jokes are good ways to create a stronger identity and activate members within digital environments – they can aid in identifying members of the group, as outsiders may find these images ambiguous.

Audio-visual elements can be considered significant modes of influence. Ideological material on image boards is often presented in a visual way, which gives both images and videos an important role in radicalisation work as well as idolising violent extremism.
One person can produce visual material, even though it may seem like multiple individuals take part in the dissemination of it. Additionally, images do not require as much as internalising as a long piece of writing. Anonymity ensures that users behind comments and posts cannot be recognised.[59]

Indeed, extremists have "hijacked" mainstream **memes**[60], and use them to disseminate their propaganda as well as to create internal cohesion within their ideology. Humour and internal jokes are good ways to create a stronger identity and activate members within digital environments – they can aid in identifying members of the group, as outsiders may find these images ambiguous.

Images and memes are easily approachable and may look familiar, even though their message might be unlike what one may be used to. This way, a group outsider can also recognise and understand their underlying meaning. Indeed, this may be both a good first encounter with a new ideology, and an opportune way to recruit new people as well as lure especially young people into an extremist group, as memes are used actively by youth. Even though these images may seem silly and insignificant, it is important to keep them in mind and follow their occurrence, as images lower the threshold for interaction with extreme ideologies or extremist groups.[61]
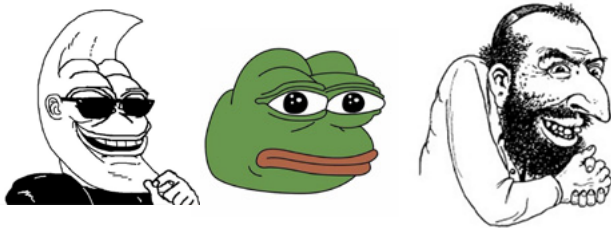
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[58] RAN, 2021.
[59] Expert interview 13.04.2021.
[60] A meme is an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.
[61] RAN, 2021.

Memes used by far-right extremists – Kek, Pepe the Frog and the Happy Merchant.

The use of various memes and images is particularly common among **far-right extremist** groups, wherein the digital environment is a significant tool for networking and culture creation.[62] Possibly one of the most prominent examples of this is the so-called alt-right movement[63], the roots of which are mainly online. Numerous discussion and image boards are actively used by far-right actors – such as 4Chan and 8Chan/kun, as well as Finnish sites Hommaforum and Ylilauta, the latter being the largest image board in Finland.

In addition to other material and discussion, far-right content is also shared on these forums, in both text and image formats, and Ylilauta is a central website for the dissemination of Finnish far-right visual material. It is easy to disseminate hate material and propaganda on these types of sites, as they often do not even require a log in, and everything can be added to the site anonymously and/or with a username. Image boards have been noted as having a pivotal role in the spread of extremist beliefs.[64]

However, communication is not limited to these platforms, and it can be found on more mainstream sites as well. Images and memes that are added to mainstream platforms are more easily approachable, and do not necessarily illustrate violence or the justification of it. If a violent message is dressed up as a meme or funny image, its critics can be shut down by saying it is "just a joke" and that the critic themselves are too politically correct or a "snowflake". More subdued memes and

images can thus be a great way to gradually radicalise people, as they may speak to the general population on some level. Additionally, they are often carefully thought out and planned for propaganda purposes. If one wants to appeal to young people with this content, they must be visually more restrained, as images that are too violent or brutal may estrange them.[65]

In Finland, the activity of **radical antifascists** emphasizes online influencing rather than direct action. This movement is generally not very organised, and their communications and activity are carried out through loose networks. Antifascists and anarchists largely target their activity at the far-right, and often justify violence towards them in their communications.[66] Antifascists use a great deal of visual means in their communications, such as ripped or burnt swastika flags. The Finnish antifascist network Varis (crow) is an engaged actor, and their stickers and posters can often be seen in public spaces.

Image taken from the Varisverkosto (Crow network) Facebook page.

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[62] RAN, 2021.
[63] The alt-right, an abbreviation of alternative right, is a loosely connected far-right, white nationalist movement.
[64] Malkki et al., 2021.
[65] Halminen et al., 2015.
[66] Ministry of the Interior of Finland, 2020.

A copious amount of **radical Islamist** material has been produced especially by ISIS at its influence peak in 2013-2014. During this period, the organisation was able to disseminate its communications somewhat freely on social media channels, for example on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other smaller platforms. ISIS' use of online communications, their understanding of online environments and its importance, have been unprecedented. The organisation produced massive amounts of culturally relevant content around the world, translated into countless languages. Since then, however, radical Islamist content has been systematically removed from social media platforms, which is why its dissemination on public platforms has decreased significantly.

Content in Finnish or targeted at Finland has consistently been moderate, nor has there really been any visual content in which Finland has been painted as an enemy. However, it is possible that this kind of content could be found on closed platforms, on which only invited users are allowed. Indeed, researchers have noted that supporters of the ideology consume a great deal of radical Islamist content before taking part in the movement.[67] The radical Islamist movement has been growing in Europe as of late, so radical Islamist communications containing visual content and symbolism related to Western culture and consumption may be produced more in the future, by using memes to reach their target audience, for example.

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[67] Malkki et al., 2019.

DEEP WEB PLATFORMS

The different levels of the online world can be thought of as a large iceberg. The public web is much like the tip of the iceberg – it is visible to all above the surface and one can search for information utilising well-known search engines such as Google. However, most information and material in the online space is, metaphorically speaking, under the surface – in the **deep web** – which has websites and material that cannot be found with public search engines or are password protected. The deep web is up to 400-500 times broader than the public web. It also contains various services (e.g. content sharing platforms) that are not available to public search engines. [68]

In the depths of the deep web is the **dark net**, which contains purposefully hidden content, including illegal and societally harmful information. Access to the dark net is only available with specific browsers that automatically encrypt user data and information that enables recognition. The aim of this is to avoid tracking by authorities among other things.

Both the deep web as well as the dark web are utilised to distribute radical Islamist material and recruitment. [69] Since 2015, tech firms and authorities have actively countered the dissemination of radical Islamist material online. For this reason, the activity and material of radical Islamist groups have increasingly migrated to dark web platforms. [70]

Even though public sites are still the main recruitment channel for radical Islamist

extremist groups, they actively use the dark web to disseminate material and recruit new supporters. Those interested in radical Islamist activities are promptly directed to encrypted channels and/or the dark web, where recruitment and communication can continue more diligently. [71]

According to research, the violent far-right movement also utilises the dark web to disseminate racist, anti-Semitic, and white supremacy idolising content, as well as communication between members. The violent far-right has formed, among others, blogs, and social media platforms reminiscent of Facebook – the contents of which would be banned or removed from public sites. Much like radical Islamist groups, studies have shown that the violent far-right also utilises the dark web as a tool to recruit and radicalise, but there is little known about the dynamics of it. [72]

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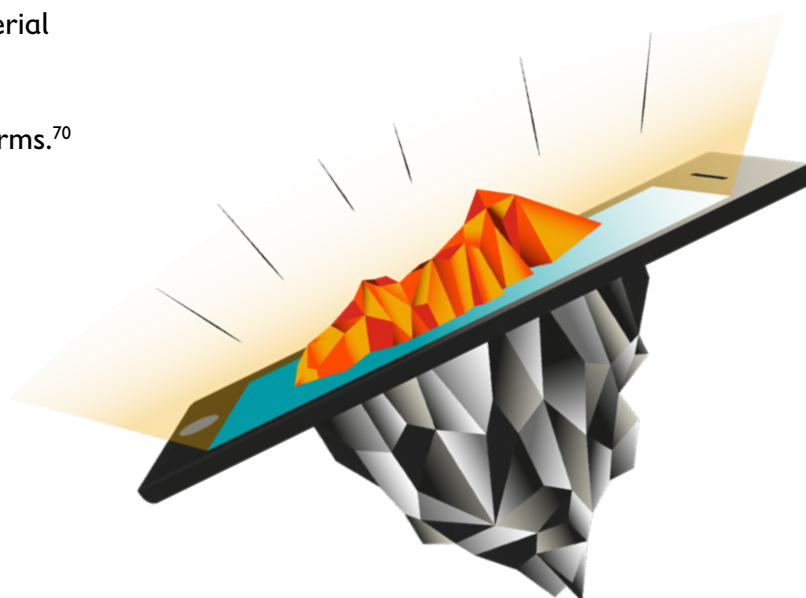
[68] Malkki et al., 2019; Weimann ym., 2020.
[69] Malkki et al., 2019.
[70] Paronen et al., 2020.
[71] Malkki et al., 2019.
[72] Weimann et al. 2020; Walther, 2020.

CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC

Conspiracy narratives entail accounts of several actors working together towards malevolent objectives.[73] They provide a black and white worldview and aim to strengthen societal division by increasing intolerance towards other people. Differing opinions are dismissed, not accepted and are deemed to be a part of the conspiracy. The internet and social media are easy and fast channels for the dissemination of conspiracies. Young people actively use the internet and various social media platforms and can thus easily encounter the material disseminated by conspiracy narratives. Particularly young people in vulnerable positions can be susceptible to conspiracy propaganda.

All kinds of extremist groups disseminate conspiracies. They are also employed as a tool for recruitment and promoting extremist agendas – they take advantage of peoples' insecurities and fears as well as socio-economic and mental health problems. Conspiracy narratives can induce anxiety, distrust in institutions, and the feeling of powerlessness, which in turn can subject an individual to violent extremist ideologies.[74] Conspiracy narratives flourish in crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic has been a triggering factor in the formation of conspiracies.

The socio-economic challenges brought on by a global crisis have escalated societal polarisation, tension between groups, societal distrust, as well as the need to blame someone for the current situation. Indeed, violent extremist groups have taken advantage of this crisis to disseminate propaganda, advertise their ideology and gain more supporters.[75]

Due to an ongoing crisis and increasing uncertainty, extremist beliefs may awaken positive responses in people that are experiencing insecurity, anxiety, and fear. Limited movement, social isolation, a diminished support network, and lockdowns have all influenced the amount of time young people spend online – often without supervision, which makes them more susceptible to online propaganda disseminated by extremist groups. An outcast and lonely young person is very vulnerable and can thus be more receptive to radical thoughts. Hence, the pandemic can contribute to internalising a certain type of worldview. [76]

> **Conspiracy narratives can induce anxiety, distrust in institutions, and the feeling of powerlessness, which in turn can subject an individual to violent extremist ideologies.**

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[73] Rousis, 2018.
[74] Farinelli, 2021.
[75] Di Carlo, 2020.
[76] Avis, 2020

Some extremist groups have utilised conspiracy narratives and blamed ethnic minorities for spreading the virus, which has increased racist attacks. Especially the violent far-right has taken advantage of this dynamic to justify hate speech targeted at religious and ethnic minorities and the so-called "elite".[77] Increased uncertainty and the hate and violent speech due to it, have created a fertile ground for the growth of violent extremist ideologies.[78]

For example, the conspiracy movement QAnon[79] has garnered massive media attention and support during the pandemic. QAnon conspiracy narratives have disseminated disinformation and fake news, which polarise society and create a breeding ground for violence. Even though QAnon's beginnings are likely in the United States, its message knows no boundaries and the movement has supporters in Europe as well.[80]

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[77] Farinelli, 2021.
[78] Di Carlo, 2020.
[79] QAnon is an American far-right political conspiracy theory and movement centred on false claims made by an anonymous individual or individuals, known by the name "Q", that a cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic paedophiles operate a global child sex trafficking ring that conspired against the former U.S. President Donald Trump during his term in office.
[80] Juusela, 2020; Farinelli, 2021.

GUIDANCE FOR CARETAKERS AND PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH YOUTH

Young people increasingly spend time online and communicate through a multitude of social media channels. However, it is easy to encounter material online that is inappropriate and harmful to minors. Because of this, it is of vital importance to discuss safety and the risks related to the digital world with young people as well as remind them about the false information and hate speech that circulates online. The generational gap can cause adults to not necessarily have accurate information and understanding of what platforms young people utilise and how they function online.

Even though it might feel uncomfortable, one should discuss difficult subjects, prejudices, and world events with young people, as well as help them understand different viewpoints and beliefs. There is no one correct approach but intervening in a worrisome situation at an early stage is critical – when the possibilities for leaving an extreme ideology are more hopeful.

Changes in behaviour, thought patterns, opinions, or clothing, resistance to societal order, or following and disseminating propaganda online can act as warning signs. However, it is good to keep in mind that changes in clothing or social circles for example can simply be a part of a young person's normal development and are not necessarily signs of radicalisation. If a caretaker, professional working with youth, or someone else in frequent contact is concerned about a young person, they should consider the following:

Find out what online platforms young people are on and what kind of communication channels they use. Help them identify potentially dangerous content and hate speech. Bring up the importance of critical media literacy as well.

Help young people understand how they can influence and participate in decision-making through peaceful and non-violent means.

Be present in their everyday lives and encourage them to talk about their thoughts and worries. Ensure that young people feel that they are being listened to and that you genuinely care about their issues. Providing time and support can have a significant and even pivotal effect in a young person's life.

Ensure that the discussion environment is as calm and neutral as possible. Open, appreciative, empathetic, and constructive dialogue is key. Conversely, one should avoid questioning, belittling, judging, overreacting, and blaming.

Talk about your concerns with others and discuss your observations with a colleague, for example. Contact the police, child protective services or other support functions at a low threshold. However, always remember to respect the child's right to privacy. This right can only be breached when concern for the child's safety is justified. In this situation, one should only share the absolute necessary information about the child's circumstance.

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[81] Benjamin ym., 2021.

RADICALWEB

The RadicalWeb-project (2019-2022) is part of Save the Children Finland's development work on child protection and advocacy, and it aims to identify and prevent online extremism and radicalisation, which threatens the welfare and rights of young people. The main focus of the project is training youth workers and other professionals working with young people on this phenomenon, as well as how to intervene both face-to-face and online. Youth workers are provided with an online training programme and training videos in addition to in-person trainings.

Professionals working with youth have a particularly good opportunity to prevent violent extremism and radicalisation in young people. 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 the development of interpersonal skills and attention from a safe adult protects young people – developing critical thinking, media literacy, and understanding of diversity are all significant antidotes to extremism. Many youth workers have experience with extremism and encountering escalated and problematic rhetoric, but according to surveys done during the pilot project (2019), more information and understanding is needed regarding violent radicalisation and extremism as phenomena.

Additionally, the RadicalWeb project aims to strengthen the knowledge base of prevention work by conducting research into how violent extremism and radicalisation that threatens the welfare and rights of young people manifests online. The first report was "Violent extremism Online" - the aim of which was to increase understanding of how violent extremism manifests and spreads online. In this second publication, the aim was to increase understanding of factors leading to, as well as protecting from radicalisation, in addition to recruitment methods and channels that extremist groups use to recruit young people. The purpose of these reports was not to provide academic information on the phenomenon, but rather deepen understanding of it in support of, among others, the trainings of the project.

RadicalWeb is part of the National Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Radicalisation and Extremism 2019-2023

The project is funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Finland and is ongoing until the end of 2023.

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[82] Haavisto, 2020.

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Contact:
info@pelastakaalapset.fi
PelastakaaLapset
@pelastakaalapset
@pelastakaalapse

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