

- Refrain from confronting people who use extremist resources online or who clearly express radical ideas in your presence. Challenging people on their online habits or ideas may result in their views becoming more crystalized and their attitudes more entrenched, while destroying the relationship of trust between you.
- Individuals who regularly visit online forums in which radical and homogenous ideas are discussed should initially be exposed to forums that promote a milder ideology, while remaining within a similar spectrum so as to ensure they remain open to dialogue. With time, you can expose them to other sources of information and alternative discourses so that their views do not become further entrenched.
- Pay particular attention if you notice that someone is actively looking for violent extremist content online (e.g., regularly participates in radical forums, searches and shares violent content or hate speech on social networks, or expresses intentions or threats). Seek more information about these online behaviors and if you are concerned promptly consult local practitioners who specialize in violent radicalization AND the risk assessment of violent behavior (see <https://cpnprev.ca/directory/>).
- Keep in mind that there is no causal link between online habits and engaging in radical and extremist behavior offline. These habits act as indicators and deserve your attention, but do not necessarily require immediate action.

Next steps to follow:

Our team is actively working to create a network of Canadian practitioners representing all sectors involved in the prevention, intervention, or evaluation of radicalization and violent extremism. For more information about this initiative, to become a member of the network, to find answers to questions you may have, or to access support services, please visit this link:

<https://cpnprev.ca/page/>

We are also in the process of creating a committee of Canadian experts bringing together practitioners from different fields and all sectors working in the field of radicalization and violent extremism, including researchers, with the aim of identifying best practices and developing guidelines for prevention and intervention. For more information on this committee, please consult the following link:

<https://cpnprev.ca/canadian-consensus-guidelines-committee/>

For more information:

- CPN-PREV website: <https://cpnprev.ca/>
- Access to this publication (via the journal portal): <https://content.iospress.com/articles/international-journal-of-developmental-science/dev170233>
- Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media – Mapping the Research: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002603/260382e.pdf>

Does Online Exposure to Extremist Content Lead to Violent Radicalization?

Practitioners
Conference edition



PREV

The CPN-PREV Systematic Review Series

Canadian Practitioners' Network for
the Prevention of Radicalization and
Extremist Violence

UQÀM

Université du Québec à Montréal



Public Safety
Canada

Context

It is frequently argued that social media plays a part in the process of violent radicalization. But what is the actual situation? What do scientific studies tell us about this issue?

The Canadian Practitioners' Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence (CPN-PREV) conducted a systematic literature review to:

- Identify existing studies on the subject;
- Evaluate both their scientific quality as well as the reliability of their results;
- Draw key conclusions from the studies.

This pamphlet, therefore, provides information on the current state of knowledge regarding the link between exposure to extremist content on the **Internet/social networks** and the risk of violent radicalization.

What is the status of existing studies?

Despite a large number of identified studies (5,182 scientific articles or government reports), only 11 had any concrete results (as opposed to theoretical analyses or opinions) about the **empirical link** between online exposure to extremist content (e.g., religious, political, or environmental propaganda) and violent radicalization.

Six of the 11 studies employed quantitative research designs (e.g., questionnaires on the level of involvement in neo-Nazi forums) and five were qualitative in nature (e.g., in-depth interviews on the perceived influence of social networks on individuals who have committed terrorist acts).

What are the main results of these studies?

ONLINE EXPOSURE TO EXTREMIST SITES OR VIDEOS

- Generally does not elicit **positive emotional responses** (e.g., being empathetic or in agreement with conveyed messages or radicalized people) from people who are not engaged in a process of radicalization.
 - ✓ However, some individuals—either because they lack a sense of belonging to a social group or because they feel a cultural/linguistic proximity to the person conveying the message—are more vulnerable and may show an increased receptiveness to extremist messages.

- Tends to be associated with the adoption of **radicalized attitudes** by individuals who may or may not be engaged in a radicalization process, regardless of the type of platform (e.g., website, online discussion forum) or extremist ideas (e.g., neo-Nazi or radical Islamist).
 - ✓ Online interaction with groups that have similar ideologies can exacerbate extreme attitudes and negatively shape opinions about other groups or communities that differ from one's own.
 - ✓ When individuals with radicalized ideas are confronted with those who have opposing views, their attitudes tend to become more radicalized.
- Is also linked to the adoption of **extremist behavior**—whether manifested online (e.g., posting hate content) or offline (e.g., planning an attack, joining armed groups)—among individuals who may or may not be involved in a process of radicalization.
 - ✓ Individuals **actively seeking** violent radical material online appear to be at greater risk of engaging in any form of violence than those who have been unintentionally exposed to it.

What is the key take-home message?

According to the surveyed studies, the Internet and social media play a significant role in the process of violent radicalization for some individuals. However, the studies have not demonstrated an independent causal relationship.

- The effect of the Internet and social media is reinforced by other factors such as personal crises, mental health problems, or belonging to a radical group.
- It is therefore online exposure to violent extremist content that, in conjunction with **real-life factors**, can influence or facilitate decisions to join an extremist group or to act violently, particularly among individuals who **actively** seek such content.

A distinction should be made between emotional responses (being receptive to extremist discourse), endorsed attitudes (promoting a radical message), and actual behavior (taking action)—all different yet related phases of the violent radicalization process that must be taken into account through targeted interventions.

What are the implications for stakeholders?

Based on the results of this systematic review, the CPP-PREV team has come up with the following recommendations to help guide practitioners working with people at risk of radicalization:

- Find out more about the online habits of the people you meet. Be interested in their use of social networks and seek to open dialogue by asking questions, without making value judgments regarding their online habits and without challenging them.