

What are some recommendations for future research?

- In research and practice settings, develop conceptual models that can help identify the processes through which exposure to extremist online content can contribute to violent radicalization.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to further our understanding of the specific role that online exposure to radicalized content can play in processes of violent radicalization. If this is not possible due to time or funding constraints, studies should at least include pre/post measures and control groups.
- Establish a multidisciplinary and multisectoral national committee in order to create evidence-based guidelines regarding best practices for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism.
- Support partnerships between research centers and data collection bodies beyond North America and Europe, in order to obtain a more global picture of the phenomenon of online radicalization.

What is the key take-home message?

Online exposure to extremist content may contribute to the process of violent radicalization. In conjunction with other offline factors, such exposure can influence an individual's decision to join an extremist group or to act violently, particularly among those who actively seek to access this type of content.

Useful links:

- 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?

Researchers
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



What is this systematic review about?

This systematic review examines the current state of knowledge on the relationship between **exposure to extremist content online or via social media** and **violent radicalization of individuals exposed to it**.

What is the purpose of a systematic review?

A systematic literature review allows researchers to identify, synthesize, integrate, and evaluate the available literature on a specific subject. It, therefore, makes it possible to determine the current state of knowledge, assess its reliability, identify its shortcomings and limitations, and finally define needs in terms of research and future practices.

How was this carried out?

A systematic review requires the application of a very rigorous methodology and predetermined research criteria. To this end, the guidelines of the Campbell Collaboration (<https://campbellcollaboration.org/>) were followed, since they are considered to be the benchmark for systematic reviews in the social sciences.

The bibliographic search strategy identified 5,182 documents (e.g., articles, organizational reports, case studies) in English, French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese. Of these, only 11 studies were consistent with our selection criteria to examine the empirical link between exposure to extremist content and violent radicalization. Six of these studies used quantitative research specifications while five were qualitative in nature.

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.
- There is insufficient research evidence to support the hypothesis that the Internet and social media act directly and independently of other factors within the process of violent radicalization. It is difficult to establish a causal relationship since no study specifies whether attitudes or behaviors follow, accompany, or precede exposure. In addition, other factors that could explain the observed relationships (e.g., the offline influence of peers adhering to radical ideas) may exist.

Which are the most significant limitations?

- Most of the research is not based on conceptual frameworks that could help explain the process by which extremist online content can lead to violent radicalization.
- The wide range of definitions used by the surveyed studies to describe the nature of extremist content and violent radicalization attitudes/behaviors makes integrating knowledge on the subject difficult.
- The studies have significant methodological limitations and raise ethical concerns that affect the reliability of the results.