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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EXTREMIST ORGANISATIONS

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms have revolutionized communication, enabling rapid sharing of information and facilitating global connectivity. However, these platforms have also been exploited by extremist organizations to spread propaganda, recruit members, and coordinate activities. Furthermore, extremist groups use social media not only to the beforementioned topics, but also for financing and cooperation and sometimes for information manipulation, that might be hand in hand with foreign state-actors information manipulation and aims to divide democratic societies. This aims to feed the extremist organisation with more possibilities to recruit personnel and gain more assets as well as it serves the purpose of the emotional aspects of extremist organisations. The vulnerable groups can mainly be identified as people in their adolescence, starting in the age of 14, and up to 30 years. Of course, there are exceptions of people that are younger or older, but this contains the target group and is in line with the group that is most vulnerable and uses social media in all its aspects. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic the social media channels were full of material with false or wrong information, regarding the pandemic and its effects.

This misinformation combines also conspiracy theories with extremist ideologies. E.g. Right-wing groups are adopting the conspiracy theories to gain more sympathizers and followers in the virtual environment. Also, other forms of crimes developed quickly. The dark net was one big driver, but to get to a large number of people, social media is the perfect playground for gaining attention and finding followers. Several forums like 4 chan and 8 chan were platforms used for sharing extremist content and in 8 chan also live-streaming attacks, like in Christchurch, New Zealand, but this is not limited. Nowadays misinformation, extremist content is shared on any social media. Quite common are groups on Telegram, but it might be Instagram or any other tool as well. This paper expands on the role of social media in extremism by providing a detailed literature review and case studies, analysing how extremist groups leverage social media, the mechanisms of online radicalization, and policy challenges.



2. Literature Review

The literature identifies social media as a “thriving subculture” where extremists communicate, share propaganda, and recruit new members (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017). Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have been exploited to glorify terrorist figures and spread violent ideologies. The ability to comment, share, and send private messages fosters a “vibrant jihadist virtual community,” facilitating rapid identification and engagement among sympathizers (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017).

2.1. Social Media as a Tool for Extremist Propaganda and Recruitment

Extremist organizations worldwide use social media to disseminate their ideologies and recruit followers. Violent extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and ISIS actively use social media to share messages, videos, and propaganda to reach global audiences (UNDP, 2022). Extremist groups have increasingly employed sophisticated online marketing techniques and IT expertise to craft and disseminate high-quality propaganda materials. According to Zeiger and Gyte (2023), terrorist organizations actively seek out skilled online marketers and IT experts to lead their propaganda campaigns, which are primarily spread via social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (p. 359). Despite efforts by platforms to remove violent extremist content, these groups remain adept at evading detection by avoiding overtly violent images or videos that trigger censorship, instead focusing on personal narratives and storytelling that resonate emotionally with potential recruits (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

For instance, an analysis of 1,000 pro-ISIS Facebook profiles across 96 countries in 2018 showed that ISIS’s Facebook networks continued to grow globally despite account takedown efforts (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). These platforms are not only used for broadcasting propaganda but also for sharing personal experiences of fighters, which promotes viral imitation and emotional engagement, a potent recruitment tool.



2.2 Recruitment Strategies and Targeting Vulnerable Individuals

Extremist recruiters use social media to identify and connect with individuals who may be susceptible to radicalization. Social media's interactive features enable recruiters to engage with potential recruits by planting seeds of dissatisfaction, offering alternative identities, and providing a sense of belonging that individuals might lack offline (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). However, to avoid police monitoring, recruiters often move conversations to encrypted messaging apps like Telegram once initial contact is made (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

Research in Indonesia highlights how terrorist groups such as ISIS, HTI, and JAD use social media to target youth, who are particularly vulnerable due to their ongoing identity formation and search for purpose (Jain & Vaidya, 2021). These groups exploit social media algorithms that amplify attention-grabbing content, repeatedly exposing users to extremist viewpoints and facilitating a process of self-radicalization (Jain & Vaidya, 2021). The emotional and provocative language used by extremists—words like “struggle,” “sacrifice,” and “victory”—evokes a sense of heroism and urgency, pushing individuals toward extremist action (Anas, 2020).

2.3. The Digital Transformation of Extremist Recruitment - From Physical Networks to Digital Ecosystems

Historically, extremist recruitment relied heavily on physical proximity, social networks, and direct contact. The rise of social media has dismantled these geographic and social barriers, enabling extremist groups to reach global audiences instantaneously. According to the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), terrorist and violent extremist groups have leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to expand their online recruitment efforts, capitalizing on increased digital engagement during lockdowns and social isolation (UNICRI, 2023).



Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, and gaming-related platforms have become primary venues for recruitment, allowing extremists to disseminate propaganda, engage in conversations, and build virtual communities (Australian Government, 2025). The shift from traditional recruitment to digital ecosystems has accelerated the radicalization timeline, reducing the time from initial exposure to active participation in extremist activities (Vision of Humanity, 2025). Important to realize is that in the past physical contact was in most cases of radicalisation crucial from a certain point on. Now this has changes as the face to face contact is due to the new technical development not necessary anymore.



3. Targeting Vulnerable Individuals: Psychological and Social Dimensions

3.1 Characteristics of Vulnerable Individuals

Extremist recruiters focus on individuals exhibiting vulnerabilities such as social isolation, economic hardship, identity crises, political disenfranchisement, and psychological distress. These vulnerabilities create fertile ground for extremist narratives promising belonging, purpose, and empowerment (Vision of Humanity, 2025).

Youth are particularly susceptible due to their developmental stage, which involves identity exploration and a heightened need for social acceptance. The European Commission emphasizes that young people facing alienation or marginalization are prime targets for radicalization via social media (European Commission, 2023).

Nevertheless, there are always exceptions to the above. Crucial analysing the studies is that there is a certain grievance mainly connected to a strong feeling of injustice. This is usually the entry int for extremist ideologies.

3.2 Psychological Manipulation Techniques

Extremist groups employ sophisticated psychological tactics to manipulate vulnerable individuals.

These include:

- **Narrative Framing:** Presenting extremist ideology as a solution to personal and societal grievances;
- **Emotional Appeals:** Using provocative language to evoke feelings of injustice, anger, and urgency (Anas, 2020);
- **Social Validation:** Creating online communities that reinforce extremist beliefs and provide social support (Jain & Vaidya, 2021);



- Incremental Indoctrination: Gradually exposing individuals to more extreme content to desensitize and deepen commitment (Vision of Humanity, 2025).

These tactics are often personalized, with recruiters tailoring messages based on the individual's background, interests, and online behaviour (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

These techniques can be used in a different framework to radicalise individuals. There is often a combination used by extremists to change the thinking and the personality of the individual recruit. One of the possibilities is mental programming. This is based on the psychological concept of mental programming, which is meant to change, individuals opinion thoughts and beliefs. This principle is found by Hofstedes cultural research, but can be misused by extremist organisations. Three phases are necessary.

In the first one there will be de-freezing, meaning the person will be mentally confused by different means like sleep deprivation, drug abuse, inundation with sensory impression and using fear and anxiety. The in the next step the mindset of the individual will be change by repetition, generating feelings of hate, monotony or creating a new language. The last step is freezing it again to have the new way of thinking long-lasting. The advantage of this methodology is that it is timely flexible and can be adjusted to the individual needs (Mansour 2022; Psychologie heute 2010).



4. Recruitment Strategies on Social Media Platforms

4.1 Content Creation and Dissemination

Extremist organizations invest in high-quality, emotionally engaging content designed to attract and retain the attention of potential recruits. This includes videos, memes, personal testimonials, and interactive posts that emphasize themes of struggle, heroism, and victimhood (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

The use of personal storytelling and “viral imitation” encourages users to identify with fighters and martyrs, fostering emotional connections that facilitate recruitment (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

4.2 Exploiting Platform Features and Algorithms

Recruiters exploit platform algorithms that prioritize engaging content, often leading to echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to similar extremist narratives (Prisgunanto et al., 2023). This algorithmic reinforcement accelerates radicalization by normalizing extremist views within the user’s social media feed.

Platforms’ interactive features—comments, direct messaging, group chats—enable recruiters to initiate personalized engagement, build trust, and move conversations to encrypted messaging apps like Telegram for deeper indoctrination (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

4.3 Use of Emerging Technologies: AI and Virtual Reality

Artificial intelligence has become a game-changer in extremist recruitment. Groups like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) use AI to automate and personalize recruitment efforts, employing chatbots that mimic human interaction and tailor radicalization pathways based on user behavior (GNET Research, 2025).

Virtual reality (VR) is emerging as a tool for immersive indoctrination and training, allowing recruits to experience simulated combat and tactical scenarios, thereby deepening psychological commitment (Vision of Humanity, 2025).



5. Recruitment in Specific Digital Environments

5.1 Social Media Platforms

Mainstream platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter remain central to recruitment despite content moderation efforts. Extremists adapt by using coded language, memes, and indirect messaging to evade detection (European Commission, 2023). This now can be enlarged by Instagram, Snapchat and gaming platform and is highly supported by Telegram and TikTok.

5.2 Encrypted Messaging Apps

Apps like Telegram and Signal provide secure environments for private communication, enabling recruiters to engage in direct, unmonitored conversations with potential recruits. These platforms facilitate the transition from public propaganda consumption to private indoctrination and operational planning (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

5.3 Online Gaming and Gaming-Adjacent Platforms

Online gaming platforms and related social spaces have become unexpected recruitment venues. Violent extremists exploit in-game chat rooms and streaming services to identify and radicalize young gamers, leveraging the interactive and immersive nature of gaming to normalize extremist narratives (Australian Government, 2025).

5.4. Fragmentation and Hybridization of Extremist Ideologies

The extremist landscape is increasingly fragmented and hybridized, with young radicals influenced by a mix of ideologies, conspiracy theories, and hybrid movements that blend far-right nationalism, religious extremism, anti-government sentiments, and anti-globalist conspiracies (Vision of Humanity, 2025). This ideological fluidity complicates recruitment monitoring and intervention.



6. Case Study

In the following there is a short description of use cases according to the virtual activities.

Case Study 1: ISKP's AI-Driven Recruitment Strategy

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) exemplifies the integration of AI into extremist recruitment. ISKP uses AI to produce multilingual propaganda, optimize content visibility through keyword and hashtag strategies, and profile users for targeted messaging (GNET Research, 2025).

This AI-enhanced approach enables ISKP to circumvent counter-terrorism monitoring, maintain ideological cohesion, and expand its recruitment base despite territorial losses. The group's use of AI-driven chatbots for continuous engagement represents a new frontier in automated recruitment (GNET Research, 2025).

Case Study 2: ISIS and Social Media Propaganda

ISIS has been one of the most prolific users of social media for extremist purposes. The group used platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram to disseminate high-quality propaganda videos, recruit foreign fighters, and coordinate attacks globally (NIJ, 2020). Their online presence created a “virtual caliphate,” attracting thousands of recruits worldwide. Despite platform takedowns, ISIS adapted by migrating to encrypted messaging apps, illustrating the challenge of content removal.

Case Study 3: Far-Right Extremism in the United States

Data from the PIRUS dataset (2011-2016) shows that 73.2% of U.S. extremists used social media in their radicalization process, with 16.9% relying primarily on social media (START, 2018). Social media facilitated communication, sharing of propaganda, and mobilization. Notably, far-



right extremists used Facebook extensively, often supplementing offline networks. The Charleston church shooter and the New Zealand mosque attacker both used social media to livestream or publicize their attacks (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

Case Study 4: Al-Shabaab's Use of Social Media in Africa

Al-Shabaab uses social media to spread propaganda, recruit fighters, and intimidate local populations in East Africa (UNDP, 2022). The group exploits Facebook and Twitter to share videos glorifying attacks and to disseminate ideological narratives. Social media helps Al-Shabaab maintain influence despite military pressure, showing how online platforms sustain extremist groups in conflict zones.

Case Study 5: Right-Wing Extremist Radicalization in Europe

Research in the Netherlands and Germany reveals that social media platforms have been used to spread polarizing content that borders on extremist rhetoric (WODC, 2021). Although explicit extremist content has been reduced by platform moderation, borderline content continues to polarize users and contribute to radicalization. Recommendation algorithms sometimes amplify divisive content, facilitating “echo chambers” that reinforce extremist views.

Right-wing extremism in Europe represents a complex and evolving threat that has increasingly leveraged social media and online platforms to spread ideology, recruit followers, and coordinate activities. This phenomenon is characterized by a heterogeneous landscape of groups and ideologies, ranging from white supremacists and neo-Nazis to identitarian movements and anti-government militias, often interconnected across national borders (European Commission, 2021)².



7. Online Ecosystem and Communication Strategies

Right-wing extremists in Europe have adapted to the digital age by exploiting a wide range of online outlets, including mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as fringe and encrypted spaces like Gab, Telegram, 4chan, and BitChute (European Commission, 2021)². These platforms serve as “safe havens” for extremist content, allowing groups to disseminate propaganda, share violent manifestos, and coordinate attacks with relative anonymity and minimal oversight.

The internet has also enabled innovative operational strategies, including sophisticated financing through cryptocurrencies and crowdfunding, as well as virtual harassment tactics like doxing and trolling targeting opponents or minority groups (European Commission, 2021)². Some groups, such as the Atomwaffen Division and its European offshoots, have been formed and organized almost exclusively online, illustrating a shift toward predominantly digital extremist networks (European Commission, 2021).

8. Mechanisms of Online Radicalization

Radicalization is not simply about exposure to extremist content but involves complex social and psychological processes. Research emphasizes that radicalization requires reinforcement and social interaction, often facilitated by social media (Science Advances, 2023). Vulnerable individuals—experiencing isolation, anxiety, or rejection—are targeted through tailored messaging that offers belonging and purpose (ACT Early, 2021).

Algorithms on social media platforms can contribute to “echo chambers” or “cyberbalkanisation,” where users are exposed predominantly to like-minded views, reinforcing extremist beliefs (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., 2017). However, some studies caution that algorithms rarely recommend extremist content directly, but radicalized users can still access and share such material (Science Advances, 2023).



8.1. Gender-Specific Recruitment and Messaging

Extremist groups also use social media to target specific demographics, including women and children. Research on Islamic State recruitment highlights gender-specific propaganda designed to appeal to women's values and social roles, using social media campaigns to groom and persuade them (NIJ, 2020). This targeted approach exploits individual propensities and social contexts, facilitated by online interactions. There is also a research project in Germany concentrating on education standard in Salafi families and is analysing education guides and online sources (not published yet).

8.2. Social Media and Far-Right Extremism

Far-right extremist groups in the United States and Europe have increasingly used social media to radicalize, mobilize, and coordinate activities. Analysis of online forums shows diverse ideological perspectives within the far-right community, with social media playing a key role in communication and planning (NIJ, 2020). Platforms have also been used to live-stream attacks and spread hate speech, contributing to real-world violence (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

8.3. Social Media's Impact on Violence and Polarization

There is a documented correlation between hate speech on social media and spikes in violence. For example, anti-refugee attacks in Germany and communal violence in India and Sri Lanka have been linked to online hate campaigns (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Extremist perpetrators often self-radicalize online and use social media to publicize violent acts, amplifying their impact (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019).

8.4. Ethical and Professional Challenges

Professionals working to counter extremism face ethical dilemmas due to the public and often unregulated nature of social media. Psychologists and



social workers must navigate privacy concerns while engaging in online counter-radicalization efforts (American Psychological Association, 2021).

Mainstreaming and Normalization Tactics

A key strategy employed by right-wing extremists in Europe is the normalization of their ideologies through “metapolitical” approaches aimed at shifting public discourse and expanding the boundaries of acceptable political debate (European Commission, 2021)². Movements like the Identitarians focus less on electoral politics or violent street action and more on influencing the “dominant zeitgeist” by injecting terms such as “remigration” and “genderismus” into public conversations.

These groups often use humour, sarcasm, memes, and conspiracy theories to package extremist views as “just jokes,” thereby making them more palatable to a broader audience and shielding themselves from criticism (European Commission, 2021)². This strategic use of online culture facilitates the spread of fake news and the undermining of expertise, contributing to a polarized and fragmented information environment.

Transnational Networks and Offline Links

Right-wing extremist movements in Europe are not confined by national borders. The conflict in eastern Ukraine, for example, has become a hub for foreign fighters and a physical nexus for right-wing extremist networks (European Commission, 2021)². Moreover, extremists participate in international rallies, concerts, and events to forge personal and organizational ties, reinforcing a transnational extremist subculture.

Impact of Social Media on Political Populism and Extremism

Recent studies indicate that social media significantly influences the rise of populist and extremist political movements across Europe. Research published in ScienceDirect (2024) demonstrates how social media plat-



forms have been instrumental in amplifying far-right populist votes and spreading extremist narratives, contributing to political polarization and the erosion of democratic norms (ScienceDirect, 2024)1.

Recent Trends and Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic and related conspiracy theories, such as those surrounding 5G technology, have been appropriated by right-wing extremists to expand their reach and recruit new followers (European Commission, 2021)2. Movements like the “yellow vests” protests in some countries have been infiltrated by extremists, blurring the lines between legitimate dissent and extremist mobilization.

The European Union and member states have recognized the increasing threat posed by right-wing extremism. Europol’s 2020 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report highlights the growing use of the internet by right-wing extremists to livestream attacks, disseminate manifestos, and radicalize individuals globally (European Commission, 2021)2. The transnational nature of these groups necessitates coordinated intelligence sharing and joint counter-terrorism efforts.



9. Challenges and Policy Implications

The risks for security and safety are obvious and the key question is what is necessary to mitigate the risks evolving from radicalisation and the fast technological development in social media and the misuse of these. The technological innovation is developing in an enormous speed and countering the unfortunately innovative misuse by extremist organisations is crucial. Reflecting the above this results in several challenges and policy implications.

9.1 Challenges

In short there are several key challenges to mitigate the risk and counter the threat emerging:

Platform Moderation Limitations: Extremists' use of coded language and migration to encrypted platforms limits the effectiveness of content removal (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

Algorithmic Amplification: Social media algorithms inadvertently promote extremist content by prioritizing engagement (Prisgunanto et al., 2023).

Youth-Generated Extremist Content: Increasingly, youth themselves produce and share extremist material, complicating the traditional victim-perpetrator dynamic (Australian Government, 2025).

Technological Sophistication: AI and VR technologies enhance recruitment sophistication, outpacing current countermeasures (GNET Research, 2025).

9.2 Policy Recommendations

Countering violent extremism and radicalisation with respect of the influence of social media in this process is essential to create a safe and se-



cure society. Several policy recommendations result from the challenges and the above described methodologies, risks and threats:

- Enhance Digital Literacy: Equip youth with critical thinking skills to recognize and resist extremist narratives (Etumnu & Williams-Etumnu, 2023);
- Strengthen Platform Accountability: Mandate transparency in content moderation and cooperation with law enforcement (European Commission, 2023);
- Develop AI-Based Countermeasures: Invest in AI tools for detecting and countering extremist propaganda (GNET Research, 2025);
- Foster Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships: Governments, tech companies, educators, and civil society must collaborate to address recruitment challenges (Australian Government, 2025);
- Support Community Resilience: Build social support networks to reduce vulnerabilities exploited by extremists (Vision of Humanity, 2025).



10. Conclusion

Social media plays a critical role in the operations of extremist organizations, enabling propaganda dissemination, recruitment, radicalization, and coordination of violence. The literature and case studies demonstrate the complexity of online radicalization and the challenges in balancing security with rights to free expression. Effective policy responses require multi-faceted approaches involving technology regulation, community-based interventions, and international cooperation.

Social media's role in facilitating extremist organizations, particularly right-wing extremists in Europe, is multifaceted and deeply consequential. The digital environment has become a critical battleground where extremist ideologies are propagated, normalized, and operationalized. Right-wing extremists exploit social media's reach and anonymity to spread hateful narratives, recruit vulnerable individuals, and coordinate violent acts, often transcending national borders and leveraging both online and offline networks.

The literature and case studies reviewed underscore that social media platforms do not act in isolation to cause radicalization but serve as powerful enablers and accelerators of extremist processes. Algorithms and platform designs can inadvertently amplify polarizing content, while extremist groups skilfully use memes, humour, and coded language to mainstream their ideas and evade moderation.

Policy responses must therefore be comprehensive and adaptive, balancing the imperative to protect democratic societies from extremist violence with the need to uphold freedom of expression and privacy. This includes enhancing platform accountability, regulating algorithmic amplification, investing in digital literacy, and fostering international cooperation. Moreover, addressing the socio-economic and psychological vulnerabilities that extremists exploit remains essential.

The rise of right-wing extremism in Europe, as evidenced by recent vio-



lent incidents, online mobilization, and the mainstreaming of extremist discourse, demands urgent and sustained attention from policymakers, civil society, and technology companies alike. Only through coordinated, multi-dimensional strategies can the complex challenges posed by extremist use of social media be effectively mitigated, preserving social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Furthermore, IT professionals should educate social scientists about using online tools to analyse Internet content (Scrivens et al. 1, 2020: pp. 1417-1435). Also, some sociologists and criminologies point out that radicalisation in the social sciences cannot be reduced exclusively to a security approach, but it is necessary to analyse the motivation of extremist actors, opportunities and expand this discussion to the level where radicalisation becomes a cognitive problem of society. The Internet helps to understand new forms of adopting some values and norms of another culture. Social networks (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) are also used to break ties with familiar people and establish connections with strangers (Khosrokhaver, 2014).

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