



Consequences of Extremist Digital Heritage on the Rehabilitation Process

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Radicalisation Awareness Network

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Practitioners

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Introduction

The diffusion of digital extremist content by individuals and extremist groups, as well as the way in which this content and terrorism-related events are reported by news media, have increasingly raised concerns regarding: 1) the perpetuation of violent extremist propaganda; 2) pathways to radicalisation; and 3) the potential recruitment and mobilisation of at-risk individuals. However, little attention has been paid to how digital remainders of former extremist activities may be impacting on the disengagement and rehabilitation processes of former extremists. Most former extremists are concerned about how their past will be perceived and understood and how it will impact them.

In addressing this significant issue, this report will focus on four key questions:

1. Which types of extremist digital heritage exist and which are the most common and relevant examples regarding rehabilitation?
2. How can these impact on the rehabilitation and long-term stabilisation process of former extremists?
3. How can negative consequences best be dealt with?
4. Which practitioner groups can and should be involved in dealing with this issue and how?

The report builds its findings on first-hand experiences of exit workers, law enforcement practitioners, youth workers, social workers, and prison and probation officers as well as former extremists from Europe, Canada and Australia.

Extremist Digital Heritage as a Challenge for Rehabilitation

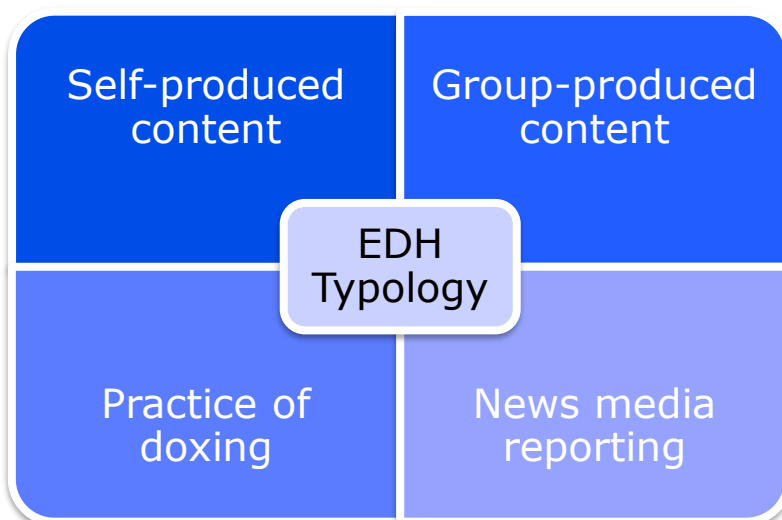
Before considering the impact of digital remainders of former extremist activities or of an extremist digital heritage (EDH) on the rehabilitation process, it is important to understand the evolution of media ecology in relation to former extremists. A clear distinction needs to be made between a pre- and post-internet generation of former extremists. Unlike the younger generation heavily influenced by the internet and social media, older generations of former extremists mostly active in the 1980s and early 1990s have in fact a very limited digital footprint, if none at all. Before the advent of the internet, most extremist activity in the 1970s up to the early 1990s was analogue, where recruitment and radicalisation happened in study groups and terrorism- and extremism-related content was mostly accessible through videotapes, audiotapes and books ⁽¹⁾. Pre-internet, the reach and effectiveness of extremist violent content was fairly limited, which translates to a lower EDH compared to a later post-internet generation of violent extremists. As such, the dilemma regarding EDH with an older generation of former extremists can be different. For some, the challenge is not so much about mitigating the impact of an EDH to ensure a sustainable rehabilitation, but rather about learning and familiarising themselves with online communication and creating a digital identity that does not compromise their rehabilitation and long-term stabilisation process ⁽²⁾. For a generation of extremists heavily reliant on new technologies, the level of EDH may be more significant and more impactful on the rehabilitation process than for this earlier generation of former extremists.

Another important aspect to consider in addressing the EDH impact on the rehabilitation process of former extremists is the different existing types of EDH. These need to be outlined in order to understand the ramifications of this heritage and the best ways to manage or limit its harmful effects. In this context, it is essential to understand who produced the content and how it is used. Four types of EDH have been identified: 1) self-produced content; 2) group-produced content; 3) practice of doxing; and 4) news media reporting (printed and online).

⁽¹⁾ Interview with UK and Canadian practitioners, September 2021.

⁽²⁾ A Canadian exit practitioner explained that for some older former extremists who are released from prison after long sentences, the simple use of new technology such as a smartphone could be a challenge and require new ways of learning to communicate safely in a digital era.

Figure 1: EDH Typology Impacting on the Disengagement and Rehabilitation Processes



Self-produced Content

Self-produced content can include individual accounts on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, social media postings, messaging platforms, talks at events, memes or video content. Self-produced content is one of the types of EDH that poses less challenges to the rehabilitation process as it can be very easily dealt with.

Group-produced content

Group-produced material encompasses content produced by the former's own group or by an oppositional group. These include, but are not limited to, propaganda videos, messaging on forums, fake news and conspiracy theories. As part of their radicalisation strategy, extremist groups will engage individuals in their material and implicate them in their enterprise to exercise leverage and control over them. As such, by purposefully involving individuals in the extremist group and milieu, possibilities to exit the scene become limited as individuals see their reputation damaged. Moreover, the extremist group will intentionally hold this EDH over them to refrain them from leaving or making the rehabilitation process extremely difficult despite the former's distancing from the group.

Practice of doxing

The group-produced EDH content becomes even more challenging when it is used by oppositional groups or in doxing. For instance, religiously motivated extremist groups may produce online content such as videos where a former may feature, and this same material can then be reused by right-wing extremist groups to undermine and negatively represent the former extremist. This can seriously discredit the process of disengagement of the individual and put at risk the sustainability of their rehabilitation process as well as endanger the community to which the former extremist belongs by creating an image of a dangerous community.

News media reporting (printed and online)

Media reporting of violent extremism, which often errs on the side of sensationalism and hyper-mediatisation, has inadvertently perpetuated terrorist propaganda and in some instances contributed to building pathways to radicalisation ⁽³⁾. News media are full of images of violent extremists and terrorists, often featuring them on newspapers or news magazines' front covers. To name only a few, right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh has been featured at least three times on the cover of TIME, Anders Behring Breivik doing the Nazi salute appeared in The New York Times, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev in Rolling Stone and Michael Adebolajo as the front

⁽³⁾ In an interview in 2017, a Belgian minor confided to having found her way to Daesh after watching on French mainstream television a special news investigation programme on the Soldiers of Allah.

headline of The Sun. Only last month, *Le Monde*, amongst other newspapers, published parts of the testimony of one of the main perpetrators of the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, offering a platform to violent extremism. While it is important for news media to inform the public, care also needs to be taken to not provide oxygen to violent extremists and their messages. Another significant aspect of consideration here is how this mediatisation of violent extremists who have disengaged from violent extremism can complicate the rehabilitation process of these individuals. In the context of news media reporting of terrorism, often photos, names and stories of former extremists are published that will eventually inflate their EDH. The news media cycle often operates in the “now and then”. Rarely do they consider in their reporting future projections of how media news reports can and will impact on individuals, communities and societies, and even less so the immediate and potential long-term effect images and content can have on the future rehabilitation of an individual. Hence, depending on the degree of media exposure, former extremists may encounter additional significant challenges to rebuilding social relations and convincing their relations of their reformation.

Furthermore, the degree of negative representation and the type of language used by news media to describe former extremists can have an impact on the disengagement process of individuals and their successful rehabilitation. For instance, the news media tend to humanise right-wing extremist offenders, often depicting them as misled individuals rather than actual criminal offenders, whereas religiously motivated extremist offenders are demonised and often stripped of their humanity, portrayed almost systematically as terrorists. This news reporting dichotomy and ensuing digital heritage will consequently affect differently the disengagement and rehabilitation processes of an individual depending on whether this EDH portrays them as misguided but essentially a good human being or inherently evil.

Each type of EDH brings different types of challenges in mitigating their effect on the rehabilitation process of former extremists. Furthermore, depending on the volume and the type of digital heritage remainder and the kind of involvement in the extremist scene the individual had, there can be a hindering effect both on the individual’s own processes of leaving the extremist milieu and their process of change as well as the sustainability of their rehabilitation.

To further understand the risk linked to EDH and rehabilitation of former extremists, additional significant distinctions need to be made between different cohorts of former extremists: i.e. between high profile/low profile, underage/overage, and the types of involvement, violent or non-violent (e.g. someone who took part in a violent act versus someone who posted heinous comments online).

For individuals who have played a prominent and visible role in the extremist milieu and hence have a significantly larger digital heritage, it becomes very challenging for these former extremists to distance themselves from this extremist identity of their former selves in the public sphere.

A UK exit practitioner explains:

He [former extremist] has lots of headlines around him. For him, it is something he cannot escape. He is a body builder, he’s a black guy, he’s a Muslim, a convert. He fits every box in terms of stereotypes around the aggressive other. His infamy follows him everywhere. His most recent offence was an offence because his whole image followed him, and people provoked him based on this image. He would go to a mosque and the mosque wanted nothing to do with him as they already knew who he was. He’s been in every demonstration, every newspaper; he’s very prominent in the online space. For an individual like that, the problem is trying to escape from that.

A large EDH creates significant additional pressure for individuals to *visibly* distance themselves from their former identity. Former extremists with higher level and more visible profiles put more pressure on their rehabilitation process than those with lower level and less visible profiles. It also brings the question of sincerity about the disengagement of the person and whether this public distancing is a way to simply divert public attention away from them. It may also increase the risk of setbacks in the disengagement process of an individual and endanger their rehabilitation due to the constant public scrutinisation and demonisation of their experience, which in turn leads to experiences of rejection. In some cases, EDH-related impact has the potential to trigger re-radicalisation.

For former extremists with low level profiles, the self-awareness of a digital heritage coupled with the anticipation of this heritage to be publicly revealed at any time is equally problematic. It creates feelings of being under constant scrutiny and can lead to mental health issues and anti-social behaviour. For some, it can also accentuate a sense of significance or accentuate grievances.

For underage former extremists, an EDH can cause severe impediments to their rehabilitation process as they rely even more so on positive social relations to rebuild their identity and new life. Adolescence is when identity formation becomes the most salient; a teenager's self-identity is shaped by different social environments such as family, peers and school.

A Belgian minor explained how he was worried about returning to his community once he would be released from detention as his photo and name had been published by Belgian news media. His fear of rejection and of being discovered weighed heavily on his decision of whether to return or not to his hometown where he had all his social support network ⁽⁴⁾.

The disruption of positive social relations by an EDH can enhance the fear of rejection and stigma, cause trauma and lead to self-isolation. This is particularly important to consider in the current context of minors returning from Syria and Iraq and their rehabilitation ⁽⁵⁾.

Several effects have been identified as a result of EDH impeding both the disengagement and rehabilitation processes ⁽⁶⁾:

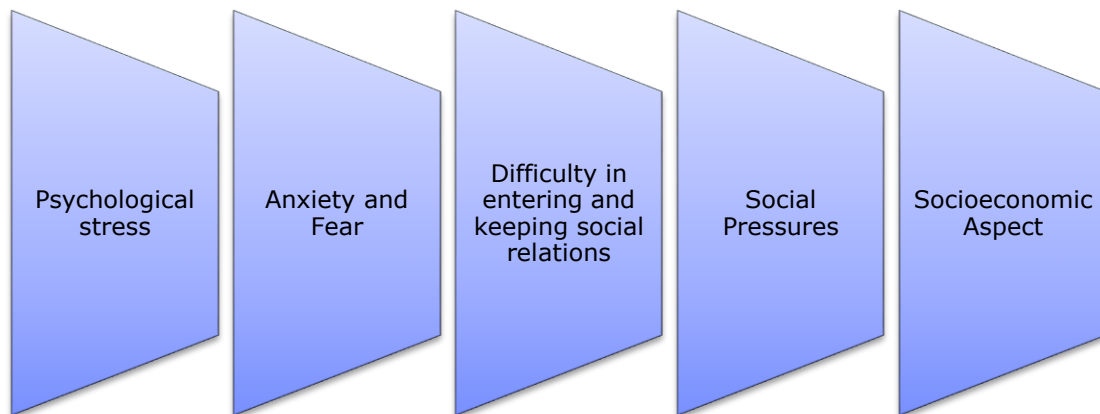
- Significant **psychological stress** – related to the risk of exposure of a former extremist's past due to the existence of readily identifiable and available online content. It can affect the ability of an individual to move forward in their disengagement process, increases the risk of mental illness and lengthens the whole process.
- **Anxiety and fear** – While some individuals may have been wanting to disengage from violent extremism, the existence of an EDH may have prevented or considerably slowed down some former extremists from actually leaving their extremist milieu because of the fear of shame, stigma and public rejection that may arise from this publicly available EDH. The notion of guilt can also be multiplied, especially if the former's biographical history is linked to an act of violence.
- **Difficulties in entering and keeping social relations** due to the fear of being discovered through an EDH, which can lead to isolation and social exclusion.
- **Social pressures** – There are additional social pressures to prove to the social circles with which former extremists engage (e.g. employers/co-workers, universities, communities) that the individual has changed.
- The **socioeconomic aspect of the rehabilitation process** can be severely impacted. The search for employment or long-term employment of former extremists can be severely impacted by an EDH, leading to unemployment and termination of employment as well as access restrictions to certain professions. A similar logic is found as regards access to education.

⁽⁴⁾ Interview with Belgian minor conducted in youth detention centre, Belgium, 2017.

⁽⁵⁾ In 2020, Belgian youth association AtMOspheres introduced a complaint with the Belgian Deontological Journalistic Council about the publication by three news media of the name and image of a minor in relation to a case of extremism.

⁽⁶⁾ Interviews with exit practitioners and former extremists, September 2021.

Figure 2: EDH Effects on Disengagement and Rehabilitation Processes



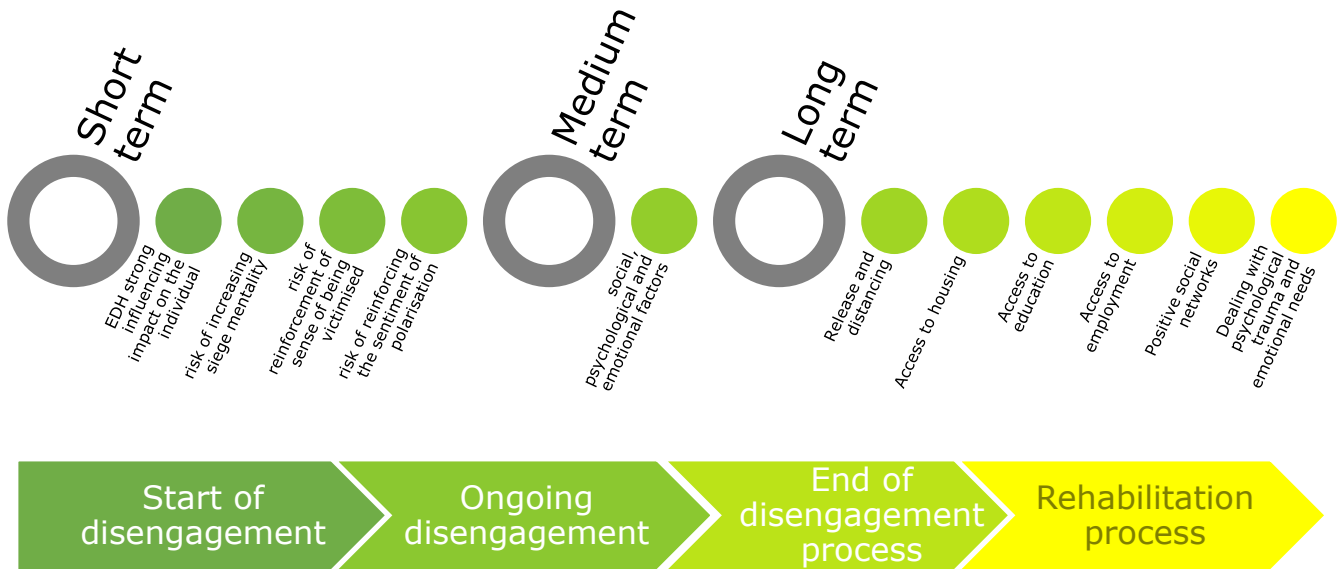
As explained by an Australian practitioner:

Many employers are now starting to go online and look at people's Facebook pages and there's every chance that they may stumble across this material. ... This would alter the former's recovery process. How would they overcome these barriers within society?

These effects constitute significant obstacles not only to the processes of exiting but also to the moving forward of former extremists, with devastating consequences for some individuals. The degree to which such barriers will personally affect an individual in their process of disengagement and rehabilitation will depend on the person's level of resilience, personal emotional state of well-being, and the preparedness and mitigation strategies in place. Resilience can be understood as developing a strong sense of self away from extremist views and identity and that one is no longer conflicted about their new self and past identity. The more resilient the new identity is, the less the risk of relapse or failed rehabilitation.

Understanding the extent of one's EDH is important as it has short- to long-term consequences that can severely hinder the disengagement and long-term rehabilitation processes for some individuals. So what are the short-, medium- and long-term consequences of an EDH on the disengagement and rehabilitation processes? At the early stage of disengagement, the individual is still radicalised and as such still holds certain beliefs and attitudes. The EDH in the short term continues to strongly influence the individual and will impact the disengagement process. There is an increasing risk of reinforcing a siege mentality, a sense of victimisation and reinforcing grievances. In the medium term, it will impact on the social, psychological and emotional needs of the individual. In the long term, at the end of the disengagement process and throughout the rehabilitation process, the EDH can impact on the building and maintaining of positive social networks, access to education, employment and housing, and can reinforce psychological trauma and emotional needs.

Figure 3: Short-, Medium- and Long-term Impacts on the Disengagement and Rehabilitation Processes



At the practitioner level, practitioners and service providers supporting the rehabilitation process of former extremists are not spared by the EDH. They can also be influenced by it when building their relationship with the individual. There have been instances where probation officers or social workers have deliberately accessed the individual’s EDH to “get to know better” the offender/client.

Finally, the EDH can also impact on communities’ preparedness and readiness to support former extremists’ rehabilitation and integration into the community. Depending on the volume of the EDH, communities may not be willing to support the rehabilitation process in fear that they may be stigmatised or associated with violent extremism. This is particularly true with individuals who have extremely high visible and prominent profiles. Furthermore, depending on the type of media coverage, the related media narratives and the language used, community support towards rehabilitation may differ between former right-wing extremists and former violent religiously motivated extremists. While similar in action and undertaking, societies’ and communities’ appreciations of the rehabilitation process of former extremists may differ based on the media coverage of the different types of extremism. This impacts on the public’s perception and acceptance of the rehabilitation process of former extremists and ultimately on the readiness and preparedness of communities to support rehabilitation. Communities play a significant role in the successful process of rehabilitation of former extremists and the reduction of the risk of recidivism. Like the former extremists they support in their rehabilitation process, they can also be impacted by the EDH.

Ways of Overcoming or Managing This Challenge in Rehabilitation

In considering ways to mitigate and manage the effect of EDH, it is important to understand where an individual is within their own personal disengagement and rehabilitation processes. In the case of some former convicted extremists, this digital heritage can be considered a “badge of honour” that validates them further in the extremist milieu. Indeed, there exists a risk of accentuating the profile of some individuals who without an EDH would remain very low profile within the scene. In these particular cases, the best strategy to adopt is to limit the individual’s EDH.

At the individual level, an active approach should be considered in limiting the impact of the EDH. Practitioners can provide support and work with the individual to help them anticipate and strengthen their preparedness and readiness to manage the potential effect of the EDH as part of their process of rehabilitation. Also, following a robust assessment, practitioners should identify fault lines, triggers and

vulnerabilities that may emerge from this EDH. Most importantly, practitioners have to help keep the individual grounded on their personal journey of disengagement and rehabilitation.

One useful approach is the **use of risk case scenarios** through which the practitioner and the former extremist work together to assess: 1) what kind of content is accessible; 2) how likely it is the information will be accessed; 3) who will access the information; 4) what kind of consequences may arise; and 5) how a response can be prepared. In mitigating these consequences, the former can adopt both a proactive and reactive strategy. On one hand, the individual can choose to inform the concerned party, such as an employer or education provider, of their past and their change in order to mitigate the possible impact of the EDH. On the other hand, the individual can prepare a statement in anticipation of the risk of their former extremist past coming to light and being called into question. This active approach at the individual level allows to instill a sentiment of ownership, control and confidence in better assessing and managing risks in relation to one's EDH.

Developing a strategy of public relations is also important to consider in crafting any risk responses. Some important considerations are: how to manage oneself in the public sphere, and how to formulate one's response. In terms of access to employment, due to the significance of the digital heritage, additional support by practitioners who can provide evidence of the individual's process of disengagement should be considered.

While individual proactive strategies can be developed, in some instances it may also be necessary to have some of the EDH removed. This needs to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis.

Removal of the problematic EDH – This can include removal of text, images and videos where the former extremist is identifiable or which can be associated with them. However, the request for content removal needs to be expressed by the individual as it is an integral part of their disengagement process. Removal of the content will help the individual to distance themselves from their former identity and extremist milieu. For this to happen, the following must be ensured: 1) a robust assessment of an individual to assess that they have distanced themselves from their past; 2) the individual has undertaken restorative work; 3) clearly present an argument and a case that the EDH will impact the disengagement or the rehabilitation process and that it will place the individual in a space of vulnerability.

This can be easily done with **self-produced content** with the individual removing content themselves from their social media accounts or simply deleting social media accounts related to their former extremist identity. Cutting off their ties and relations in the digital space (as in real life) is also part of the steps within the disengagement process where individuals need to distance themselves from the extremist group and milieu.

With extremist group-produced content and doxing, content removal is extremely challenging as the former extremist has little control over or recourse to content removal. In the case of doxing, while it remains difficult, it is possible to have some of the content revised, if not removed, to limit the potential harmful effect of doxing on the former extremist's rehabilitation process. This can be done by attempting to enter into discussion with the concerned doxing group in which clear motivations for content removals are established. Depending on where the problematic content is hosted, there are existing regulations such as on social media platforms that may facilitate the taking down of content.

Removal or modification of news media content potentially harmful to the long-term rehabilitation and stabilisation process of a former extremist is possible. The duty of care and principle of do no harm are important principles to put forward when engaging in this process with news media. This can be done in direct discussion with the concerned media with the support of a practitioner and would require the former extremist to demonstrate sincerity in their process of change. Caution and careful consideration need to be exercised in this case, as the media can request that the concerned individual share publicly their reformation, which could impact negatively on the disengagement and rehabilitation processes of the individual. Depending also on the individual's degree of involvement or position in an extremist group, the extent of their media coverage and visibility, and whether there was any display of acts of violence in the news media, there may need to be a clear public statement about the individual's disengagement to effectively communicate the change and distancing from violent extremism. For some individuals with very high profiles who decide to change, this could only be communicated to the public (who would otherwise identify them as extremists) through media. However, in most cases, most individuals will want to keep their disengagement process private, away from the prying eyes of the news media.

Building a new digital identity that surpasses the older digital identity – Depending on the prominence and role of the former extremist in the extremist scene, it may be challenging for some to completely disappear from the public eye. Therefore, creating a new digital identity, which will embrace the former digital identity to transform and surpass it, is not only an important part of the disengagement process (offline and online) in itself, but is equally important in building resilience towards the harmful effect of the EDH and mitigating its effects.

I decided to deal head on with this heritage (EDH). We can decide to avoid that heritage or we can take that heritage and transform it. For me, it was a catalyst to my own change process. It's always there. Unless I do something with it, I can either avoid it and it's always there or I can transform it ⁽⁷⁾.

Altering search algorithm results by creating new content – By building a new digital identity and establishing a public relations strategy, former extremists on their own and with the support of practitioners can also start creating new digital content that over time will overtake the former extremist digital identity by altering the results returned by the search algorithm. This is a long-term approach in mitigating EDH.

Right to be forgotten – Within EU legislation (May 2014), individuals have the right to be forgotten and as such have the possibility to ask search engines such as Google “to delist certain results for queries related to a person’s name. In deciding what to delist, search engines must consider if the information in question is ‘inaccurate, inadequate, irrelevant or excessive’, and whether there is a public interest in the information remaining available in search results” ⁽⁸⁾. In the context of EDH and rehabilitation, the difficulty with the right to be forgotten lies in the notion of public interest and the authority that decides what is of public interest.

Anonymisation and name change – Ultimately, for some former extremists, their EDH is so prominent and the degree of violence committed is such that the right to be forgotten becomes very difficult. A name change to recover one’s anonymity is not an uncommon practice in the rehabilitation of former extremist offenders.

Finally, **building community and individual awareness on the long-reaching impact of EDH** through early intervention educational campaigns targeting vulnerable and at-risk individuals is essential as an early intervention prevention strategy but also in preventing the build-up of a harmful EDH. In Australia, law enforcement agencies developed such a strategy to assist at-risk individuals to understand how a certain EDH may impact them in real life, such as the individual’s long-term ability to find employment or to build meaningful relationships.

EDH Relevance to Practitioners

The issue of EDH is relevant to all practitioners providing support to extremists disengaging from extremist groups and violent extremism as well as those involved in the rehabilitation of former extremists.

1. This includes but is not limited to exit practitioners, social workers, prison and probation officers, and healthcare workers.
2. Addressing the EDH can be done in incremental ways with the support of practitioners by working with the former extremist themselves on an individual and global communication strategy plan.
3. In the early intervention and prevention stage amongst vulnerable youth and at-risk individuals, the EDH is also of specific concern to youth workers, social workers and educators.

⁽⁷⁾ Interview with former Canadian right-wing extremist, September 2021.

⁽⁸⁾ See: <https://support.google.com/legal/answer/10769224?hl=en-GB>

Key Lessons

1. While the EDH can be mitigated, it will always exist, overtly or explicitly linked to the individual and it will have some impact on the individual.
2. A clear distinction needs to be made between a pre- and post-internet generation of former extremists. For a generation of extremists heavily reliant on new technologies, the level of EDH may be more significant and more impactful on the rehabilitation process than for an earlier generation of former extremists.
3. There exist four types of EDH that can impact on the rehabilitation process of former extremists: 1) self-produced content; 2) group-produced content; 3) practice of doxing; and 4) news media reporting (printed and online).
4. Depending on the volume and the type of EDH and the kind of involvement in the extremist scene the individual had, there can be a hindering effect both on the individual's own processes of leaving the extremist milieu and the sustainability of their rehabilitation.
5. High EDH may increase the risk of setbacks in the disengagement process of an individual and endanger their rehabilitation due to the constant public scrutinisation.
6. In some cases, EDH-related impact has the potential to trigger re-radicalisation.
7. The degree to which EDH will personally affect an individual in their process of disengagement and rehabilitation will depend on the person's level of resilience, personal emotional state of well-being, and the preparedness and mitigation strategies in place.
8. The EDH can affect the social, psychological and emotional needs of an individual in their rehabilitation process. It can impact on the capacity of building and maintaining positive social networks and access to education and employment as well as housing, and reinforce psychological trauma and emotional needs.
9. At the practitioner level, practitioners and service providers supporting the rehabilitation process of former extremists can also be influenced by the EDH in their relationship building with the individual.
10. The EDH can also impact communities' preparedness and readiness to support former extremists' rehabilitation and integration into the community. Depending on the volume of the EDH, communities may not be willing to support the rehabilitation process in fear that they may be stigmatised or associated with violent extremism.

Key Recommendations to Mitigate EDH Impact

While the EDH can be mitigated, it will always exist, overtly or explicitly linked to the individual and it will continue to have some impact on the individual. Hence, the first line of approach is to assist the former extremist to strengthen their resilience towards the potential harmful effects of their EDH by building their preparedness and readiness through the development of response strategies on how to address and mitigate these effects.

Recommendations

1. Develop at the individual level an active approach to limit the EDH impact.
2. Develop a strategy of public relations to manage EDH harmful effects.
3. Provide the opportunity to former extremists to completely distance themselves from their EDH by building a new digital identity.
4. Facilitate the possibility for former extremists to have their EDH removed.
5. Facilitate the possibility for former extremists to have their name changed when necessary.
6. Develop a set of guidelines on how to mitigate the impact of EDH in the context of disengagement and rehabilitation.
7. Develop proactive response strategies to the potential harmful effects of EDH in tandem with the individual and the practitioner.
8. Build community and individual awareness on the long-reaching impact of EDH as an early intervention and prevention tool.

Further reading

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Dr Virginie Andre is a Victoria University Senior Research Fellow. Virginie has expertise in terrorism and countering violent extremism, strategic communication, media and terrorism, and ethno-nationalism and conflict transformation. She has a particular interest in disengagement from violent extremism and youth radicalisation. In the last 15 years, Dr Andre has researched diverse communities in Europe, North America, south-east Asia and Australia. She is regularly consulted as an expert by various institutions, notably the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network and the Global Coalition Against Daesh. She also develops and delivers trainings to counter violent extremism to government officials, media practitioners, frontline practitioners (including military) and youth. In 2021, she joined the international editorial team of the EXIT-Germany Journal. She is also a founding member of Finnish NGO youth outreach organisation Kare. Virginie holds a PhD degree from Monash University and a degree in art therapy.

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