# Hybrid youth and social work

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# Introduction

Online social systems, which are interwoven throughout the digitally savvy lives of children and young people, are not only spaces for games and memes. They are also arenas of social interaction and belonging. Before streaming and gaming, monitoring at-risk youth involved screening their physical environment. Today, it is just as important to assess their browser history and learn about their preferred hashtags. It is within this context that the paper seeks to demystify the new online arenas of potential radicalisation and their attraction to certain groups of young people. The paper will also shed light on the psychological and sociological perspective of the young people who are seeking them out. The overall aim of the paper is to enable youth and social workers, teachers, parents, and caregivers to become empowered actors in the increasingly digital lives of children and young people.

## Challenges

Many young people facing challenging or risky social situations in their day-to-day life seek support in online settings. This makes them vulnerable to risks, which are oftentimes not directly visible to professionals focusing on the local physical community. Furthermore, many experienced professionals have been educated and are experienced and comfortable working in a physical space. They may feel they lack the appropriate tools or insights to engage with young people in the digitalised world.

Many professionals and parents feel an obligation to minimise time spent online or in front of screens. This is something that many young people report as the sole focus of conversations on digital environments adults engage them in (how long they are used rather than what they are used for). This hinders constructive discussions about communities, impressions and emotions that are created in the digital context.

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and stay-at-home mandates resulted in an increase in screen time. The restrictions also necessitated a digitalisation of many professions, including pedagogical and psychological interventions. As a result, a hybrid-approach was required for a range of new and existing projects.

What's more, considering that most professionals and parents did not themselves experience the ubiquitous social media (SoMe) environment as teenagers, it is not easy for them to fully understand the almost cyborg-like nature of the new generation of adolescents who do not *go* online but rather *are* online as a prerequisite to (social) life.

Previous RAN papers ([1]) have dealt extensively with many practical questions regarding how to conduct digital youth work. This paper builds on the excellent points made herein, and furthers the understanding of the ever-expanding and evolving digital landscape of children and young people.

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([1]) Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context, RAN, 2019. Link in "Further Reading".

# Understanding digital communities

Since the onset of the internet's social media culture, starting with Six Degrees (1997), the evolution to MySpace (2003) and the (so far) ultimate example of Facebook (2006, but only overtaking MySpace in 2008), young people have been the earliest adopters of these new (social) technologies [2]. The notion of emotional and social validity and impact of these new digital social media has become broadly acknowledged, some through knowledge [3,4] and some through panic-laden tabloid headlines [5,6]. Therefore, adults have been playing catch-up to children and young people and their ever-expanding understanding and appropriation of (then) new digital communities and networks.

Many children and young people say the initial generational conflict stems from parents engaging with their children's lives with a normative rather than a qualifying agenda. They try to limit, restrict and frame the screen time, rather than try to increase its quality. These differing views hinder constructive dialogue between children and parents, discouraging children from actively seeking parental guidance.

Many digital environments outside the most mainstream platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok [7] are used strategically in accordance with (digital) local values and 'moods'. Users can seek out communities of similar interest, political temperament and creed. Only the few mainstreamed platforms have grown above a socially critical threshold, making their content 'unavoidable' for most online users. Facebook etc. have become the primary platforms of the internet, allowing a centralised dissemination of news and information to most (if not all) online users. The smaller and more niche sites allow users to form new interest-driven social relationships, away from all the 'clutter'. Men use such platforms more than women, and are also more likely to go online to form new relationships or join new communities, whereas women mainly use online platforms to strengthen existing connections [8]. Men and members of male-dominated communities online have a higher risk for radicalisation in this regard.

This paper shall argue that these communities attract users (often men, whose interests or political convictions do not fit with mainstream platforms) who try to formulate strong feelings of in-group belonging to combat experienced social ostracisation [9]. By making 'the others' an enemy, they create a shared argument of belonging: To fight against 'the others'. It shall be argued later that many young men feel ashamed or stigmatised for showing vulnerable emotions or even depicting themselves as anything other than fighters, conquerors or 'winners'.

According to research findings and experience, most female dominated communities do not suffer the same fate as male groups in the sense of a negative transformation in the long term. Since women are subject to different sets of gendered controls, many (though not all) female communities of vulnerable women start as support groups and remain supportive. Women as a whole are in turn much more the victim of social control on mainstreamed social media sites, with regards to appearance, non-feminine behaviour etc. Where women risk stigmatisation for not being feminine enough, men in turn suffer the same risk for showing traits which are socially labelled as being too feminine (for example being too emotional, as this is often viewed as a specifically feminine trait). Thus, men are not given the opportunity to give or receive constructive emotional support.

Women are also engaging with aggressive gender focused communities and movements online, though often in an introductory or supporting role within, bringing others into the group.

[2] Pew Research Center. (2016). Early Technology Adopters.
[3] Paul Best, Roger Manktelow, Brian Taylor. (2014). Online communication, social media and adolescent wellbeing: A systematic narrative review.
[4] Amy Orben & Andrew Przybylski. (2019). The association between adolescent well-being and digital technology use.
[5] Karen Leick. (2019). Parents, Media and Panic through the Years.
[6] Margaret K. Nelson. (2018). Helicopter Parents: A New Moral Panic?
[7] Pew Research Center. (2021). Social Media Fact Sheet.
[8] Muscanell & Guadagno. (2012). Make new friends or keep the old: Gender and personality differences in social networking use.
[9] OSCE. (2019). Understanding the Role of Gender in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism

*"By fetishizing physical strength and traditional family values, the contemporary far-right embraces conventional notions of masculinity and uses narratives around the reclamation of masculinity as an important recruitment tool. […] weak masculinity is identified as a defining trait of progressive culture, with tropes of cuckoldry and effeminacy being used to ridicule left-wing men. […] A new wave of women are situating themselves within the movement, leading to the growth of communities such as the 'Tradwives', who see the rejection of feminism as a key component in 'redpilling [10]', a trend which mirrors the empowerment that western women joining the Islamic State felt through embracing traditional gender roles"* [11].

*Ebner & Davey (2019)*

Women are often portrayed as 'the good wives' to 'strong men', fighting for their country and conservative values [12].

Over the past years, as progressive public debates have led to the adoption of narratives supportive of women's rights and immigration in many countries, these male communities have formulated counter-narratives of being resistance movements, masculine bulwarks against what they perceive as feminist oppression. Some countries have started to include this counter-narratives into political movements of the highest level, e.g. the US and Poland have in recent years become much more restrictive on reproductive rights, and the establishment of the anti-progressive narrative is some places growing from fringe-movements to political decisions.

The notion of (white) masculine values and traits being inherently better than feminine counterparts, and feminism therefore being an unnatural and unhealthy societal 'coup', eventually leading to society's downfall, is a narrative often shared in these communities. It leads a transition from being pro-men, to anti-women. Most new radicalising groups fall under this broad understanding of gender (and race) relations, and are joined under the umbrella term: 'manosphere' (which is expanded on later in this report). The networks within the 'manosphere' also include a few women, who are often used strategically to promote or deflate the dangerous image that some of the networks might have [13,14].

Since most women use social media mainly to consolidate friendships, one notable threat should be mentioned. Many countries have noticed that social media networks formed by young women (as well as young people and children) over bonds over self-harm and suicidal ideations, often centre around methods or self-harm identities such as anorexia, bulimia, cutting etc. In 2020, a Danish network of more than 1 000 young women was brought to the media's attention when several of its members exposed the network and the self-harm that was going on within the network [15,16]. Such networks are acknowledged by other European helplines and initiatives, though no evidence as clear as the Danish case is currently available. The networks, like many other radicalising communities, bond over feelings of detachment and ostracisation to mainstream society, and a romanticisation of a destructive counter-culture. Whereas many communities within the 'manosphere' grow to be externally directed, these networks remain self-focused, but just as (dangerous (if not more so).

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[10] Based on the movie "The Matrix", 'redpilling' represents the idea of a painful awakening to reality.
[11] Julia Ebner & Jacob Davey. (2019) How Women Advance the Internationalization of the Far-Right,
[12] Neo Nazi group use Instagram to recruit young people, warns Hope Not Hate. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/22/neo-nazi-groups-use-instagram-to-recruit-young-people-warns-hope-not-hate
[13] Ibid.
[14] Eviane Leidig. (2021) « We are worth fighting for » : Women in far-right extremism
[15] PRIV-Netværk: https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/selvskade-og-selvmordsplaner-bliver-delt-i-hemmeligt-netvaerk-med-1000-danskere (in Danish)
[16] Døde Pigers Dagbog (Dead Girls' Diary): https://www.dr.dk/drtv/program/doede-pigers-dagbog_170332 (TV Special, in Danish)

## Summary

- Digital communities gather like-minded users.
- 'Mainstream' vs 'niche' communities.
- Men use online platforms more than women.
- Men are more likely to use online platforms to form new relationships and enter new communities.
- Women are more likely to use online platforms to strengthen existing relationships and communities.
- Men in male-focused communities are at higher risk of radicalisation than men who are not.
- The 'manosphere' has formed as a countermovement to feminism and progressive politics.
- Female networks exist, but have a more internal focus, albeit the same dangerous ideations.

## Developments in hybrid support for young people

National digital helplines have been established across Europe over the past 15 years. Using chat, digital forums, or digital hotlines and helplines instead of physically based walk-in support systems ([17]) the helplines seek to provide and offer systemic and qualified assistance or guidance for children and young people, that is not limited by physical closeness, fitting opening hours, or any other such limitations.

Since 2004, an increasing number of European countries have taken part in the Safer Internet Day programme, and the Safer Internet Center network ([18]). The SIC cooperation consists of 31 countries, each providing several resources for social youth work. Both are geared towards children and young people as well as professionals working in, amongst other things, P/CVE. It involves the following:

- A **helpline** providing information, advice and assistance to children, youth and parents on how to deal with harmful content, harmful contact (such as recruitment or grooming) and harmful conduct such as (cyberbullying or sexting).
- A **hotline** allowing members of the public to report illegal content anonymously.
- **Youth panels** which allow young people to express their views and exchange knowledge and experiences concerning their use of online technologies, as well as tips on how to stay safe.
- A **national awareness centre** focusing on raising awareness and understanding of safer internet issues and emerging trends, running campaigns to empower children, young people, parents, carers and teachers with the skills, knowledge and strategies to stay safe online.

Several SIC-member organisations have reported an increasing interest in youth P/CVE, both as a response to the digitalisation of older risk-networks (right-wing, neo Nazi etc.) and as the organisations become aware of a newer string of radicalisation milieus and extremist communities online , such as Pick-Up Artists (PUAs) ([19]), incels or alt right-networks.

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([17]) Youth shelters, children and young person counselling in schools or at municipalities.
([18]) Insafe, Inhope, SIC, and more.
([19]) As (some) PUA communities argue to  avoid the "target" saying no, rather than getting the "target" to say yes, they have been linked to several cases of rape, pro-rape behaviour, and promotion of a rape-culture, and is therefore in this context considered as radical in their ideology and actions.

Mainstream media have highlighted several forms of digital violence and online radicalisation over the past decade, both with news stories of actual attacks and interest-pieces about new and (in a mainstream sense) emerging trends like incels ([20]), PUAs ([21]), or the alt-right ([22]). Each time these stories emerge, experts in the field of digital P/CVE notice a subsequent increased interest in the given fields, and as such this spike in interest can be understood as an expression of a field still holding a level of newsworthiness and notoriety in mainstream media. This poses a risk for branding or even advertising the communities since they are portrayed in a very novel and (dangerously) interesting light. It also shows that understanding these communities and users is not only of great interest for the public and professionals, but also important to hinder their attractive notoriety.

Thus, any broadly accessible literature or media on the topic of youth and social work within a digital perspective (especially P/CVE), if properly disseminated, should be very well received.

Currently, many suggestions for a protective youth P/CVE agenda are based on a deplatforming approach. These strategies often forget the notion that the 'out of sight, out of mind' idea does not necessarily apply to digital communities. As many destructive communities are not based on active recruitment, but rather gain new followers via self-radicalisation ([23]), the act of deplatforming a certain movement or ideology, simply pushes the desired environment further away, but does not eliminate it. For instance, movements banned on Facebook emerge on Gab. Movements banned on Twitter pop up on Parler. Videos banned on YouTube can be found on BitChute.

Not only has the current deplatforming approach proven ineffective, but as many of the new digital radicalisation or extremist environments are based on an overall counter-cultural perception of being unwanted, ostracised or even persecuted, deplatforming them is often understood by the users as society's unwillingness to integrate or accommodate them. The formation of these communities is often based on not being wanted by mainstream society, and the communities are then formed in opposition to this. Deplatforming (in the counter-cultural mindset) confirms this notion, which in turn further increases the group's animosity and estrangement to society and the public at large.

As previously noted, many adults (parents and professionals alike) approach these new digital risk communities with the aim of eliminating them. For instance, they seek to shut down communities deemed unlawful, anti-social or radical. Doing so is trying to force a technological solution to a human problem, as it completely neglects any understanding of why these young people self-radicalise, and choose to attend such communities in the first place. Any professional approach to P/CVE work with the digital generation should primarily seek to understand this generation (and its individuals) that strays from the desirable digital communities and is attracted to the risk-laden and destructive radical communities. As this paper shall argue, we are all digital citizens (adults and young people alike) and our lives are performed in a hybrid between online and offline arenas. Current research has argued that we do not become aggressive, violent or counter-cultural only in online situations, but that we find online arenas to express feelings and sentiments to a larger audience than offline ([24]).

Therefore, it is crucial that professionals concern themselves with better understanding the modern digital aspects of youth social and P/CVE work. It is important for them to understand the increasingly hybrid nature of our daily lives and approach situations with a curious and inviting professional demeanour, instead of strategies of restriction or deplatforming.

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([20]) https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/incel-meaning-explained
([21]) The TV series 'The Pickup Artist', from 2007.
([22]) https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37899026
([23]) Mark Alfano, Adam Carter & Marc Cheong. (2018). Technological Seduction and Self-radicalization.
([24]) Alexander Bor & Michael Bang Petersen. (2021). The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis.

## Summary

- Many digital solutions, such as chats, digital forums, hotlines and helplines have been established over the past 15 years.

- More and more countries participate in the Safer Internet Day programme and in the Safer Internet Center (SIC) network.

- Helplines provide information, advice and assistance.

- Hotlines allow anonymous reporting of illegal content.

- Youth panels encourage youth to express their views, opinions and experiences.

- National Awareness Centres increase public awareness and provide the necessary knowledge and strategies to stay safe online.

- Youth P/CVE is of growing interest to organisations within the SIC network since awareness of extremist communities existing solely online rises.

- Mainstream media attention to digital extremist communities draws attention to them and risks advertising them.

- Deplatforming strategies **risk enhancement of ideology and strengthening collective identity** in extremist digital communities.

- Deplatforming strategies **do not eliminate environments and groups**, but force users to migrate to possibly more extreme communities.

- Deplatforming and elimination **neglects any understanding** of the complexity of the problem.

- P/CVE work with the digital generation should primarily seek to understand why youths join these communities in the first place.

- Understanding the hybrid nature of modern life is fundamental to understanding the digital youth.

## Digital challenges in the physical world

For most people today, daily life is a hybrid mix of offline and online spaces and activities. For many of us, our daily social communication as well as certain degrees of our work takes place online. Much of our entertainment and hobbies are also online.

Most of us are also active on social media where we share, observe, interact and connect with others. Where older generations may view the online world as a social addition or technical means to maintain existing relationships, younger generations take a different approach. It is not unusual for relationships (friendships and romantic) to exist exclusively in the online realm, and perhaps even only through text messaging. A typical negative bias and misconception towards the social relations and interactions online is that these are not real, or at least not as real as those in the offline world. It is common to overlook what it is that online relations can offer that offline relations cannot. Instead, a typical discourse seems to be that in the online world we lose something that can only be obtained in an offline setting. While this may very well be true, it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate. However, an important perspective change to encourage is that of acknowledging the online world as real, and to be curious about what might be unique in this sphere when it comes to social and psychological dynamics.

Some researchers have argued that the new generation of socially and politically engaged users who have experience in using digital platforms in a social and trusting way (i.e. most young friendships and relationships are employing digital tools to stay in touch when outside of physical spaces), they are more inclined to trust new online groups of people and communities (and their viewpoints). Moreover, the new generation are experts in culturally laden digital communication (memes, in-jokes and quick digital communication) and can therefore be engaged by radicalising environments to instantaneously disseminate information (in the form of jokes or humoristic animations).

More and more security services and organisations are noticing that radicalisation is happening increasingly online. In this case, for instance, the weapons used to offset the democratic progress are not bombs and bullets, but offensive, hateful and extremely aggressive language. As these digital attacks take form and place online - and are somewhat subtle, they draw less media attention than violent attacks in the physical space [25].

Digital attacks range from different destructive communicative strategies, dogpiling [26], sealioning [27], review-bombing [28] etc. to continued harassment, or even outright threats. From a terrorism perspective, they have the very same effect. They deny their victims the possibility to engage in societal debates crucial to democracy by weaponising fear.

The Institute for Human Rights in Denmark notes that every second person today refrains from participating in online public debates because they fear violent backlash and hate speech [29]. This fear is also much more prevalent among women [30]. The institute also noted that the topics most often garnering hate speech and violent comments are immigration, gender issues and foreign nationalities. These topics are also corroborated by the Danish research institute, Analyse & Tal, which notes that discussions on ethnic minorities, terror, gender, and right-wing politics especially trigger hate speech and digital attacks.

Popularly, the image of radicalisation is often expressed with a traditional top-down structure, which seems typical in Islamist extremism. As such, extremism and terror are driven by organisational structures that have a leader and hierarchy, and where members are recruited also following this top-down process (Hoffman, 2006). The individual falls victim to propaganda and manipulative recruitment strategies and is lured into the organisation. However, the radicalisation that takes place in some arenas of the online sphere does not follow this form, but rather plays out in a bottom-up structure. Sageman (2004) describes this process in his 'bunch of guys' approach, where there is no clear leader to follow, and no organisation. In this case, radicalisation occurs through a group dynamic. Gradually, the individual interacts and identifies with the extreme worldview. Group dynamics (e.g. group pressure, collective identity, echo chamber effect, commitment) facilitate this process, as the individual must choose whether to adopt and adapt or leave the group.

The members of these types of communities were not actively recruited and do not follow organisational structures. They gradually commit to the group and to the ideology that they contribute to shape. As mentioned above, youth growing up with online interaction are digital experts, not only in a technical way. They understand the subtle and detailed social cues that exist in online communication. These unique abilities and online social skills may enhance the group dynamics and thereby play a crucial role in the online radicalisation process. Therefore, it may be a safe assumption that the online radicalisation process for digital youths is unique, complex and differs greatly from the more traditional top-down typical offline process.

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[25] Sarah Sobieraj, Credible Threat: Attacks Against Women Online and the Future of Democracy, 2020.
[26] Many users posing the same arguments or discussions towards the targeted user, leading them to waste time arguing with everyone.
[27] Users posing overly many questions towards the target, under the guise of sincerity, forcing them to waste time answering all of them, and to exhaust themselves explaining the banalities of an argument.
[28] A coordinated effort by many users to leave very low reviews ("bomb") any institution or business associated with a target.
[29] HADEFULDE YTRINGER I DEN OFFENTLIGE ONLINE DEBAT, Institute for Human Rights - Denmark, 2017.
https://menneskeret.dk/sites/menneskeret.dk/files/media/dokumenter/udgivelser/ligebehandling_2017/rapport_hadefulde_ytringer_online_2017.pdf
[30] Marjan Nadim & Audun Fladmoe, Silencing Women? Gender and online harassment, 2019.

## Summary

- There is a **generational gap** in understanding the online realm, especially in the understanding of what constitutes *reality.*

- The tendency of older generations to focus on what is *lost* in the online life rather than what may be *gained* **limits bridging this gap**.

- For older generations the online world may be used to maintain relationships and social identity whereas younger generations may use online platforms to form new relationships that solely exist online and through text.

- The negative bias and misconception of online relationships as being less real than offline relationships **hinders the bridging of the generational gap**.

- Research shows that younger and more digitally experienced generations are more inclined to trust others online.

- Through hateful and extremely aggressive and threatening language, online extremism weaponises fear and inhibits democratic engagement of its victims.

- Topics often connected to violent backlash and hate speech are immigration, gender-related issues, ethnic minorities, terror and right-wing politics.

- Extremist communities online are often leaderless and follow a bottom-up radicalisation process rather than the traditional top-down.

- The radicalisation process in these communities is driven by group dynamics such as the echo chamber effect and group pressure, collective identity and conformity.

- Members of these communities take part in shaping the ideology, which may strengthen commitment.

- Youths are digital experts also in dissecting and catching subtle social cues, which may enhance the radicalisation process.

# A new generation

In working with digital youths, knowledge of the typical social and group dynamics that play out in the online world is important. According to researchers mentioned above, there are certain psychosocial differences in how digital youths enter and exist in the online world compared to older generations ([31]).

In the online setting of social media, the dynamics become a complex interaction between different factors. More individual factors may play a role in where one might enter the online realm (for example choosing between Instagram and Reddit) and why one enters specific communities. Societal factors and how the individual relates to society also plays a role in how he or she enters the online world. Social media offers the option of relating to others from anywhere in the world at any time of the day, but many factors also play a role in keeping the individual in the loop. Most social media platforms have algorithms designed to keep the user intrigued, for example through the offer of new videos with (somewhat personalised) enjoyable content, or through prioritising certain posts to the top of one's news feed. This process helps guide the user to particular content, specific channels and certain people and communities. Some are harmless, others are rather positive. These include, for instance, self-help communities, counselling videos etc. But the path of the internet does not have an end, and there are many turns that may lead to the more extreme communities

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([31]) Prensky (2001).

and violent content. Most people enter the online world looking for something such as support, friends, self-help, purpose, genuine connections, debates, free speech forums, love and inspiration. The internet does offer all this in groups and communities that are more intense than what one might find in the offline world. This process is important to understand because it explains why online radicalisation sometimes happens extremely fast and out of view. Online, one can find purpose and meaning in huge communities of echo chambers where anyone who challenges the narrative is excluded. What happens online is social and real, and may even have more intense psychosocial dynamics than offline given the limitless nature of the communities. Some communities actively enforce this effect by excluding those who challenge the prevalent narratives and ideology. Others start out by addressing issues of purpose and meaning to the individual, such as spirituality or deep ecology, which comprise undercurrents of right-wing extremism that pave the way into dangerous ideology. At the same time, rejecting challenges to the latter in the name of said ecological or spiritual ideology.

A common misconception is that there is a maximum number of hours one should spend in front of a screen before it becomes unhealthy. Another is that some online platforms are purely bad and others are purely good in the perspective of online radicalisation. A third misconception is the idea of a clear-cut profile of the typical user on certain problematic platforms, by which to sort through individuals and profiles. These are examples of unfortunate monochrome thinking, with a noble intention of prevention. Nonetheless, they are limited perspectives that lack the nuances of what is actually the reality. These issues risk derailing the effectiveness of the P/CVE work.

Of course, we are able to identify cases where an individual with certain traits, vulnerabilities and characteristics, spending an excessive amount of time in specific extremist online communities, has led to a tragic outcome. Most definitely, there are tendencies to this radicalisation process that can be generalised to some degree. However, it is crucial to be aware of bias and monochrome thinking in this matter. This is important in order to avoid missing the necessary nuances to understanding and thereby creating effective hybrid solutions.

## Summary

- Psychosocial factors affects where and how we enter and use the online world.

- Algorithms of social media help shape usage of the platform and affects the path to other communities.

- Many of the radicalising digital communities start with self-help and seeking belonging.

- The limitless nature of the internet makes the psychosocial dynamics more intense than the limited offline interactions.

- Awareness of bias, misconceptions, and monochrome thinking is crucial to avoid creating problems that does not exist.

- Be aware of the following **misconceptions**:
    - Quantity of time spent online solely determines if usage is healthy or unhealthy.
    - Some platforms are purely bad and others good.

- There is no one profile of a dangerous online user.

# Working from existing knowledge

It has long been discussed whether mental illness and wellbeing play a role in increasing the risk of radicalisation ([32]) or violent criminal tendencies. Earlier research suggests that high levels of anger and irritability increase the risk of violent crimes, whereas higher levels of depression and anxiety decrease the risk ([33]). Even though these findings have been corroborated in most (if not all) P/CVE studies, they seldom take into account the various ways of violence enabled by the digital environments, especially those populated primarily by young people (and are therefore not monitored to the same degree, by parents and professionals).

On the contrary, current research findings suggest that the digitalised generation of youth enables a broader use of digitised violence, and that this is not hindered by increased depression and anxiety, but fuelled by anger and frustration ([34]). In the referenced article, practitioners of the RAN C&N Working Group showed that new online violence could take on many forms. The focus should be on the following:

## Personal violence

Self-harm and suicidal ideations are exceptionally high in many online extremist and radicalised groups and communities. Many groups (incels, alt-right, PUA, trolls, ethno-nationalists etc.) discourage seeking help for any such challenges for various reasons, including being perceived as homosexual and the perceived way an evil feminist society is trying to control men, as well as the 'feminisation' of men who should instead be able to bend society to their will.

As such, the harmful impact of extremist communities is not only externalised and a danger to those outside of the communities. The members themselves are also being harmed.

## Interpersonal violence

Many of the groups that P/CVE workers focus on are grounded in counter-culture. As such, they have very distinct images of perceived antagonists (women, immigrants, 'mainstreamers' and more). Set in a digital environment, they can be prone to digital violence or outbursts against the perceived enemies. These can take the form of hate speech, trolling, doxing ([35]), chadfishing ([36]) and slut-shaming ([37]). Sometimes users are not explicitly told to do so, but engage in the digital violence and harassment, as the communities incentivise and pressure users to do so, either by positive reinforcement (positive feedback - likes, comments) or by scolding those that do nothing or dare speak out against the violence.

## Societal violence

The general mistrust and dislike of (mainstream) society in many extremist or radicalised communities, ideological hatred or politically motivated violence is often celebrated. If aimed at 'others' (those who the counter-culture is seeking to counter), any past attacks are often heralded as good, rightful or justified, and any future attacks are encouraged and hypothetically and almost playfully planned. As such the communities do not directly formulate and plan the attacks, but the attribution of sainthood or herodom of hypothetical future attackers can be a motivation for certain group members to commit such actions ([38]). Researchers point out, that even though such attacks would technically be committed by a lone perpetrator, the notion of 'lone wolf' ([39]) does not make sense in these instances, because the perpetrators would have been part of a

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([32]) Oluf Gøtzsche-Astrup & Lasse Lindekilde. (2019). Either or? Reconciling findings on mental health and extremism using a dimensional rather than categorical paradigm.
([33]) Hein et. al. (2017). Violent Offending Among Juveniles: A 7-Year Longitudinal Study of Recidivism, Desistance, and Associations With Mental Health.
([34]) RAN C&N Expert Group. (2021). The Incel Phenomenon: Exploring Internal and External Issues Around Involuntary Celibates.
([35]) Making a targeted user's personal information (address, banking, family etc.) publicly available.
([36]) Posing as an extremely attractive man ("Chad") to engage with, and harass, women. Typically done on dating-apps and sites.
([37]) Aggressively shaming and scolding women for being "too" sexual or sexually active ("slutty").
([38]) Schuurman, Lindekilde et.al. (2019). End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been.
([39]) An exclusively self-radicalised and self-motivated perpetrator.

digital radicalisation environment - which bears the same level of motivational aspects as one in the physical world.

As the violence has developed to bridge the gap between the physical and digital world, it is important to keep in mind that this is an expression of the hybrid lives lived by most people today, increasingly so for younger generations. Digital spaces have become an intertwined aspect of hobbies, cultures and spaces that were exclusively physical only 5 to 10 years ago. Youth sports clubs have digital media spaces where not only matches and activity is shared, but also memes, musings and much more. School groups share thoughts and talking points on several media platforms. News are no longer received through newspapers or curated TV programmes, but adopted through humoristic channels on YouTube, TikTok and Reddit.

As our lives, and especially those of young people have undergone a digital transformation, leaving us physically more to ourselves but connecting us digitally to myriads of peers and strangers alike, it is also important to understand that just like Schuurman & Lindekilde noted, radicalisation is no longer done by others unto us but can much easier be done by ourselves *to* ourselves.

## Summary

- Previous research does not necessarily take into account how violence takes form in digital settings.
- RAN C&N Working Group are especially attentive of:
  - Personal violence
  - Interpersonal Violence
  - Societal Violence
- Digital connection changes our understanding of radicalisation and violence.

# The 'manosphere'

'Manosphere' is an umbrella term used for online groups and communities that hold firm that men are inherently superior compared to women (arguing that men are better leaders, workers and intellectuals). They also believe that feminism is an attack on the good patriarchal society and its citizens.

In general, these groups become attractive to young vulnerable men as they offer simple solutions to complex problems in life. The 'manosphere' is a term used to denote all aggressive and democratically and socially destructive movements that start from a perspective of wanting to help or understand men. However, in trying to do so, the result is harmful for women and hinders equality in all aspects of society. The 'manosphere' is the umbrella term encompassing all of the movements that believe men and male society is inherently better and more valuable than the female counterpart, and should therefore lead, decide and police the furthering of society. It also holds that feminism is a social insurgency seeking to uproot and combat this natural right of men. ([40])

The mainstreaming and general increase in egalitarian movements has transitioned the digital veil and is predominantly focusing on hashtag-activism and digital platforms as their arenas. This has resulted in anti-egalitarian and socially regressive counter-cultures. Whilst #Metoo, #Sayhername, #Consent and #Lovewins brought about real social change via original digital media activism, a large amount of pushback and

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([40]) 'The Manosphere' as social and political community, is explored and explained in the report: *The Angry Internet*, by Christian Mogensen and Stine Helding Rand, made for The Nordic Council of Ministries, 2020. https://cfdp.dk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CFDP_the_angry_internet_ISSUE.pdf

antagonisation of these same movements is also undertaken online. This counter-activism focuses on men's rights, male social disadvantage and how these new movements and values are to blame.

The 'manosphere' has no central administration or physical offices. It is a loose term that covers all the different extreme pro-men cultures that adhere to two distinct beliefs: Gender essentialism (attributing fixed intrinsic and innate qualities to the binary genders of women and men and deducting from those qualities that men are inherently better leaders, thinkers etc. than women), and anti-feminism.

Groups within the broader 'manospheric' scope include the following:

- **Men's Rights Activists (MRA)** blames pro-women rules and regulations for putting men in a disadvantaged position.

- **Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW)** argues society has been taken over by feminists. This group believes men need to leave society so that it collapses, after which they will return and re-establish a patriarchal society (again).

- **Pick-Up Artists (PUA)** claims the sexual liberation through feminism has caused women to have too much decision-making power over sexual partners, and therefore need to be 'tricked' into having sex.

- **Ultra-Conservatives/Nationalists** believe the feminist movement has eroded the value of men as protectors, which in turn has opened the border for strong foreign men to immigrate and overtake women and jobs. As a result, they feel compelled to stop feminism in order to stop aggressive immigration.

- **Involuntary Celibates (Incels)** believe the feminist movement has given women so much power to decide on their sexual partners, that all women choose to partner with the same few men.

As the new generation of societal and politically engaged young people enter the sphere of online debates, they bring with them a paradigm of digitality ([41]). As the new generation of debaters have been born into a WiFi-world, their views are not only formed by many more influencers than their parents, they also disseminate and discuss information and values noticeably different than that of the older generations (Prensky, 2001) ([42]). As the digital generation receives societal and political influences digitally, it is also reasonable to believe they use the same channels and environments to disseminate information. From a radicalisation perspective, this is also to be understood as a risk factor, as those influencers who have historically been seen as potential protective factors (parents, teachers, etc.), are not as native as those new potentially radicalising digital environments. Also, they may not fully understand the subtleties in which they sometimes communicate.

### Gaps in knowledge and practice

As P/CVE work targeting the digital generation is contributing to research and detecting good practices, there are still several blind spots and gaps in the existing knowledge that need to be covered. More research is needed to understand if there is a difference between young people joining digital at-risk communities and those doing so in the physical space. Current research suggests the same precursors and social factors are involved. Most research is currently at the best-practice stage, and longitudinal or more substantial studies have not yet been published. Historically, long periods of time spent online have been stigmatised, but research and accounts from different countries point to a causal null-effect from time spent online to most relevant wellbeing-factors. However, current research suggests those who have previously lacked physical communities find them online. As such, extreme amounts of screen time are to be understood as a symptom of underlying problems, rather than the cause of them. Conclusively, the field of digital pedagogics or digital social work is still in its infancy, and interested practitioners are advised to seek out newsletters and new publications going forward, as the field is constantly evolving.

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([41]) The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web. Manoel Horta Ribeiro et al., 2020.
([42]) Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, Marc Prensky, On the Horizon (MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001).

The 'manosphere' is a digital movement and (collection of) communities, even though the sentiments it shares across the different factions, are as old as the progressive movements they seek to combat. The unique aspects of the 'manosphere' are based on the decentralised and un-led profile of the different factions. Also, many users see themselves shifting over time, from identifying most strongly with one faction to another. For example, from the MRA movement, which most often focuses on topics like legislation and policy detraction (in their view) from the rights of men, or unfairly giving women more rights and privileges, to a more militaristic alt-right orientation ([43]). This can further the same goals (rectifying the patriarchal role of the strong leader-man, as opposed to women and foreign influences), but in a very different way.

Consequently, many users who are loyal to one part of the 'manosphere', may browse other parts or may even switch to another. Many professionals note instances in which incels who (without any prior warning) change to radical jihadist communities or radical neo-Nazi groups. The digital nature of the wider 'manosphere' movement enables a lateral movement in between different communities. This is not possible in gang-related P/CVE work. As the different factions of the 'manosphere' share overarching ideas and values, users easily change the 'brand' of their radicalised ideology, opting for one that best suits their temperament and mood.

*"[...] in both YouTube and Reddit, there is significant overlap in the user bases of the manosphere and of the Alt-right (Sec. 4) and that users in the manosphere systematically go on to consume Alt-right content (Sec. 5). This provides quantitative evidence to the link between the Manosphere and the Alt-right, which has been hypothesized by researchers and NGOs in recent years"* ([44]).

*Mamié et al. (2021)*

Therefore, it is imperative for social and youth workers not to focus on the specifics of different 'manospheric' or radicalising environments. If this is the case, they will find themselves stuck playing catch-up to the transitioning and moving agendas and changing focal points. Instead, they should understand the underlying vulnerable and risk-for-radicalisation mindsets and situations.

## Summary

- The 'manosphere' is an umbrella term for anti-feminist and pro-gender essentialism communities.

- The 'manosphere' **offers simple solutions to complex problems** and suffering.

- Communities mentioned include MRA, MGTOW, PUA, ultra conservatives/nationalists and incels.

- Former protective factors in youth radicalisation (e.g. parents, teachers) now pose a shortcoming, as they are not as native to the digital realm and the specific dynamics of interaction and communication.

- Users may jump from one digital community to another in a way that is not possible in other arenas related to P/CVE.

- It is important to **avoid narrowly focusing on specifics** of certain radicalising environments and to focus instead on understanding the underlying mindset and circumstances.

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([43]) Alt-Right is the new 'alternative right(wing)' in politics, which is encompassing both classical right-wing motives, as well as Nazi-, (American) Confederate- and other white supremacist-ideologies.
([44]) Are Anti-Feminist Communities Gateways to the Far Right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube, Mamié, Ribeiro & West, EPFL, 2021.

# Summarising the processes of online radicalisation

The radicalisation process differs from most existing literature. As such, it should be studied under a new light – one that considers the new self-radicalisation process of bottom-up, rather than the active recruitment, or top-down process. The 'manosphere' poses several issues if applying a classic P/CVE approach and must be understood in a hybrid online/offline context that acknowledges the online social interactions, identity exploration and community searching. Most importantly, it should lend credence to the notion of online social experiences carrying the same weight as those taking place in the physical world. Thus, practitioners should have relevant knowledge and understanding of the online social world, both psychologically in knowledge about group dynamics but also practical and concrete knowledge about platforms and other forms of communication.

Practitioners must also have knowledge about the individual and social dynamics involved in online radicalisation and how this differs from offline radicalisation. Deradicalisation and prevention interventions, such as offering alternative and sustainable narratives and networks, also need to be adapted to the online arena, which again necessitates knowledge and insights of the online world.

Particularly for working with the different 'manosphere' movements, awareness and ability to detect the specific ideological traits and linguistic fingerprint will allow for more rapid intervention. Furthermore, the mental health problems often correlated with some of these movements, such as suicide risk, depression and anxiety ([45]) are important in prevention. Stigma around mental health as well as unhealthy and toxic masculinity ideals are important prevention areas to focus on. Embracing the mental health issues that may be connected to unreal ideas of masculinity (and especially the expectations of sexuality in toxic masculinity) becomes a useful tool in prevention. The grievances of the 'manosphere' members are completely human as well as pointing to an experienced societal issue. Focus of mental health in young men in the modern world, educating and informing on how to deal effectively with mental health issues is crucial.

## Summary

- P/CVE interventions must grasp the hybrid online/offline psychosocial context of online radicalisation.

- Practitioners must have relevant in-knowledge about **group dynamics** but also concrete knowledge of **platforms and communication forms**.

- Practitioners should have relevant knowledge of radicalisation and how **online radicalisation** may psychologically, socially and societally differ from offline radicalisation.

- **Prevention** and **deradicalisation** interventions should be adapted to the online arena.

- Understanding the **underlying motivation** for joining and participating in online extreme communities as well as understanding the **vulnerability** of the members is crucial in prevention interventions.

- Understanding how **societal issues** may play a role, e.g. masculinity expectations and **mental health of men**, shows direction in prevention work.

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([45]) All especially prevalent in the incel community.

# Tools, training and recommendations

## Online deradicalisation and prevention interventions

Deradicalisation interventions such as offering alternative and sustainable narratives and networks need to be adapted to the online arena. This requires knowledge and expertise of the online world. A concrete takeaway is the need to find hybrid solutions of deradicalisation by offering online spaces and communities that promote alternative narratives to youths, rather than restriction or de-platforming as mentioned earlier. It is important for practitioners to meet the youths on their turf in the online world, and compete with the radicalising communities using the online language and mindset. On a psychological level, this also requires being curious and acknowledging what the youth believe they gain from the online relationships, communities and spaces.

One practical suggestion could be to further use of online counselling platforms that can act as safe spaces for digital youths to interact, seek help and talk to adults. This can be a crucial gateway to offline interventions. A typical trajectory in online support platforms for youths is a gradual movement from anonymous counselling, to specialised help advised by the anonymous counsellor, to the youth feeling comfortable reaching out to the local offline network. Since grievances of members in the extremist digital communities mentioned in this paper are often stigmatised, it is unrealistic to expect individuals to seek help in the offline world as a first step. This further supports the need for hybrid solutions.

Offering youths digital options for alternative narratives and networks depends on where in the process the intervention is made. Focusing on prevention of radicalisation, creating a space to educate, inform, support and advice is recommended. Moderated group chats, for example, make it easier for youths to connect with others around certain stigmatised topics. In online communities, young people meet to support each other through trials and tribulations that may be difficult for them to talk about in the offline world. Group chats moderated by trained professionals, if executed correctly, enables alternative narratives of the experienced suffering through group dynamics.

In the group chat environment, for instance, the suffering is articulated, the anger and frustration addressed, the pain acknowledged by the professional and the other participants, and solutions explored in collaboration. This intervention solution requires a trained professional who is familiar with group chat interaction, well-articulated, and relevantly educated in psychology and text-based interventions. Additionally, therapeutic knowledge may also be a supportive factor in the success of the group chat. One concrete suggestion in terms of the form of the group chat intervention is to offer different topics and themes, invite relevant guest hosts, and allow the youths to participate anonymously. Suggestions to topics relevant in the scope of this paper are masculinity, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, self-worth, depression and anxiety, sexuality, unhappiness, relationships and the like.

## Use the online sphere to your advantage

Video gaming can serve as an entry point for outreach and intervention. For instance, organising local gaming events online that include P/CVE practitioners (who are also familiar with gaming) can help to initiate a conversation. The same applies to other online social media activities and platforms. Practitioners who are familiar with platforms may more easily be able to reach out and intervene.

## Make the digital world physical

Most experienced practitioners are more comfortable working with pedagogical and social interventions in the physical space, but as such are challenged trying to engage an increasingly digital generation. P/CVE interventions and preventive measures that have made the digital world local, have reported very good results in recent years. For example Sweden ([46]) and Denmark ([47]) have used physical 'gaming groups' to

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([46]) Samspel - Violence Prevention Through Gaming. https://mfj.se/vad-vi-goer/projekt/samspel
([47]) Center for Digital Youth Care, Christian Mogensen - Gaming Groups.

reach out to at-risk young people. Their aim is to motivate them to attend the interventions. In short, they anchor the digital worlds in the physical, and base the interventions and preventive measures around it.

## Recognise underlying issues

Participation in different radicalising or extremist communities is often an expression of the young person trying to solve existential problems themselves. As such, the participation itself or actions motivated by wanting to fit in to the violent community are better understood as symptoms of underlying grievances and problems rather than the problem itself. Therefore, understanding the *why* of the digital social world is crucial for the intervention. Different communities satisfy different needs, but most fulfil basic human needs of belonging and finding meaning in life and relating. This is particularly true for persons who feel these needs are not being satisfied in their offline world. If a young person joins a community devoted to misogynistic rhetoric, violence or other concerning topics, it is often constructive to view these topics as a means to a psychological or social end, and thus direct interest, attention and communication to any needs that this participation could fulfil.

## Train first-line professionals

A whole-of-society approach is needed, training all first line professionals (not only the ones with a focus on P/CVE) on the topic of online radicalisation. The aim is to raise awareness and to start discussing underlying issues early on (primary prevention). The focus should be on the risk of suicide or violence, using an empathetic approach and trying to strengthen the internal locus of control.

## Educate youth on key topics

In primary prevention, digital media literacy is key and should be taught in school. It is equally important to demystify sex and sexuality amongst youth in order to help them gain a healthy perspective on their own body and sexuality (including the notion of consent). The same is true for teaching important perspectives on social and psychological dynamics online, with the focus on furthering the individual's understanding of the consequences and effects of these dynamics. For example, this would mean understanding how the algorithms of social media bring you into certain paths and may lead you to echo chambers. It also means helping children understand that what happens online is real, the emotions of other users are real and the online and offline spheres overlap.

## Establish early relevant role models

To build the foundation for a constructive relationship between professionals and the target group, it is important to establish the professional as relevant in a digital landscape. Instead of only engaging with young people in the digital medium, professionals can help to bridge the digital and physical worlds by transferring online games and interactions to a physical space. Examples of such activities include the following.

- "Among Us", a social deduction game for the schoolyard.

- Building an Instagram-profile-poster from cut-outs from newspapers and magazines.

- Classroom presentations and discussions of digital phenomena (games, influencers, communities, and more).

## Educate parents and caregivers

Inform parents and caregivers about certain online terminology and how they can talk about this issue with their children. They should know about certain words that are not acceptable and are part of the harmful terminology of certain online communities.

## Let the young lead the 'old'

Many countries have reported great results in regards to establishing youth-oriented and youth-driven initiatives by allowing young people to formulate the frameworks themselves. Having a P/CVE professional simply ask the target group what they would like to do in a current pedagogical project, provides a level of ownership that many top-down projects lack. If building a communal discussion forum, allowing the target group to dictate topics and appoint interesting external experts can make for an extremely interesting event. It would be an event in which P/CVE practitioners might gain valuable insight to both opinions and interests of the otherwise elusive target group. Many practitioners experience this in such projects. In this context, they need to focus on framework and facilitation, and allow the young people to guide the content and context.

## Break the stigma around mental health

In terms of treatment, it is important to recognise the very real grievances that some youths experience and which they try to address online. We know there is some correlation between radicalisation and mental health issues. We also know that certain radicalising and extremist online communities, like the incel community, appear to revolve around suffering. While we should acknowledge this trauma and the grievances, it is not necessary to encourage their ideology. Work on mental health awareness and against the stigma amongst many young men, especially in these pseudo-masculine communities. It is imperative that P/CVE workers, wanting to reach out to these young men portray self-help as a strength, not as a weakness.

## Break masculinity stereotypes

Most of the members of extremist online communities in the 'manosphere' are men who are drawn to male- and masculinity-focused agendas. It is important to offer alternative representations of masculinity and convey the message that many people feel overwhelmed by social and moral uncertainty, 'chaos' and injustice, and these are normal reactions to a complex world.

## Identify and investigate problematic communities

Investigating forums or other platforms that are known to have extremist content can help to identify problematic groups. Monitoring or being active in the places your target group is present in can also help identify potential risks.

## Be aware of unique ideological traits

The 'manosphere' ideology differs from many other (extremist) ideologies or communities. While issues like isolation, loneliness and mental health, as well as dealing with bullying, can also raise some underlying concerns in other ideologies, they are very much present at the forefront of the 'manosphere' community and ideology. Most of these communities consider their identity and (potentially violent) struggle as a position they were forced into, by an oppressive and feminist society. These communities only engage women insofar as they conform to care giving and nurturing roles (in which they inherently are better than men according to their gender essentialist views, or as a 'trophy' or prize given to 'the good men', who adhere to and enforce the ideologies. They are reduced to lovers, mothers and baby-making machines. The enrolled women also enforce these gender stereotypical roles themselves.

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