



BEYOND IDEOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Mixed ideologies and what they
mean for preventing and countering
violent extremism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The landscape of violent extremist ideologies is evolving, and alongside established ideologies, a new phenomenon called mixed or unstable ideologies has emerged. These ideologies encompass elements such as eco-extremism, LGBTQIA+ phobia, anti-government beliefs, and conspiracy theories, which may contribute to radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism. However, our understanding of the links between these ideological elements and their impact on radicalisation, recruitment, and pathways to violent action is limited. This consolidated overview aims to address this knowledge gap by examining the implications of mixed ideological elements for our understanding of and response to violent extremism.

This consolidated overview explores key characteristics of ideological elements in mixed ideologies, factors that contribute to their emergence, and challenges they pose to prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) efforts. It also considers the implications for law enforcement and policymakers. The prevalence of mixed ideologies is growing, and their dynamic nature presents challenges in identifying and addressing them effectively.

Understanding the types of ideological elements that form part of mixed ideologies is crucial. Anti-vaccine ideologies, LGBTQIA+ phobia, male supremacy and misogynist ideology, eco-extremism and eco-fascism, extreme right and Islamism, as well as anti-government and other conspiracy theories are prevalent elements. These elements, although often reflecting general concerns, can be co-opted within an extremist narrative, distinguishing them from other socio-political concerns.

Factors contributing to the mixing of ideologies include the increasing role of the internet in radicalisation, social media algorithms, false consensus, polarisation, reduced trust in institutions, mainstreaming of extremist narratives, uncertainty, and individual vulnerability. These factors interact in complex ways, shaping the evolution of mixed ideologies.

Mixed ideologies pose unique challenges in understanding the motivations and purpose of extremists. Likewise, preventing and countering mixed ideologies requires tailored approaches. Law enforcement, policymakers, civil society organisations, and other P/CVE actors must recognise and address the existence of mixed ideologies. Engaging openly with individuals, acknowledging their concerns, and providing explanations without dismissing them can be effective in countering their appeal. It is crucial to avoid underestimating the threat posed by mixed ideologies. Approaches to prevent and counter violent extremism must also be nuanced and not limited to clear traditional cut definitions of ideologies that fail to account for the possibility that ideologies may be mixed, unclear or unstable.

This consolidated overview calls for more research on mixed extremist ideologies, their characteristics, origins, consistency across populations, stability over time, and effective prevention and response strategies. By understanding and addressing the unique challenges posed by mixed ideologies, we can strive to prevent the spread of violent extremism and promote a more inclusive and balanced society.

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of violent extremist ideologies is dynamic and constantly evolving, influenced by shifting concerns and circumstances. For years, the dominant extremist ideologies have been categorised as Islamist/jihadist, right-wing, left-wing and anarchist, and ethno-nationalist and separatist (Europol, 2023). However, alongside these ideologies, a new phenomenon has emerged in recent years known as mixed or unstable ideologies. The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) was among the first to identify this threat in 2019, issuing an intelligence bulletin that highlighted the rise of a new extremist threat characterised by various ideologies centred around anti-government sentiments, identity politics, and fringe conspiracy theories (FBI, 2021). The FBI observed that these ideologies played a growing role in motivating extremists to commit criminal and violent acts.

In 2021, then FBI director Christopher Wray further elaborated on this phenomenon, referring to it as 'salad bar' extremist ideologies, where different social and political ideologies blend with personal grievances and conspiracy theories to justify violent attacks (Wray, 2021). The United Kingdom Channel counter extremism programme also noticed a significant increase in referrals related to individuals exhibiting mixed, unstable, or unclear ideologies in recent years, with many individuals showing interest in multiple extremist ideologies or switching between them over time (UK Home Office, 2023).

Certain ideological elements such as eco-extremism, LGBTQIA+ phobia, anti-government beliefs, and conspiracy theories may contribute to the radicalisation and recruitment of individuals who later engage in violent extremist behaviour. However, our understanding of the links between these ideological elements and their impact on radicalisation and recruitment, particularly in creating pathways to violent action, remains limited. This paper aims to address this knowledge gap by examining the implications of mixed ideological elements for our understanding of and response to radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism. Specifically, it seeks to answer the questions: Does the increasing variety of ideological elements being mainstreamed into society and mixed together contribute to an increased threat of violent extremism? If so, what are the implications and how can we prevent and counter this phenomenon?

To explore these questions, the paper will explore the characteristics of key ideological elements that contribute to mixed extremist ideologies, identify the factors that have facilitated their emergence, analyse the challenges they pose to efforts in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and consider the implications for law enforcement and policymakers. Through this analysis, the paper aims to lay the groundwork for developing effective strategies to identify, address, and mitigate this evolving threat while striving to prevent the spread of violent extremism.

The review will draw upon relevant literature from academic, policy, and industry sources to provide insights into the issue of mixed and unclear extremist ideologies.

THE ISSUE OF MIXED IDEOLOGIES IN ADDRESSING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

There is growing recognition in security and academic circles of a rising extremist threat characterised by mixed ideologies (Norris, 2020). These ideologies draw from a range of often conflicting ideas, attitudes, and beliefs, and are frequently intertwined with individuals' personal concerns and interests (Hitchens and Ayad, 2023). These ideologies are dynamic and can change over time, with different themes and ideas gaining prominence at different points in time.

TYPES OF IDEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS AND NARRATIVES

This section will explore some of the prevalent extremist ideologies that often form part of mixed ideologies, and how they have become integrated into these mixed ideologies. It is crucial to note that the nature of mixed ideologies is ever-evolving, and new ideas and concerns may gain significance in the future. Existing literature has identified several common elements that appear in various mixed ideologies. However, it is important to recognise that there is no fixed formula for how these elements combine, as different individuals may identify with different combinations of these elements (Norris, 2020).

Some of these elements reflect general concerns shared by many, such as climate fears, immigration, governance issues, pandemics, and other perceived existential threats. What distinguishes these ideological elements is their potential to be co-opted within an extremist narrative, setting them apart from other socio-political concerns (Hitchens and Ayad, 2023).

Anti-vaccine Ideologies

The anti-vaccination movement has deep roots in Western society, dating back as far as 1722 when Edmund Massey delivered a sermon warning against the sinful practice of vaccination (Massey, 1722). In more recent times, the movement gained momentum, possibly triggered by the infamous 1998 paper by Andrew Wakefield that falsely linked the MMR vaccine to autism (later retracted due to flawed methods and analysis). This gave rise to a community of vaccine deniers known as 'antivaxxers'. These groups have employed various propaganda tools, engaged in direct action strategies, and spread significant levels of disinformation online (Benoit and Mauldin, 2021).

The antivaxxer ideology encompasses a range of beliefs, including the notions that vaccinations are ineffective, directly endanger the well-being of individuals (especially children), and, in extreme cases, are instruments of government and elite control. Many antivaxxers justify their arguments by invoking libertarian ideals of freedom of choice and opposition to state interference in individuals' lives. The issue of compulsory Covid-19 vaccinations has particularly fuelled support for antivax ideas among a broader segment of society. In fact, it is estimated that around 58 million people regularly follow antivax websites and blogs (Armitage, 2021). These ideas have also become integrated into various conspiracy theories, such as the belief that Covid-19 vaccines were purposely designed by elites to implant microchips in individuals for control purposes, the belief that the vaccine will alter people's DNA, or the idea that vaccines are dangerous, causing death, illness, or infertility (ISD, 2023).

LGBTQIA+ phobia¹

LGBTQIA+ phobia, also encompassing homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, is a range of negative attitudes, beliefs, and discriminatory behaviours towards individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or asexual. In the context of mixed and unclear ideologies, LGBTQIA+ phobia can manifest in different ways, often intertwined with other extremist beliefs.

Some extremist ideologies, particularly those rooted in religious fundamentalism or traditionalist viewpoints, promote the rejection or condemnation of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities. They may perceive LGBTQIA+ individuals as morally deviant, sinful, or a threat to traditional societal norms and values, for example by portraying LGBTQIA+ individuals as a potential threat to children, including falsely associating LGBTQIA+ with paedophilia (Center on Extremism, 2022; Breland, 2019). These ideologies often advocate for the restriction of LGBTQIA+ rights, such as marriage equality, adoption rights, or protections against discrimination.

In addition, in recent years there has been a rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment, activity and rhetoric within mainstream right-wing politics with an increase in use of hate speech (including the crudest of name calling), and advocacy of policies and laws to limit LGBTQIA+ rights in many places (Rashed, 2022; Vitkine, 2023; Riera Bosqued, 2023). Frequently this political activity is justified using a range of pseudo-scientific theories and appeals to false religious values. LGBTQIA+ phobia has been amplified by various politicians and personalities using social media accounts. Various religious and right-wing groups have also targeted LGBTQIA+ people and spaces, their families, friends, and those deemed to support LGBTQIA+ rights (including public schools, teachers, libraries, librarians, hospitals, and doctors) using campaigns of harassment and intimidation (Martiny and Lawrence, 2023; Squirrell and Davey, 2023).

In the context of mixed ideologies, elements of LGBTQIA+ phobia can be incorporated alongside other extremist ideas, resulting in a complex amalgamation of beliefs. For instance, individuals may hold anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments alongside conspiratorial thinking, anti-government beliefs, or other extremist ideologies. The fusion of these ideas can contribute to a distorted worldview that perceives LGBTQIA+ individuals as part of a larger societal threat or as targets for discrimination and violence.

Male supremacy and misogynist ideology

Male supremacy and misogynist ideology represent beliefs and attitudes that promote the superiority of men over women and perpetuate discrimination and subjugation based on gender. Within the context of mixed and unclear ideologies, these ideologies can be present in various forms, sometimes overlapping with other extremist beliefs (Pearson, 2020; Johnston and True, 2019).

Misogynist ideology often portrays women as inferior, objectifies them, and reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes. It can be rooted in patriarchal norms, religious fundamentalism, or extremist interpretations of ideologies. This ideology may advocate for the control and domination of women, restrict their rights and freedoms, and justify gender-based violence (Phelan et al., 2023).

¹ LGBTQIA+ is an evolving acronym used to describe how people experience gender, sexuality, and physiological sex characteristics. The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, asexual and represents other terms (such as non-binary and pansexual) that people use to describe their experiences.

A common trope within male supremacy is that men are victims of women's manipulation and an oppressive feminist system. The ideology mixes and overlaps with other extremist ideologies including antisemitism – some male supremacists also believe that feminism was a Jewish invention and is part of a Jewish conspiracy – and is also associated with white supremacy and far-right ideology stressing 'traditional' gender roles and sexual expression. This ideology justifies violence against women with many advocates arguing for the decriminalisation of rape, seeking to justify domestic violence, and some arguing for physical and sexual violence against women as a means of changing the inherent disparities they see in society (Jane, 2014).

Focussing upon rigid definitions of 'traditional' gender roles, women are devalued, and defined in terms only of their reproductive function. Sexual activity is seen as something that women 'owe' to men, that it is a man's right to 'take' or coerce sexual activity whenever he wishes, and that women have no right to prevent this. Simultaneously, women are shamed for their bodies, sexuality and for having or desiring sexual activity. This ideology strongly vilifies any deviation from 'traditional' gender and sexual stereotypes frequently including LGBTQIA+ phobic elements (Cottee, 2020).

Many male supremacist groups operate online using various social media platforms and chat rooms. One particularly prominent community in this area is the so-called Manosphere – a loosely connected network of online communities and ideologies that focus on issues related to men's rights and masculinity. It encompasses various sub-categories, each with its own emphasis and perspective, including those listed hereafter.

- Men's Rights Activism (MRA): MRAs advocate for men's rights in areas such as family law, custody rights, domestic violence, and male reproductive rights. However, some MRAs may espouse misogynistic beliefs and promote hostility towards women.
- Pick-up Artist (PUA) Movement: PUA ideology revolves around strategies and techniques for attracting sexual partners, often with an emphasis on objectifying women and manipulating interpersonal dynamics.
- Incel (Involuntary Celibate) Community: Incels are individuals who perceive themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner. The incel ideology often incorporates deep-seated misogyny, blaming women for their perceived lack of success and promoting hostility and resentment towards them.
- Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW): MGTOW is a movement that encourages men to distance themselves from romantic relationships, marriage, and traditional societal expectations. While MGTOW followers vary in their beliefs and motivations, the ideology often includes elements of resentment towards women, viewing them as manipulative or exploitative.

Some parts of the Manosphere have focussed upon legitimate social problems such as male suicide, domestic violence against men, and male homelessness, however many of these sites simply blame women for these problems without discussing or taking steps to address them. Indeed, many of these sites are regarded as gateways into violent misogyny, seeking to provide readers with justifications for a hatred of women (Marwick and Caplan, 2018).

Eco-extremism and eco-fascism

Eco-extremism and eco-fascism are ideological frameworks within the context of mixed and unclear ideologies that focus on environmental concerns but can take on extreme and radicalised forms. Eco-extremism encompasses a range of beliefs and actions that prioritise environmental issues to the point of advocating for extreme measures or resorting to violence to protect or restore the natural world. It often involves a deep sense of urgency regarding ecological crises, such as climate change, deforestation, or species extinction, and a belief

that traditional methods of activism or policy change are insufficient to address these issues. In the context of mixed ideologies, eco-extremism can intersect with various other ideological elements, including anarchist or anti-government sentiments, anti-civilisation perspectives, and even elements of deep ecology or biocentrism. The specific characteristics and beliefs associated with eco-extremism can vary among individuals and groups, but they generally involve a strong commitment to environmental preservation, an anti-establishment stance, and a willingness to take direct action, which may include sabotage or acts of eco-terrorism (Spadaro, 2020).

While concerns about the environment have often been considered to be a focus of the political left, Staudenmaier (2011), in coining the term eco-fascism, points out that such concerns have been a central tenet in extreme right-wing ideology since at least the beginning of the Third Reich. Eco-fascism typically involves the belief that the preservation of the environment should be achieved through authoritarian and exclusionary means, often targeting marginalised communities. Eco-fascist ideologies may advocate for the defence of a specific racial or ethnic group's relationship with nature, viewing the protection of the environment as a means to preserve racial purity or dominance. Staudenmaier described the important connection between concerns for the land, the natural order and racial purity within Nazi philosophy and how this has continued within a green wing of extreme right-wing ideology. Some modern right-wing extremists have also incorporated climate change fears into far-right ideology, linking ideas of racial purity, the bond between blood and land, and concerns about migration and the destruction of the environment by corporate entities (Roberts and Moore, 2022). Broadly then, eco-fascist ideology stresses the symbiotic relationship between homeland and a national group. The global South and individuals from the global South are blamed for various ecological problems and direct violent action against those deemed responsible is advocated including population control based upon racial categories (Forchtner, 2020).

However, it is important to note that both eco-extremism and eco-fascism represent extreme and fringe perspectives within the broader environmental movement. The majority of environmental activists and organisations operate within peaceful and democratic frameworks to advocate for sustainability and conservation. However, the presence of eco-extremist or eco-fascist ideologies within mixed ideologies highlights the potential for environmental concerns to be distorted and combined with other radical beliefs.

Extreme right and Islamism

Several authors have identified an overlapping between extreme-right and Islamist ideologies (Hitchens and Ayad, 2023; Argentino et al., 2022; Ayad, 2021). For example, from an exploration of online materials, Hitchens and Ayad (2023) identified a range of idiosyncratic dimensions that form part of what they termed the alt-Jihad. They identified a number of communities that appeared to be influenced by ideas drawn from fascist, Nazi, and Jihadist narratives. They note that some of these are Nazi or extreme-right wing groups whilst others are Islamist groups who appear to incorporate ideas and occasionally use material drawn from each other. Indeed, the authors note that these different groups share many similar concerns and narratives especially, anti-LGBTQIA+ and antisemitic narratives.

Anti-government and other conspiracy theories

There is growing recognition of the significance of conspiracy ideologies (Allington, 2021) and their connection to violent intentions (Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). These ideologies are typically fuelled by fear, a pervasive sense of being threatened, and a belief that the threat is being concealed or disregarded by others (Allington, 2021). They encompass a deep distrust of governments, political institutions, mainstream science and medicine, the fairness of electoral processes, and other pillars of the rule of law.

Conspiracy ideologies encompass a wide range of beliefs and can incorporate elements from various other extremist ideologies, making them unstable and prone to change over time. They often incorporate components from antisemitism, anti-vaccination, anti-abortion, and anti-LGBTQIA+ ideologies, evangelical Christian beliefs, and other fringe perspectives. One prominent feature of many conspiracy theories is the notion of a secretive elite that manipulates world events for their own benefit at the expense of the general population, with the belief that most occurrences are part of this underlying conspiracy.

Current events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, are frequently interpreted through the lens of conspiracy theories and utilised as evidence to support their validity. Within conspiracy circles, Covid-19 has been attributed to the elites either as a deliberate creation or a hoax aimed at exerting control over the population. Additionally, Covid-19 vaccinations have been regarded as a means of social control, with some adherents believing that they contain microchips intended to manipulate individuals' behaviour. Certain conspiracy theories in this context have also propagated the notion that children are under threat or being exploited by the elites.

A conspiracy theory that has gained particular traction in the European context is the Great Replacement theory. This theory promotes the idea that there is a deliberate plot to replace the white European population with immigrants, predominantly from Muslim-majority countries. Proponents of the Great Replacement theory often express concerns about cultural identity, national heritage, and demographic changes. While the theory lacks empirical evidence and has been widely debunked, it has contributed to the polarisation of public discourse on migration, multiculturalism, and social cohesion in Europe. Its propagation through online platforms and social media has fuelled anxieties and stoked anti-immigrant sentiment in some European societies (Farinelli, 2021; ISD, 2022).

Another prolific set of conspiracy theories has been circulating on the internet under the umbrella name QAnon since 2017. The conspiracy narratives revolve around the belief in a deep-state conspiracy against former US president Donald Trump and alleges the existence of a satanic paedophile ring involving high-ranking politicians and celebrities. The theory's followers interpret cryptic posts from an anonymous user known as 'Q' as insider knowledge of the deep state's activities. QAnon supporters scrutinise symbols and signs, considering them as evidence of involvement in the alleged conspiracy. Despite lacking credible evidence, QAnon has spread through social media and has led to real-world consequences, including political activism, harassment campaigns, and acts of violence by individuals inspired by the theory (Amarasingam and Argentino, 2020). While initial iterations of the QAnon conspiracy theories were centred mainly around the United States, their influence has transcended borders, including the European context (Pinna, 2020). The interconnectedness of online communities has facilitated the spread of QAnon ideology to Europe, where right-wing extremists participate in transnational networks, primarily using English as the main language of communication. The shared online spaces allow for the dissemination and exchange of conspiracy narratives, enabling QAnon theories, as well as other conspiracy theories, to find resonance among individuals across the world (Farinelli, 2021; Prothero, 2020).

Opposition to technological advances

Mixed ideologies also draw upon the shared thematic area of opposition to technological advances, which is present in diverse extremist narratives. Traditionally associated with left-wing and anarchist terrorist ideologies, anti-technology sentiments have also found resonance within right-wing extremist movements, particularly concerning telecommunication infrastructure. Left-wing and anarchist anti-technology narratives have long perceived technological progress as synonymous with capitalist control, with resistance against such advancements serving as a form of defiance against state authority. More recently, right-wing extremists have

adopted similar anti-technology positions, for example manifesting in calls for attacks on 5G infrastructure. These calls are rooted in theories positing 5G technology as hazardous to human health and as a tool for controlling citizens. This convergence of anti-technology sentiments from disparate ideological backgrounds reflects the fluidity and interplay of ideological elements in mixed ideologies (Europol, 2023).

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE MIXING OF IDEOLOGIES

The mixing of ideologies in the context of the current violent extremism threat picture is influenced by various interconnected factors and processes. This section aims to outline and summarise some of the most relevant of these contributing factors.

Online availability and accessibility of extremist ideologies

The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in global connectivity, facilitated by diverse online platforms including mainstream and fringe social media networks, messaging apps, online gaming platforms, and imageboard forums. Consequently, accessing a wide range of extremist ideologies through various online sources has become increasingly effortless (Weiman and Pack, 2023). These platforms have made it relatively easy for inquisitive individuals to explore various ideas, conspiracies, explanations, and advocacy, offering a sense of comprehension of the world and its challenges.

It is worth noting that many extremist websites are linked to more mainstream platforms, which can serve as gateways to extremist content (Conway et al., 2019). For instance, within the Manosphere mentioned earlier, there are websites that address legitimate concerns regarding men's health and well-being or provide dating tips and strategies. While such sites may attract a broad range of individuals, the presence of content blaming or devaluing women can steer some individuals towards more extremist material.

Increasing role of the internet in radicalisation

Coupled with, and perhaps partly as a result of the increase in online availability of extremist ideas, there has been a noticeable shift towards greater online radicalisation (Gaudette et al., 2020). For example, Hitchens and Ayad (2023) report that over the last decade there has been a 413% increase in cases where the internet played a primary role in radicalisation. In industrialised Western nations there also appears to have been a waning in the influence of organised extremist or terrorist group membership towards greater self-radicalisation facilitated by online materials. For example, according to the Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States (PIRUS) dataset, the number of radicalised young individuals without formal affiliations or connections to recognised extremist or terrorist groups has seen a significant increase of 311% in the United States in the past ten years, compared to the preceding five decades (START, 2023). In the European Union, affiliation to specific terrorist groups like IS and al-Qaeda has similarly been decreasing among supporters of jihadism, with individuals and fluid cells coexisting within various national and transnational networks. In 2022, all 'successful' Islamist attacks were carried out by individuals acting alone rather than with the support of a structured group (Europol, 2023). In the same way, right-wing extremists within the EU reportedly tend to blend aspects from different ideologies, aligning them with their personal perspectives, without strictly adhering to any single ideology or belonging to a specific group (ibid, p.43). According to Europol's 2023 Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, "lone actors or small leaderless cells, radicalised in transnational online communities and not belonging to any established right-wing extremist group" currently have the "biggest potential for carrying out right-wing terrorist attacks in the EU" (ibid, p.50).

That said, it is important to note that the potential for online materials to influence individuals has not been lost on organised extremist groups who have been avid developers of often high-quality professional social media content. Social media platforms have become a breeding ground for the dissemination of extremist propaganda and disinformation. Extremist groups and individuals strategically utilise these platforms to spread their ideologies, targeting vulnerable individuals who may be searching for explanations or seeking meaning in times of uncertainty. Likewise, there has been an increasing tendency for extremist groups to opportunistically claim 'credit' for attacks by self-radicalised individuals who were influenced by their online materials (Bloom, 2018).

Social media search and recommendation algorithms

The rise of mixed ideologies is also significantly influenced by the existence of social media search and recommendation algorithms, which are designed to maintain user engagement by presenting users with content they are likely to find most interesting (Kim, 2017). With the increasing availability of extremist ideas online, these algorithms play a crucial role in shaping individuals' online experiences and content consumption. Online spaces such as social media platforms, chat rooms, and blogging sites leverage these algorithms to curate and personalise users' feeds, creating echo chambers that reinforce their existing beliefs and preferences. In essence, individuals become linked into a positive feedback loop that amplifies particular messages with similar content. This repeated exposure to confirmatory information from various sources leads some individuals to experience an increased sense of certainty in a particular position, irrespective of its alignment with objective facts. This unintended consequence of social media algorithms can give rise to the transmission of conspiracy theories or other beliefs in false facts. Echo chambers can also act as a gateway towards more extremist content, both through suggestions of increasingly extreme content by recommendation algorithms and through active searches by users as they actively seek out information to further understand the 'facts' that they are seeing on these platforms.

By curating users' feeds to present content aligned with their preferences, interests and personal grievances, social media search and recommendation algorithms create filter bubbles that reinforce pre-existing beliefs. Users may be exposed to diverse and often contradictory ideological elements within these filter bubbles, in line with their personal interests and grievances, potentially leading to the amplification of different, sometimes contradictory, messages (Binder and Kenyon, 2022). This mixing of ideological influences in online environments may not always be intentional, as individuals navigating today's information-rich online landscape can be shaped by the sheer volume of information they encounter, rather than actively choosing specific ideas. The exposure to various toxic online cultures and the repetition of messages that align with existing grievances or beliefs can lead to this mixing in a manner that is less deliberate than commonly assumed (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023). This repeated exposure creates a positive feedback loop, amplifying messages that align with different aspects of an individual's multifaceted beliefs. As a result, the certainty in holding these mixed ideologies may increase, despite the coexistence of potentially contradictory elements. This phenomenon can make it challenging to predict and understand the motivations and purpose of those subscribing to mixed ideologies.

False consensus, polarisation, and reduced trust in institutions

Social media-induced echo chambers have another potential impact: they create a perception of widespread consensus regarding a specific 'truth' or ideology (Luzsa and Mayr, 2021). This phenomenon, known as false consensus, can be concerning as it can lead to the polarisation of worldviews. When an individual observes unchallenged agreement among others, they may develop a belief that their own worldview is correct. This polarisation can be further fuelled by influential actors such as populist politicians and extremist groups who actively seek to sway and manipulate public opinion.

Moreover, the polarisation resulting from echo chambers can contribute to a decline in trust in public institutions. As individuals become increasingly entrenched in their own echo chambers, they may develop scepticism and suspicion towards traditional sources of information, including mainstream media and established institutions. This erosion of trust can have profound implications for societal cohesion and the ability to address complex issues collaboratively.

Mainstreaming of extremist narratives

Many of the extreme ideological elements that were discussed above, including LGBTQIA+ phobia, anti-vaccine ideologies, conspiracy theories, eco-extremism, and others, have become increasingly integrated into mainstream views and narratives in recent years. Individuals exposed to these mainstreamed ideologies may selectively adopt certain elements that resonate with their personal beliefs or reinforce their existing grievances. Therefore, as these ideologies become more mainstream, they gain greater visibility and acceptance, increasing the chances of individuals encountering and integrating them into their belief systems. Individuals exposed to these ideologies may become desensitised to extremist ideas, making it easier for them to transition to more violent beliefs and actions. In addition, the normalisation of certain extremist narratives can validate individuals' grievances and enhance their sense of alienation, potentially leading to the adoption of gradually more violent ideologies. Thus, the mainstream presence of extreme ideological elements can expand the pool of individuals who may be susceptible to radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism.

While these ideological elements may not necessarily advocate or incite violence themselves, their mainstream presence can contribute to creating an environment that is conducive to radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism as well as potential pathways to violent action. Some examples of this are detailed below.

- The mainstreaming of LGBTQIA+ phobia can contribute to societal discrimination, exclusion, and hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ individuals by creating an environment that reinforces and validates the marginalisation and alienation of the LGBTQIA+ population. Moreover, the intersectionality between LGBTQIA+ phobia and other extremist ideologies, such as misogynistic or white supremacist ideologies, can further compound the potential for extremist violence or hate crimes. The mixing of these ideologies can create a toxic blend that fuels hatred, intolerance, and the dehumanisation of marginalised groups.
- The mainstreaming of conspiracy theories, fuelled by social media platforms and online communities, has become increasingly pervasive. The widespread acceptance of conspiracy theories that provide alternative explanations for complex events and issues can erode trust in institutions, polarise societies, and contribute to a climate of social unrest and grievance. This environment can be exploited by extremist actors seeking to recruit individuals into more violent ideologies.
- The mainstream presence of anti-vaccine ideologies poses challenges to public health and trust in scientific expertise. Although not inherently violent, the widespread dissemination of misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding vaccines can undermine public health efforts, sow distrust in healthcare systems, and potentially contribute to a climate of suspicion and opposition to authorities. This can create fertile ground for further radicalisation and recruitment into violent extremism.
- While most proponents of eco-extremism or eco-fascism do not advocate violence, their beliefs can create a sense of urgency and crisis, potentially pushing individuals towards more extreme actions. The mainstreaming of these ideologies can contribute to the broader discourse surrounding environmental issues and can indirectly influence individuals' perceptions of the legitimacy of violent tactics.

Uncertainty and the search for meaning

The world has undergone a number of major events and is experiencing a substantial number of different crises, many of which, such as Covid-19, a land war in Europe, and financial crashes, were not anticipated. In addition, issues such as climate change, water and food shortages, and rampant inflation provide a context that has been referred to as a polycrisis (Homer-Dixon, 2021). This serves to engender a range of uncomfortable negative emotions among individuals such as fear, uncertainty, dissatisfaction, and anger (Lawrence et al., 2022). This can lead many to begin to search for meaning and explanations to reduce their distress (Oxford et al., 2022). In the face of this complexity, comfort may be found in a range of often simple, disparate, and even inconsistent ideas that serve to explain personal concerns. In these contexts, there is a risk of an individual developing a hybrid or highly personal ideology to explain things.

For those searching for meaning in the world, identifying others with similar views can be reassuring and supportive, serving to normalise those views. Moreover, there may be strategic usefulness in sharing ideas and strategies used by others who have similar targets and desires. As discussed above, there is clear evidence of overlap among various ideological elements with shared targets of hatred, beliefs about the causes of problems, or ideas for the necessary changes in the world (Hitchens and Ayad, 2023). This convergence of ideologies allows individuals to find common ground, reinforcing their shared beliefs and potentially fuelling the adoption of mixed ideological frameworks.

Individual vulnerability

While there is no conclusive evidence that various forms of mental health problems, personality disorders, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and developmental disabilities are generally linked to risk and vulnerability for engagement in violent extremism – indeed, research indicates that the majority of individuals involved in terrorism do not have a diagnosed mental illness (Al-Attar, 2019) – certain elements within extremist ideologies may provide explanations that resonate with an individual's vulnerability, potentially providing a target for their anger or exacerbating pre-existing mental health issues, such as paranoid ideation. Additionally, fluctuations in mental health states may contribute to the instability of ideologies (Knudsen, 2021).

Additionally, adverse environmental or social conditions can trigger or worsen mental health concerns, leading individuals and groups to deviate from 'normal' functioning, potentially resulting in the adoption of violent extremist ideologies (De Marinis and Boyd-MacMillan, 2019). For example, vulnerable individuals who may experience social isolation might be more inclined to seek online interactions in the absence of other social contacts. Given the influence of online materials and the reinforcing dynamics of online echo chambers, these individuals may face a heightened risk of encountering and being influenced by extremist ideologies. This risk is particularly relevant in the context of mixed ideologies.

Under conditions of heightened uncertainty and significant situational stress, individuals may be particularly prone to vulnerability (Calissano, 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a notable example, wherein many individuals, grappling with the loss of income and fears for their own and their loved ones' health, experienced substantial levels of stress and anxiety. In this context, with limited social interaction and increased reliance on online platforms, individuals sought explanations and a sense of control over their circumstances. The convergence of multiple factors contributes to the appeal of mixed ideologies in such situations. Firstly, the loss of income and disrupted routines provided individuals with increased time to engage with online content, creating opportunities for exposure to diverse ideological narratives. Secondly, the psychological strain and

anxiety prompted individuals to seek comfort and reassurance, making them susceptible to finding solace in communities that share similar grievances and frustrations.

Furthermore, the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation² during the pandemic added to the allure of mixed ideologies. Various extremist groups and fringe sources exploited the information void, capitalising on individuals' uncertainties and offering alternative explanations that aligned with their pre-existing beliefs or fears. The convergence of conspiracy theories, anti-vaccination sentiments, and other fringe views presented a comprehensive narrative that seemingly addressed multiple concerns, offering a sense of coherence in an otherwise chaotic and uncertain world. In other words, under conditions of high uncertainty and substantial situational stress, the appeal of mixed ideologies lies in their ability to provide a semblance of control, a sense of community, and a comprehensive narrative that encompasses various concerns. This is in line with the finding that there has been a subsequent spike in the number of individuals subscribing to conspiracy, anti-vaccination and other fringe and extreme views since the pandemic (Davies et al., 2021).

MODELS OF MIXED IDEOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

A small number of studies has attempted to model how the above factors might operate and interact in the evolution of mixed ideologies. For example, Regehr (2022), based on interviews and analysis of online content related to the incel community, presents a model that elucidates the process of escalating involvement in extremism.

According to the model, vulnerable individuals initially seek companionship to alleviate feelings of loneliness. Turning to online platforms and communities becomes a potential avenue to fulfil this need for connection. During their online exploration, some individuals may encounter Incel and other misogynistic ideologies that offer an explanation for their loneliness, attributing blame to women and transforming their loneliness into anger. Over time, these misogynistic beliefs become normalised and amplified within online echo chambers, perpetuating a continuous positive reinforcement loop that further normalises the ideology and provides support for violence.

This model provides a plausible account of how individuals may gradually drift into extremist ideologies, highlighting the role of vulnerability as a motivating factor in their search for understanding and belonging. It acknowledges that extreme ideologies do create attitudes and beliefs that can support violent acts. In this way, the emergence of mixed ideologies does not signify a departure from the processes of radicalisation seen in clear-cut ideological categories. Instead, it reflects a broader shift towards a preference for selecting and combining narratives that resonate with personal grievances and needs, rather than adhering to pre-established ideological frameworks. For example, research has shown that right-wing extremist activists are drawn to digital milieus not solely for ideological specifics, but for the broader culture and dynamics they offer. While ideology still plays a role in these spaces, the focus extends beyond notions of white supremacy and racism to seeking a sense of belonging, community, entertainment, and meaning, as well as an escape from isolation and existential struggles experienced in the physical world. This illustrates how mixed ideologies entail a flexible and evolving landscape that caters to individual motivations while integrating a combination of elements from various extremist narratives (Thorleifsson, 2021).

² **Misinformation** refers to incorrect or inaccurate information that is unintentionally spread, often due to misunderstanding, confusion, or lack of knowledge. **Disinformation** refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately created and disseminated with the intention to deceive, mislead, or manipulate individual or public opinion. **Malinformation** refers to true information that is selectively shared, manipulated, or presented out of context with the intention to harm someone's reputation, privacy, or personal well-being.

To provide greater conceptual clarity to practitioners and researchers dealing with complex ideologically motivated threats, Gartenstein-Ross and colleagues developed the Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) Framework – a conceptual framework for understanding the spectrum of violent extremists whose worldview comprises multiple distinct ideologies, sentiments, grievances, and fixations. The framework consists of four primary categories: ambiguous, mixed, fused, and convergent. Ambiguous cases involve individuals with disparate prejudices and grievances who lack a discernible ideological framework. Mixed extremists adhere to multiple ideologies on relatively equal levels, while fused extremists are primarily oriented around one core ideology but also express sentiments associated with other ideologies. Convergent extremists cooperate or collaborate with individuals or groups holding different beliefs without adopting their outlook (Gartenstein-Ross et al., 2023).

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE THREAT

The mixing of ideological elements has profound implications for understanding the motivations for violence and the nature of the threat posed. Individuals motivated by various conspiracy ideologies have often been driven to act out by a desire to draw broader attention to the specific conspiracy which in turn is expected to facilitate political change (Rottweiler and Gill, 2022). For example, in the case of QAnon and related conspiracy theories, violent action has frequently been designed to expose the alleged corruption and criminality of the elites. This exposure is expected to stimulate a ‘great awakening’ of the broader population facilitating the so-called ‘storm,’ where the elites are ultimately overthrown (Sommer, 2023).

The blending of various ideological components, such as conspiracy theories, anti-government sentiments, anti-vaccine ideologies, eco-extremism, LGBTQIA+ phobia, and others, creates a complex tapestry that influences the purpose and motivations of extremists. As with other violent extremism motives, mixed ideologies often offer a sense of purpose, belonging, and a perceived mission to address perceived threats and societal challenges. The conspiratorial mindset prevalent in many mixed ideologies fosters a belief in hidden agendas, secret elites, and a distorted understanding of reality. It provides a framework through which extremists perceive themselves as defenders of truth, justice, or a specific cause, justifying their actions as necessary to uncover the truth, protect their communities, or combat perceived injustices.

The mixing of ideological elements also plays a crucial role in shaping the perception of immediate danger and the urgency for action among extremists. By combining different extremist ideologies, individuals are drawn into a narrative that amplifies their sense of urgency, perceiving imminent threats that require immediate intervention. This heightened urgency can justify acts of violence or vigilantism as a means to address the perceived dangers, protect their communities, or dismantle the alleged conspiratorial structures they believe exist.

However, it should be noted that in the case of both mixed ideologies and clear-cut ideologies, the translation of supportive attitudes into actual violence is contingent upon motivation, as well as the availability of opportunity and means to carry out such acts. For example, an individual who lacks the means and opportunity to engage in violence, such as being unable to gain access to potential targets, regardless of their supportive ideology, would be unable to act (Regehr, 2022). Understanding the complex interplay between attitudinal support, motivation, and the practical means to engage in violent acts is essential for comprehending the pathway from mixed ideologies to actual violence. While extreme ideologies may provide a supportive framework for violent actions, the realisation of violence relies not only on ideology but also on situational factors and individual circumstances.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION

ADDRESSING MIXED IDEOLOGIES THROUGH P/CVE INTERVENTIONS

Research on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) specifically applied to mixed threats remains limited. While some theoretical accounts have explored certain implications, empirical studies addressing this question are scarce. Therefore, there is a crucial need for research that seeks to comprehend the characteristics of mixed ideologies and the individuals who hold them, the factors influencing the formation of these ideologies, their consistency across different populations, and their stability over time. Additionally, it is important to investigate effective strategies for preventing and responding to mixed ideologies.

It is worth noting that many evidence-based approaches to P/CVE, such as those focusing on self-radicalisation, prevention of online radicalisation, and engagement with individuals at risk, are equally applicable to addressing mixed ideologies as they are to other forms of extremism. However, research does indicate that many of the existing prevention approaches are not optimally suited to dealing with fuzzy ideological categories and fragmented extremist threats stemming from decentralised networks rather than structured violent extremist groups with clearly identifiable ideological leanings (Comerford & Havlicek, 2021). Considering the limited literature available, this section presents several observations regarding the potential challenges posed by mixed ideologies in P/CVE efforts.

Risk and threat assessment and predictability of activity

Perhaps the biggest prevention challenge in dealing with individuals with mixed or unstable ideologies is that their activities may be less predictable than other ideologically driven terrorism in terms of aims, objectives and motivation. Unlike conventional terrorist activities that often seek overt political change or to instil fear in a population, violence perpetrated by individuals with mixed ideologies tends to be sudden, unpredictable, and driven by their immediate concerns. Research indicates that individuals with mixed ideologies frequently engage in actions to prevent perceived injustices or draw attention to specific issues (Norris, 2020).

As a result, relying solely on risk or threat assessments based on ideological content may prove less effective in mitigating the risk posed by individuals with mixed ideologies. The shifting and inconsistent nature of their ideas and motives makes it more difficult to predict potential targets. The dynamic nature of their beliefs may lead to unpredictable shifts in focus and motives, making it challenging to anticipate their actions accurately.

When assessing individuals with mixed ideologies, it becomes crucial to identify and understand the nuances that exist between different, sometimes conflicting ideologies. It is essential to recognise that even if these ideologies appear unusual, inconsistent, or illogical, they may fulfil important psychological and emotional needs for the individuals. Challenging their ideologies solely based on their inconsistency may be counterproductive and may hinder effective engagement.

Rather than focusing solely on ideological content, a comprehensive risk assessment should take into account various factors, including individual vulnerabilities, personal circumstances, social networks, and behavioural indicators, both online and offline. Understanding the underlying reasons for adopting mixed ideologies and

addressing the specific needs and grievances of individuals can contribute to more effective prevention strategies.

Moreover, an assessment approach that recognises the dynamic nature of beliefs and the potential for shifts in focus and motives is necessary. This requires ongoing monitoring, information-sharing, and collaboration among relevant stakeholders, ideally including law enforcement, mental health professionals, community organisations, and social service providers.

Individual needs

While individual needs assessment is important for any approach to countering violent extremist ideologies, it has been suggested (Norris, 2020) that this may be particularly relevant when dealing with individuals holding mixed ideologies. This is because these individuals may be less driven by a specific ideology itself, but rather by the psychosocial needs fulfilled through their engagement with an extremist ecosystem anlike-minded individuals (e.g., a sense of belonging, purpose, or affiliation).

It is therefore a priority to explore the individual needs served by adherence to the ideologies prior to any attempt to tackle or challenge specific beliefs. It is also crucial to develop responses that prioritise addressing mental health issues and other vulnerability factors, as mixed ideologies may be interconnected with an individual's mental health status. Flexible interventions tailored to the specific needs of individuals are likely to be highly relevant in the case of those motivated by mixed, unstable, or idiosyncratic ideologies.

Identification of those influenced by mixed ideologies

Identification of those holding mixed ideologies poses similar challenges as other forms of violent extremism. Individuals have different routes into violent extremism, it may serve different functions for different individuals and the beliefs can be held with different levels of conviction ranging from complete internalisation through sympathy with to complete rejection of various ideological elements (Thijssen et al, 2023).

Any method designed to identify those holding violent extremist ideologies relies on the ability to accurately identify overt behaviours of concern. These can be verbal expressions or other behaviours consistent with an ideology. That said, not all extremist views may lead to expressed attitudes or opinions, or even overt behaviour (Becker, 2021).

Often it is friends and family members who are the first to notice the development of extremist beliefs and who are sensitive to any subtle changes in attitudes and behaviour that may be consistent with radicalisation. However, reporting these to authorities is not always an easy or straightforward process. Often individuals are reluctant to report their concerns for fear that they or their loved one will be imperilled. (Thomas et al, 2020).

Behaviour change is particularly significant among those subscribing to various extremist ideologies (Munden, 2023). Often those at risk of becoming radicalised may experience a period of vulnerability caused by life changes such as bereavement, job loss, or relationship problems. This may coincide with spending increasing time alone, online, or away from loved ones. Rejection of previous interests and hobbies, family, friends, and others not sharing the ideology, or colleagues and acquaintances who have failed to be persuaded of an ideology's importance is also significant. (Borum, 2014; Harpviken, 2020).

For all forms of violent extremism, there is some evidence that those who have internalised particular ideological elements can take on the role of advocates for the ideology and behave in a manner consistent with it (Schmid, 2014). Where different ideologies may differ here is in the specific content of the message's individuals choose to present to others. For example, so-called 'true-believers' subscribing to conspiracy-based ideologies can be particularly overt in their verbal behaviour with a desire to 'convert' others to their view. In the case of QAnon the explicit expectation of the 'great awakening,' drives a need for many true believers to attempt to persuade others of the validity of the conspiracy so that they may take part in the coming 'storm' where evil is vanquished. Likewise so-called Sovereign Citizens have been known to signal their beliefs through a refusal to conform to government rules and regulations such as paying taxes, fines or engaging with other 'unacceptable' forms of government control. (Sommer, 2023). It is however not clear from the literature the extent those with mixed ideologies differ from those with other ideologies in the likelihood or frequency of the verbal or behavioural expressions of their ideology.

Taking these together authorities seeking to identify those with mixed extremist ideologies need to be sensitive to reports of behaviour changes and the content of messages presented by individuals to others. It is important to be open to the concerns of family, friends and loved ones and to adopt systems that are not overtly draconian in their approach to those at risk of radicalisation. Systems in place for identifying believers in other forms of violent extremist ideology may be relevant and applicable to mixed ideologies.

Counter and alternative narratives

A number of approaches to P/CVE attempt to create counter or alternative narratives to an ideology. However, when individuals have essentially constructed their own unique ideologies, it becomes challenging to create generalised counter narratives. One-size-fits-all approaches are likely to be unproductive in such cases. While it is feasible to develop counter narratives relevant to specific aspects of a mixed ideology (e.g., separate strategies to counter misogynistic or anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives), countering highly idiosyncratic or unstable ideologies may prove difficult due to their distinct and variable nature. These ideologies may be characterised by their uniqueness or instability, making it challenging to effectively challenge or counter them through conventional means. Thus, alternative approaches are needed to address mixed ideologies that cannot be easily categorised or countered by generic narratives. This requires a nuanced understanding of the specific elements and motivations within the mixed ideologies and the development of tailored strategies to address those elements.

Insider threats

Self-radicalised individuals with mixed ideologies, particularly those focused on conspiracy theories, can present a significant insider threat to various organisations. Instances have been reported where police officers and serving members of the military have faced job termination due to their adherence to the QAnon conspiracy theory. Moreover, during the 6 January insurgency, individuals involved in the incident were identified as serving or retired military personnel. There have also been reports of similar individuals compromising security at critical infrastructure sites (Hitchens and Ayad, 2023). Relatedly, certain locations have become significant as potential targets for conspiracy based violent extremism. For example, within the QAnon conspiracy there is a range of beliefs that identify specific locations or types of locations as being significant. This includes beliefs that elites are abusing children in tunnels under Washington-DC, that they are also hoarding cures to all disease in secret laboratories, and that laboratories are working to produce mind-control vaccines. Together this has motivated some search for and destroy the Washington tunnels, or to attempt to identify and destroy the secret labs (Sommer, 2023).

This phenomenon poses a major challenge due to the potential risks it poses to public confidence in institutions such as the police and military. If it becomes known that individuals with mixed ideologies are present within these organisations, it can significantly undermine public trust and the perception of their effectiveness. Furthermore, the potential damage caused by these individuals to critical infrastructure can have far-reaching negative consequences, impacting public safety and essential services.

Therefore, addressing the presence of self-radicalised individuals with mixed ideologies within organisations, particularly when those beliefs are associated with types of location, becomes crucial to safeguard public confidence and maintain the integrity of institutions. Effective strategies are needed to identify and address these insider threats, including enhanced vetting procedures, ongoing monitoring, and training programmes that promote awareness and resilience against extremist ideologies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT, POLICYMAKERS, CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS, AND OTHER P/CVE ACTORS

Given the hybrid nature of mixed ideologies, it is crucial for these entities to develop an awareness that the extremist threat extends beyond traditional actors such as extreme right-wing or Islamist groups. It is essential to recognise that in principle, any ideologies can become mixed and combined to produce new extremist ideologies. Therefore, the threat posed by individuals holding mixed views should not be underestimated, even if their ideologies are inconsistent or unconventional. This is particularly evident in the case of adherents to conspiracy theories.

To enhance prevention efforts, a shift is needed from limited and targeted approaches to more inclusive and comprehensive engagement, involving a whole of society response, combining mainstreamed, non-securitized preventive actions with targeted prevention activities. Rather than focusing on broad ideological categories, prevention strategies should adopt a more precise and nuanced perspective, identifying specific features or "tags" associated with different extremist threats. Such an approach has the potential of capturing the diverse spectrum of ideological markers indicative of extremist mobilisation, moving away from rigid categorisations and acknowledging the complexities of the hybridised threat landscape. By recognising the fluid and evolving nature of these threats, prevention approaches can better address the challenges presented by mixed ideologies, which challenge traditional notions of extremism, terrorism, and hate (Comerford & Havlicek, 2021).

What is perhaps most important to be aware of is that the ideologies serve important functions for individuals providing them with explanations for the state of the world and reasons for action. They may also provide a sense of psychological safety especially if engagement with these ideas provides a sense of belonging, fellowship, and shared ambition. It is crucial to acknowledge that due to their idiosyncratic nature, many of these ideas can be highly resistant to challenge and can morph and change when subjected to scrutiny. Therefore, direct attempts to counter these ideas by presenting objective truth may prove counterproductive. Instead, more effective strategies involve recognising the needs and concerns that drive interest in mixed ideologies.

In a world facing complex problems and challenges where governments have limited capacity to respond, individuals are often inclined to seek meaning, understanding, and explanations, searching for a reliable guide. This was evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many conspiracy theories, for instance, arise from a combination of fear of the unknown and changing circumstances, coupled with a belief that those in power are indifferent to the struggles of ordinary individuals. In such contexts, those in positions of authority, including law enforcement and policymaking, must recognise the importance of listening to and engaging with the concerns of individuals without negative judgment. They should refrain from undermining, criticising, or

exploiting these concerns, and instead provide explanations that directly address the raised concerns. Failing to provide individuals with a voice will lead to a loss of legitimacy for those in power, erode cooperation with governance systems, and increase the likelihood of seeking explanations from alternative sources that may reinforce extremist ideas. Ensuring individuals feel heard by those in power can help counter feelings of alienation or neglect and may challenge certain tenets of conspiracy theories.

When engaging in dialogue with populations, it is also crucial for those in power to explain and support the principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law. This requires clear and regular communication, illustrating the achievements of this system of governance and highlighting the individual costs of alternative approaches. Western democracies have often fallen short in effectively conveying the successes of the rule of law, and indeed, many elites have attempted to subvert this system for their own political or personal gains.

In countering extremist ideas, those in power, corporations, and others need to demonstrate their commitment to the rule of law and refrain from undermining it. Breaches of the social contract, such as allowing environmental pollution without sanctions or granting impunity for egregious rule violations, undermine confidence in governance systems and directly feed into extremist narratives of individuals being ignored, exploited, and oppressed by powerful elites. It is therefore essential to establish robust systems of governance that treat all individuals fairly and consistently.

Considering the unintended consequence of social media algorithms in creating echo chambers, it may be necessary to implement regulations that require social media companies to be more transparent about their algorithms and the impact they have on content dissemination and establish oversight mechanisms to monitor and assess the algorithms' influence on promoting extremist content and echo chambers. This could include encouraging social media platforms to develop algorithms that prioritise diverse and balanced content, actively countering echo chambers and filter bubbles. Algorithms should be designed to expose users to different perspectives and reduce the reinforcement of extremist ideologies. The recent adoption of the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) by the European Union presents an opportunity to address some of these issues. The DSA, which is now in force, seeks to hold online platforms more accountable for the distribution of illegal and harmful content, including misinformation and violent extremist materials. It requires platforms to be transparent about their algorithms and imposes greater liability for not promptly removing harmful content. This includes materials related to hate speech, terrorist content, child sexual abuse, and coordinated disinformation.

Another important measure in this area relates to the empowerment of end users of online content through digital literacy and critical thinking skills. This can help to enable users to identify and evaluate extremist content, conspiracy theories, and misinformation online. Encouraging respectful debate, curbing troll behaviour, and actively presenting moderate yet diverse perspectives may also serve as strategies to limit polarisation. This could include collaborating with civil society organisations, academic institutions, and tech companies to develop and promote fact-checking initiatives, reliable sources of information, and alternative messages that promote tolerance, inclusivity, and critical thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

This review highlighted the emergence of mixed extremist ideologies, which can be attributed, in part, to the proliferation of extremist online content, the vast array of social media platforms and online networking opportunities, and the unintended consequences of social media algorithms that create echo chambers of ideas.

In recent years, the world has experienced unprecedented crises, particularly the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to widespread fear, distress, and uncertainty. These conditions have driven many individuals to seek meaning and explanations in online environments, which, as noted, often contain extremist materials.

Mixed extremist ideologies encompass a range of common extremist beliefs that intertwine and have no inherent limits on how they can be combined. The extent to which individuals find different extremist ideas acceptable to themselves is the primary determinant. Conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, exemplify this phenomenon by drawing from a wide range of influences, including elements from extreme right-wing, antisemitic, antivax, and extreme right-wing environmentalist ideologies that incorporate Nazi and environmentalist elements.

Addressing mixed ideologies in P/CVE efforts requires nuanced approaches tailored to the unique needs and motivations of individuals. A one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to effectively counter mixed and often unstable ideologies. When it comes to preventing violence, mixed ideologies may lead to more idiosyncratic and unpredictable targeting, making risk and threat assessment more challenging. Understanding the underlying needs driving an individual's radicalisation process may provide valuable insights for conducting such assessments.

However, there is a significant lack of research examining responses to mixed extremist ideologies, and further empirical work is needed to explore the characteristics of these ideologies, the individuals who hold them, their origins, their consistency across different populations, their stability over time, and the most effective prevention and response strategies.

In broader policy terms, it is crucial for those in positions of power to acknowledge the existence of mixed ideologies and not dismiss or underestimate the threat they may pose. Even if an ideology appears confused or inconsistent, its potential threat should not be diminished. Engaging openly with individuals, recognising their concerns, and providing explanations that address these concerns without dismissing them may be the most effective P/CVE strategy. In such circumstances, individuals are more likely to feel seen and heard, which can help inoculate them against the allure of seeking 'better' extremist explanations.

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