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# ONLINE EXTREMIST THREATS: A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

**Threats posed by online extremism are evolving— extremists are younger, using operational security, and adhering to non-traditional ideologies. Understanding these trends is imperative for the professionals charged with mitigating them.**

## A VIEW FROM BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Once upon a time, not so long ago, online extremism and the behaviour of online extremists could be characterised as a new and emerging threat. Today, the online space is central to understanding, and trying to address, violent extremism.

Security and intelligence professionals often comment that “everything we do has an online component.” The challenge then lies in the rapidly evolving risks posed by the online environment. The following brief describes these challenges from the perspectives of the professionals tasked with their mitigation at the national, provincial, and municipal levels in Canada.

## “AWFUL” VS “UNLAWFUL”

As extreme rhetoric permeates mainstream culture, it is increasingly necessary to distinguish between “run of the mill” extremist content and that which rises to the level of crime or national security risk. Canada has widely adopted the terms Ideologically, Religiously, and Politically Motivated Violent Extremism (IMVE, RMVE & PMVE) to refer to the actions that fall into the latter category, and it is in the “unlawful” sense that extremism is used here.

## WHERE’S WALDO?

Between about 2016 and 2018, everything was “low hanging fruit,” and locating online extremists and their content was relatively straightforward. Operational security among individuals on the internet and social media platforms was poor to non-existent. This is no longer the case. Extremists take precautions to hide their identities, including wearing balaclavas, blurring their faces, or using stock images as profile pictures. Access to extremist controlled spaces like select Telegram channels is increasingly “by invitation only,” with some employing elaborate vetting procedures, such as having “applicants” provide videos of self-harm (knowing that this would preclude law enforcement).

Anecdotally, there appears to be a strong positive correlation between a site’s “level of extremism” and its operational security level: the more extreme the site, the higher its security

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precautions. This presents heightened challenges in trying to locate the most pressing national security and law enforcement targets. Currently, there is considerable focus on individual risk assessment. But this presupposes that the “right” targets (individuals) are being assessed, and this has become increasingly difficult. Professionals at all levels note an urgent need for better tools for locating extremists online.

## THE KIDS ARE NOT ALRIGHT

Because of the obvious link between youth culture and the internet, concerns about online radicalisation and recruitment of youth have been voiced for some time. Two trends are making the situation worse. First, individuals are engaging in extremism at younger and younger ages; it is common now to see youths as young as 11 and 12 active on these platforms. One group, the National Partisan Movement, expressly recruits and has a membership that is predominantly between the ages of 14 to 19 (Hermansson, 2021). Second, professionals perceive a change in the youths’ mindset: they are no longer afraid of law enforcement.

While a simple visit from the police once would have been enough to deter many youth from worrisome behaviours, this is no longer the case. This points to the need for more nuanced thinking about prevention and intervention and a better understanding of how online platforms can function as gateways that draw youths into extremism.

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## WHITHER IDEOLOGY?

Traditionally, the motivations for terrorism have been conceptualised according to relatively distinct categories, such as ethnic nationalist, religious, and secular ideologies (far right and left). Recently, these boundaries have become blurred. Various referred to as mixed, composite, or salad-bar approaches, individuals are increasingly driven by more personalised and idiosyncratic “ideologies.”

This has resulted in a host of complications, starting with “what are we even looking for?” and ranging to “how do we explain it in court?” More generally, it is very difficult to explain these motivations to policymakers.

## ACCELERATIONISM: EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE

At the same time, we are also witnessing other forms of criminal violence, such as child abuse, sex abuse, and bestiality, bleeding into terrorism. This confluence seems to represent the worrying spread of “accelerationism.”

Accelerationist narratives are increasingly underlying the broad spectrum of extremism, present across the far right, anarchists, jihadists, and incels. In essence, there are growing numbers of extremists for whom the end goal is violence for the sake of violence: they want to “see it all burn.” In the absence of identifiably political, ideological, or religious goals, it is much harder for national security professionals to articulate the nexus to terrorism.

## COOPERATION CHALLENGES

The increasing internationalisation of online extremism necessitates ever greater cooperation across jurisdictions, but this is challenging in practice. For example, Britain recently became the first country to ban Terrorgram. As a member of the Five Eyes, it would be prudent for Canada to follow suit.

However, it is unclear whether its current listing regime is able to deal with an entirely online entity. If decentralised networks such as Terrorgram represent the future of online terrorism and extremism, efforts to harmonise legislative responses will need to continue apace.

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