

THE CHALLENGE – ONLINE RADICALISATION

Online radicalisation is one of the most rapidly evolving security challenges. Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed the speed, scale, and geography of radicalisation. Digital platforms may serve as incubators for extremist ideologies, enabling self-radicalisation without the need for direct in-person recruitment. Right-wing and left-wing extremism, misanthropic and nihilistic violent extremism, and ideology-based extremism all make use of digital platforms at scale. They target and radicalise users. Without specific guardrails and measures, vulnerable users can be easily exploited and radicalised in gaming spaces, social media platforms and beyond.

Since 2019, new, hybrid forms of extremism (misanthropic and nihilistic violent extremism, accelerationism, misogynistic, incel, fascination with extreme violence (FEV), gore and com networks) have emerged that do not follow the traditional ideology-based formulas. Gaming and gaming adjacent spaces, alt-tech and chat platforms, voice chats, social media and encrypted messaging apps are amplifiers of extremist ideas and movements. Because of their accessibility, these ideas reach tens of millions of internet users today.

The internet does not cause radicalisation in isolation. Research consistently shows that offline and online factors interact in a complex manner.^[i] Extremist content online exploits offline vulnerabilities such as mental health status, socio-economic marginalisation, the search for identity and belonging, and grievances to radicalise individuals.^[ii] Because radicalisation is rooted in offline vulnerabilities, durable online user resilience is an essential complement to ongoing efforts by tech companies to strengthen age verification, tools, takedowns and platform moderations, and the development of regulatory frameworks must take effect at the national and global levels.



USER-BASED PREVENTION APPROACH

GCERF, building on its decade-long community-based prevention experience and expertise, focuses on building individual user resilience to prevent online radicalisation. Its approach focuses on the users, their surrounding environment, platform moderators and gaming influencers, police forces and frontline workers.

GCERF's approach to preventing online radicalisation is age and gender-sensitive to ensure that it accounts for the different steps of identity formation among minors and different genders. Many of the tools are designed for and by the users, including minors and youth, frontline workers, platform moderators and gaming influencers. Meaningful engagement and the provision of resources to them through local civil society are paramount elements of success.

Connecting different civil society organisations, facilitating knowledge sharing and actioning within and beyond the GCERF ecosystem, for example, through the EU Knowledge Hub, the Christchurch Call and others, is essential for cooperation and learning.

MULTI-LEVEL PREVENTION APPROACH

GCERF operates at three interconnected levels to build resilience against online radicalisation.

1. User Level



GCERF invests in digital, algorithmic and emotional literacy adapted to the various aged users and localised to the given country context. For micro-communities such as peers, nuclear families and schools, sports clubs, GCERF invests in raising awareness about the early signs of online radicalisation but also about the emerging extremist trends using online and offline technologies. Through mass awareness-raising campaigns, credible and community-owned counter-narratives challenging violent extremist propaganda, the phenomenon can be better detected and intercepted at its early stage. The establishment and strengthening of peer networks are central elements of prevention efforts.

2. Platform Moderators & Gaming Influencers



GCERF works on PVE literacy at the platform level: equipping gaming influencers and platform moderators with the capacity to interrogate manipulative narratives and intercept radicalising content before it takes hold in the spaces they manage. GCERF encourages its partners to join trusted flagger platforms to report harmful extremist content, and aims to collaborate with organisations to develop PVE-specific online games and interactive tools that embed prevention messages in digital environments where young people are most active.

3. Structural & Community Level



GCERF collaborates with local and national authorities to ensure the incorporation of critical thinking, digital, algorithmic and emotional literacy modules into curricula. GCERF also draws the attention of authorities and frontline workers to the heightened risks among neurodiverse users. At the community level, GCERF funds structured training programmes that equip youth, women, educators, and community leaders to identify extremist content, recognise online recruitment tactics and critically evaluate what they encounter on digital platforms. This builds the first line of community defence against online radicalisation.

ADDRESSING OFFLINE VULNERABILITIES

Many of the grievances of users originate from the offline environment, such as trauma, depression, emotional dysregulation, loneliness, bullying, humiliation, lack of guardian attention, general aggression and other factors. To address these, GCERF invests in individual and community engagement initiatives away from screens, such as intergenerational dialogue, sports, and conflict mediation.

GCERF also aims to support national law enforcement agencies in ensuring localised gaming patrols. Based on some advanced European models, it is an area currently being explored, given its cost-effectiveness and impact.

Finally, once someone is identified as radicalised, GCERF invests in their rehabilitation primarily through the establishment of multi-sectoral case management and its capacity strengthening.

WHERE GCERF WORKS ON ONLINE RADICALISATION



11,000+

youth and community leaders trained to identify fake news, hate speech, and online recruitment tactics – building the digital literacy skills that form the first line of community defence against online radicalisation.

GCERF'S ONGOING AND UPCOMING WORK ON ONLINE RADICALISATION



Burkina Faso

Two grants in Burkina Faso focus on online radicalisation as part of their broader programming, expanding GCERF's digital PVE footprint into the Central Sahel.



Ghana

Youth trained on digital literacy and critical thinking skills have formed digital skills clubs to promote awareness of extremist propaganda. Fact-checking mechanisms are established within communities to counter misinformation and violent extremist propaganda circulating online.



Indonesia

Digital literacy and critical thinking training, awareness-raising across formal, non-formal, and religious education settings, and youth-led community engagement that promotes prevention messages among peers. A regional community of practice on nihilistic violent extremism and online subcultures in Southeast Asia will be held in September to build shared understanding and identify opportunities for collaboration.



Iraq

Detection of early signs of radicalisation is a central element of GCERF's investment in Iraq to prevent online radicalisation.



Kosovo

The Country Support Mechanism in Kosovo has agreed on a new grant focused on online radicalisation and interethnic dialogue.



The Philippines

Young people are trained to identify extremist messaging, fake news, hate speech, and manipulative online content, integrating critical thinking into digital literacy activities so youth can analyse and challenge harmful narratives. Young people are supported to produce and share positive online content including digital campaigns, radio programmes, and podcasts that counters extremist narratives and disinformation with locally credible voices. AI-supported "peace companion" tool is being piloted to complement the work of human peace educators.



Uzbekistan

One new grant will focus on strengthening youth resilience to online radicalisation, hate speech, nihilistic violence, and harmful information by enhancing media and digital literacy, including the responsible use of AI and critical engagement with AI-generated content. Young people are supported to create and disseminate high-quality digital content through community and mahalla-based platforms.

NOTES

(i) Mutton, A., Lewis, J., & Marsden, S., Online Radicalisation: A Rapid Review of the Literature, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) / University of St Andrews, July 2023.

(ii) Australian Institute of Criminology, Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice No. 673: Radicalisation, the Internet and Regulation, 2023; Whittaker, J., Online Radicalisation: What We Know, European Commission / Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN), 2023.