

Exploring the role of the Internet in the radicalisation process and offending of convicted extremists

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INTRODUCTION

The overarching aim of this doctoral research was to investigate the role of the Internet in radicalisation pathways and offending of convicted extremists in England and Wales. The empirical study was unique because it benefitted from access to closed source risk assessment reports within His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). These reports were authored by Psychologists and Probation Officers with access to restricted case documentation and in the majority of cases, direct interviews with the individuals concerned.

Findings were based on 235 convicted extremists, all of whom were considered to have radicalised prior to committing their offence. Variables of interest, including offender demographics, offence characteristics and online activities were extracted from risk reports completed from October 2010 to December 2017. Since completion of the doctorate, the analysis has been expanded to 437 convicted extremists, which includes all those subject to risk reports from October 2010 to December 2021. This accounts for close to every convicted extremist in England and Wales considered to have radicalised prior to their conviction.

The convicted extremists were grouped into one of three radicalisation pathways based on the detailed narratives and descriptions of radicalisation presented in the reports:

- Primarily radicalised online (internet group)
- Primarily radicalised offline (face to face group)
- Subject to radicalising influences in both domains (hybrid group)

FINDINGS

Radicalisation through online influences has steadily increased over time, whilst offline influences appear to have waned. Of those sentenced in 2019-21, the most dominant pathway was radicalisation through primarily online influences. The increased prominence of online influences was observed for various sub-groups, including males, females, those up to and including 25 years old and those over 25 years of age. A breakdown by ideological affiliation showed an increased prominence of the Internet within radicalisation pathways for the two most prominent ideological groups in England and Wales: Islamist extremists and those affiliated with the Extreme Right Wing.

The types of platforms and applications used by convicted extremists has changed over time. Most notably, there has been an increase in the use of online forums, open social media platforms and encrypted applications, and a decline in the use of extremist websites and standard communication applications. Newer online developments linked to extremist activity, such as use of the dark web, imageboards and online gaming was reported infrequently. Livestreaming of attacks was not relevant for any cases.

There were differences in the types of online extremist activities engaged in across the pathway groups. As expected, those who radicalised online were more likely than those radicalised offline to learn from online sources, interact with like-minded others and use open social media platforms within the context of their offending. However, differences were also found when

those radicalised online were compared with the hybrid group: those subject to online influences only were more likely to use open social media platforms and generate their own extremist propaganda.

The three pathway groups differed in relation to demographic profiles, offence histories and degree of socialisation. Those who radicalised online were least likely to be socially connected to other extremists offline and most likely to commit non-violent and solely online offences. Those radicalised in offline settings were typically older, more likely to have prior convictions, including for violence, and most likely to have assumed the role of an attacker in the current offence. This pathway group were also more likely to be part of a group and least likely to support an Islamist extremist ideology.

When investigating the prevalence of mental illness and other conditions, used as a broadly defined category within the assessment reports, this was relevant for a third of the overall sample. Most common was autism spectrum condition, depression and personality disorder; all three conditions were most prevalent for those who primarily radicalised online.



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Marked differences were found in assessments of risk presented by individuals depending on their pathway. Those who primarily radicalised online were considered the least engaged with an extremist group or cause at the time of offending, and had the lowest levels of intent and capability to commit extremist offences with the potential to cause significant harm. Those who primarily radicalise online are both the most prevalent group in recent terrorism convictions and those least likely to commit a violent, off-line offence. This may indicate a diminishing threat of serious harm from terrorism in England and Wales.

Those exposed to online and offline radicalising influences were assessed as most engaged at the time of the offence, with highest levels of intent to commit violent acts in support of an extremist group or cause. This pathway group were also most likely to commit further offences under terrorism legislation when future proven offending outcome data was interrogated. Based on these findings, it may be that those subject to online and offline influences present additional challenges for rehabilitation, particularly when ensuring that risk of offending is

sufficiently managed across the online and offline domain. Furthermore, this pathway group does not appear to simply be an extension of the internet group, suggesting that online radicalisation itself may require different responses than hybrid forms of influence.

The study included specific analysis of 137 convicted extremists identified as attackers based on their offending role. Those subject to online influences within their radicalisation pathway were more likely to engage in attack preparation online, including identifying targets online and signalling attacking intent. In terms of the success of attacker plots, those who primarily radicalised online were least likely to have plots that progressed beyond the planning stage and most likely to have been foiled. It may be that online traces make it more difficult to substantially progress attacks, bringing individuals to the attention of authorities more readily. By contrast, those who primarily radicalised offline were most likely to carry out successful attacks, proving the hardest to detect.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for policy and practice include:

- The need for online responses to remain a key focus of counter-terrorism efforts, with multi-platform responses key to managing the online threat.
- Specialist mental health support is recommended for those vulnerable to online radicalisation, with prosecution alternatives considered for those seen as vulnerable, active solely online and having a peripheral role.
- The offline activities of those identified as potential extremists should be closely monitored, and attack planning concerns acted on at an early stage.

FURTHER READING

The original study, published on GOV.UK in September 2021, included 235 convicted extremists in England and Wales and featured risk assessment reports from 2010 up to the end of 2017 - *Exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation and offending of convicted extremists - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)*

The updated study, published on GOV.UK in December 2022, included 437 convicted extremists in England and Wales and featured risk assessment reports from 2010 up to the end of 2021 - *Internet and radicalisation pathways: technological advances, relevance of mental health and role of attackers - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)*

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

Dr Kenyon's research exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation pathways and offending of convicted extremists has continued post-doctorate. The original analysis of 235 convicted extremists reported within the doctoral thesis has since been expanded to 437 individuals, including all those subject to risk reports from October 2010 to December 2021. **This research was not funded by CREST.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Jonathan Kenyon is a BPS Chartered and HCPC Registered Psychologist. He currently works as a Senior National Specialist Lead within the HMPPS Counter Terrorism Assessment and Rehabilitation Centre (CT-ARC). His research interests include pathways to lone-actor terrorism and exploring the role of the Internet in radicalisation and extremist offending. Previous publications include:

Kenyon, J., Baker-Beall, C., & Binder, J. (2021). Lone-Actor Terrorism – A Systematic Literature Review, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2021.1892635](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1892635)

Kenyon, J., Binder, J., & Baker-Beall, C. (2021). Understanding the Role of the Internet in the Process of Radicalisation: An Analysis of Convicted Extremists in England and Wales, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2022.2065902](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2065902)

Kenyon, J., Binder, J., & Baker-Beall, C. (2022). Online Radicalization: Profile and Risk Analysis of Individuals Convicted of Extremist Offences, *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, DOI: [10.1111/lcrp.12218](https://doi.org/10.1111/lcrp.12218)

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