

Social Media Narratives: Addressing Extremism in Middle Age (SMIDGE)

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Abstract: This paper examines the ongoing work of a three-year Horizon Europe project titled ‘Social Media Narratives: Addressing Extremism in Middle Age’ (SMIDGE). The project will cover aspects of the following areas: ethical dimensions, review of the literature (including conspiracy theories, misinformation and extremism online), co-designing of quantitative surveys, stakeholder engagement through qualitative focus groups, national nuances, changing technological issues, platform use and regulations. We take this analysis as a case study template that we believe will be useful to researchers in this field and potentially policy makers, especially from a multidisciplinary and transnational perspective. The project is split into four phases; Phase 1 - Understanding the landscape, profiling content and users, Phase 2 - Understanding the ‘attractiveness’ of the narrative, Phase 3 - Creating counter narratives and Phase 4 - Guidelines and policy briefs: spreading the word. We will unpack the challenges and opportunities of this approach for social media analysis and its real-world impact on democracy. Once the initial phase is completed in year one, we will start to construct counter-narratives to combat extremism in this context. This will take the form of creating counter videos and a documentary, as well as producing a series of podcasts and webinars. Furthermore, the outputs of the empirical research will inform and feed into the development of educational and training materials, guidelines and recommendations, as well as policy briefs that can be useful to policy makers, researchers, security professionals, journalists and beyond. The outputs from the SMIDGE project will provide evidence-based content, tools and resources that will directly help to counter extremist narratives from multiple perspectives. This will enable a greater understanding of the specificities and characteristics of those in the middle-age category, specifically those aged 45-65 years, and their vulnerability to extremism online.

Key words: Social media, Middle-age, Extremism, Counter narratives, Misinformation

1. Introduction

Extremist narratives have found an ever-expanding outlet online, with many willing participants who both produce and spread misinformation and conspiracy theories. Effective countermeasures need to be multi-level, multidisciplinary, and multi-sector. This growing phenomenon is having a direct impact on perceptions of democratic institutions (Christodoulou and Iordanou, 2021), trust in science and democracy, and can lead to calls for direct action (Jan 6th, 2021, incursion in USA) to overthrow or disrupt democratically elected governments. In Europe, misinformation about Covid-19 has created demands for ever stricter controls on the movement of people and protests against restrictions and vaccines. Such protests have also attracted members of a wide range of extremist and conspiracy theory groups. Extreme, often authoritarian and populist political discourse is becoming ever more mainstream (Lee, 2018). Politicians, often middle-aged, vie to gain media attention and social media support by acknowledging and often amplifying the misleading messages inherent in the content whereby ‘the underlying force of extremism seems best understood as the ‘quest for personal significance’ (Cichocka et al., 2023). Often seen as ‘strong leaders’ and ‘anti-woke’, such politicians use extreme and fear-inducing messaging to portray themselves as saviours of the masses from ‘those who would wish to do you harm’. In understanding those who fall victim to fake news and misinformation and extremism, it has been recognised that it is no longer just a ‘youth problem’ (Pauwels, 2021), and those who may be at risk of being drawn into extremist content are also likely to be older adults. These people may take different routes to extremism than younger people, hence the focus of our work.

The middle-aged are invisible, and this is reflected both in the lack of research, but also in the focus on youth that is evident across society. For example, young people have long been the target and focus of much of mainstream media and commerce (Aas, 2006; Brandtzæg, 2012; Buckingham, 2007; Hoadley et al., 2010; Skarpa and Garoufallou, 2021), a trend that has only accelerated since the advent of the internet. The evidence of this is everywhere, from the exclusive use of young people to promote and market consumer goods, to the exclusion of older people in advertising (Eisend, 2022). It is rare to see older people advertising anything that is not directly targeted to them (like elder care services, retirement homes, hearing aids, etc.). Despite the financial weight of middle-aged people, products are not generally marketed to them (Leonard, 2014; Prabhaker, 2000; Slootweg and Rowson, 2018), suggesting that ‘in the visual market, it is as if getting older means being moved to the

margins of visibility' (Fernandez-Ardevol and Grenier, 2022). This short-sighted approach means that a whole swathe of people is excluded or sidelined.

The problems with sidelining or ignoring certain demographic groups are manifold. When people feel excluded, they may consider that they are no longer important or relevant in society, which, in turn, makes the fringes appear more welcoming. The use of social media and other forms of online community building provides opportunities for people to feel useful, to feel wanted and valued, and to get involved, as 'older adults often prioritise interpersonal goals over accuracy, they primarily use technology to connect with others, rather than to gain new information' (Sims et al., 2017). While these groups are often benign and offer support and encouragement in very positive ways, they sometimes work to feed the feeling of exclusion, offer targets to blame, such as asylum seekers and climate protestors, and distract from the real causes of their distress, which may lead them to 'circulate fake news with specific social goals in mind' (Brashier and Schacter, 2020 p. 217). These goals can be for political or business power, and such misinformation may not only reinforce preconceived prejudices and biases but may prove useful in providing justification for ideological policy making.

Those in middle-age are not the 'digital natives' of later generations and are still relying on TV and traditional routes of information such as newspapers. They distrust mainstream sources of information (Reich, 2021) and at the same time are engaging with online media. This means that while they are potential targets and victims of online misinformation and conspiracy theories, they lack the tools and skills to identify the differences between truth and misinformation (Jiang, 2016). This group of adults at risk of extremism are often self-taught, use their own lived experiences to make judgements about the validity of sources, and may have been involved in extremist activities in their youth (Lee, 2018). They also may perceive themselves as relatively tech and life-savvy, with no need to be educated further. For example, a 2021 study of older men in Malta and their engagement with the University of The Third Age stated that 'there exists no evidence that older men find it 'uncool' to be associated with lifelong learning, *as is the case in middle-age...*', (Formosa, 2022, emphasis added). The study provides insight into older, retired men's engagement with learning, but provides no further discussion about the middle-aged men who consider learning to be 'uncool'.

Attempts by authorities to do so may further fuel distrust and disengagement or be seen as evidence of attempts at manipulation. Those who are susceptible to cults and conspiracy theories, such as QAnon, Anti-Vax, New World Order and so on, are generally more distrustful and cynical (Hughes and Machan, 2021) and may experience 'high individual narcissism but low self-esteem' (Cichocka et al., 2016), alongside low educational achievement (van Prooijen, 2017), although we posit that within the 45-65 age group there is also a subset of well-educated people with decision or policy-making power. This means that people in this age group do not always adhere to the current understanding about those who are perceived to be vulnerable to extremism. These factors make this demographic particularly hard to reach, under-researched, and their specific characteristics, drivers and rationale rarely explored.

Education and awareness raising initiatives are usually targeted at young people and so are often not relatable to those in middle-age (Pauwels, 2021 p. 10). Further, training and education resources are not generally made available to older people, even if they were inclined to engage with them. The Ofcom media literacy initiatives library identifies 123 initiatives for media literacy education, tools and other resources of which only three are specifically aimed at older people, and 29 at the general public (Ofcom, 2023). The lack of dedicated learning resources for a huge section of society is undoubtedly contributing to the relatively poor digital literacy among middle-aged and older adults (van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014). While it is understandable that many of the key resources are dedicated to educating the young, as they need to navigate the future, it is potentially hugely damaging for a significant proportion of highly influential members of society to be left largely unaware of and vulnerable to misinformation, which can have a significant impact if it is then used as justification for key decision-making.

An example of this is the 15-minute city concept devised by Professor Carlos Moreno and which won the OBEL award in 2021 (OBEL, 2021). The idea behind the 15-minute city is that cities should be re-designed, so that access to daily needs (housing, work, food, health, education, culture, and leisure) is within the distance of a 15-minute walk or bike ride. This greatly reduces car traffic and CO2 emissions and increases the health and well-being of residents (Moreno et al., 2021). However, the idea was seized upon as a threat to modern life and a restriction on freedom (Morris and Ullmann, 2023; Zuidijk and Rudgard, 2023). Even though the idea was misrepresented, the resulting furore led to UK government policy being made on the basis of a conspiracy theory (Walker, 2024).

This research goes beyond the current state of the art by focusing on a specific group of under-researched individuals. These individuals play significant roles in proliferating misinformation and conspiracy theories. They are also becoming increasingly extreme in their online rhetoric and are beginning to directly question democratic values, preferring an authoritarian and often violent solution to achieve their goals. This research explores this multifaceted target group through an intersectional lens, i.e., delving into the interactions between this age group, plus other categories of identity, in particular the gender differences, and power positioning in social hierarchies, which go beyond the essentialist perception of this group from the outside.

SMIDGE will develop robust and research-informed content and learning resources that can be integrated into training for journalists, police and security agencies; provide counter narratives to foster reflexivity in middle-aged people who are currently excluded from educational initiatives and may not engage with the traditional approaches (Pauwels, 2021); and develop webinars and provide guidelines and recommendations for policymakers and other professionals. A Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) approach will include co-creation involvement of all relevant stakeholders (police and training authorities, journalists, civil society organisations, policy makers, general public). This will ensure a human-centred and ethical development of counter narratives to extremist online content.

Online social media sites provide a space where extremist views are shared and discussed and may result in negative behaviour in the physical world. For example, in 2019, an extremist in Christchurch, New Zealand, entered two mosques and shot and killed fifty-one people. Prior to the attack, he had announced his intentions on the imageboard 8Chan, which has now closed down. On 8Chan, users were anonymous, and the image-board fostered an environment where extreme violence, hate, racism, homophobia and misogyny were rampant. Since the board was shut down in 2019 (and reborn for a brief moment under the name 8kun), the extremism that grew out of 4Chan and 8Chan/8kun has become increasingly woven into more mainstream social media platforms, making these ideas accessible to a much larger audience. Today, media users who have never been on 4Chan or other message boards can still engage with extremist content, but they often do so as part of their everyday media practices on mainstream social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). The embedding of extremist material into mainstream platforms means that countering such material and viewpoints may in some ways be easier due to the relatively accessible nature of the mainstream sites. However, the sheer size, scope and reach of these platforms may also make it difficult to capture (Moor, 1997).

SMIDGE aims to achieve a truly in-depth understanding of the major factors contributing to the present rise of extremist narratives and their influence on mainstream worldviews, discourses and policies across Europe. We will particularly focus on those between the ages of 45 and 65, who are an under-researched group, but who are also susceptible to being drawn into extremist content, and may either be disenfranchised on the one hand, or in positions of power on the other. The work will go beyond discipline-specific excellence, to draw on perspectives and expertise across and between disciplines, including anthropology, psychology, sociology, law, ethics, data science, computing, education, media studies, and security studies. SMIDGE aims to produce and disseminate alternative narratives in the form of counter-videos, memes and other micro-content and to promote reflexivity in the target stakeholders. However, to ensure that the content created is informed by an understanding of the characteristics and nature of extremism, SMIDGE will engage in a new and innovative approach to the production of counter-narratives to extremist material, drawing on previous work but not remaining within it. For the first time, using empirical work, SMIDGE will produce counter-content, educational tools and policy recommendations, which will promote first-and second-order reflexivity in both those vulnerable to extremist material and those tasked to address the issues.

A further tightening of focus to middle-aged people and involving them in a co-creative approach to creating the counter-content is a new, RRI-based methodological approach to counter-extremism. The creation of the content will be politically neutral, and the co-creation activities will provide guidance to avoid bias, which is one of the charges made against mainstream media (Reich, 2021). By also targeting key professional stakeholder groups (journalists, policing and security professionals, policymakers, educators, researchers), SMIDGE will also provide new insights, tools and reflexive approaches to understanding and addressing online extremism in those of middle-age.

SMIDGE will provide a new approach to tackling misinformation and extremism in media, by using the tools, format and approach used by those creating the extremist content to inform our own creations (part of our work therefore includes understanding the complex characteristics that make such videos attractive). This approach means that there will be a greater likelihood that such messaging would be viewed positively by the target group.

We are carrying out the following activities and a brief explanation is given here: i) exposure to alternative messaging, promotes reflection and greater awareness and exposure to targeted counter-narratives, and this will encourage those in middle-age who are vulnerable to extreme messaging, to re-consider critically the type of media they view; ii) produce educational resources and training including a MOOC (massive open online course), webinars, and tools for security professionals, journalists and educators to also elicit reflexivity in their approaches and understanding, and therefore become better able to counter online extremism risk in those aged 45-65; iii) develop guidelines and recommendations and policy briefs for decision-makers, to provide evidence-based solutions as part of a toolkit to address online extremism.

These resources will be disseminated through engagement with a wide range of stakeholder networks, including RAN (Radicalisation Awareness Network), European Foundation for Democracy and ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue), Age Platform Europe, UK Police, AGICOM, European Press Association, Foundation Porticus, Danish Centre for Prevention of Extremism, the Italian Rete Nazionale per il Contrasto ai Discorsi e ai Fenomeni d'Odio, the Council of Europe supported No Hate Speech Campaign, and the tools developed will aid decision-makers to make effective policy to address the grooming process that leads people to online extremism.

A social network and sentiment analysis will be undertaken to inform the creation and distribution of the media. SMIDGE advances the state of the art by providing counter-narrative media and guidelines to provide tools for governments to push back on misinformation and extremism online, while at the same time eliciting first- and second-order reflexivity to gain greater insight and awareness. To achieve its key goal, addressing the impact of these narratives on mainstream worldviews and limiting their impacts, the SMIDGE project will take an RRI approach to the work and will draw on the various sources of the RRI discourse i.e European Commission, 2012; (Stilgoe et al., 2013; Von Schomberg, 2011). It is acknowledged that there are ongoing debates around RRI (Owen et al., 2012), but we posit that this approach provides an open and pluralist perspective that aims to align science, research and innovation with a view to strengthening societal influence and thereby fostering scientific excellence. The concept of RRI as meta-responsibility (Stahl et al., 2017) provides the theoretical anchor point for our approach. The SMIDGE approach aims to elicit both first-order and second-order reflexivity.

First-order reflexivity enables the gathering, interpretation, critique and understanding of an issue or topic. First-order reflexivity is, in part, the reason why some people may be drawn into misinformation online. Misinformation or extremist material may be so convincing that the initial reaction is that; 1. the material is to be taken seriously; 2. an interpretation is made that the claims being made are true (this may be due, in part, to having prior beliefs and experiences confirmed, such as the belief that the Government cannot be trusted to tell the truth), which then convinces the viewer that; 3. the videos or content are providing the truth, leading to ; 4. a belief that the videos reflect reality. This way of thinking may then lead to a desire to act in some way, to either raise others' awareness (sharing, commenting, etc.) or even to direct action, such as protesting and possibly acts of violence.

When second-order reflexivity is employed, each interaction and reflection is re-considered through an acknowledgement of the context in which it sits and is a key part of the RRI process (Gianni et al., 2019). Further, integrating a gender and intersectional perspective into this frame enables the gathering, interpretation, critique and understanding of the explored topics, by taking into consideration how the interaction between identity characteristics shape individual experiences, representations and epistemologies, as well as how structures and discourses impact on these individuals in a 'qualitatively different way' (Crenshaw, 1991). Through understanding the interactions of responses and characteristics, cultural influences and personal experience, SMIDGE will provide stakeholders with the tools to elicit a greater understanding of the drivers and triggers for being vulnerable to misinformation with a focus on those in middle-age. 1. With regard to the content being viewed, second-order reflexivity provides a momentary pause to be taken before deep diving into extremist/conspiracy theory material. 2. Within training and educational tools such as a MOOC for journalists, it raises awareness of the specific drivers, factors and contexts that lead people down the path towards extremism, and second order reflexivity through lateral reading, aids journalists to more effectively contextualise, understand and report on the issues of misinformation and online extremism. 3. Understanding one's own cultural drivers, as well as understanding personal motivations can go a long way towards enabling critical and reflexive thinking.

2. Case Study

The SMIDGE project is divided into four phases.

Phase 1 - Understanding the landscape, profiling content and users

Phase 1 includes a comprehensive horizon scanning and theoretical analysis of the scope, extent and nature of online extremist material. SMIDGE takes a multi-disciplinary approach, and so the examination takes a broad view to enable greater understanding of the context in which extremism online has permeated society, threatening democratic institutions and trust. The first of two literature reviews covers social, political, philosophical, psychological, technical and legal developments from 2016 (Cambridge Analytica scandal, the rise of Trump, and Brexit vote). They include specific analysis of the literature regarding technology use and acceptance by those in middle-age (45-65 years) and their involvement in social media and the online extremist narrative. In addition, we analyse the popular conspiracy and fake news content published online during this period. We review and analyse the technologies used by individuals engaging with this content. This work provides the starting points and sets the parameters for the quantitative analysis work, which includes a social network analysis and a textual analysis of the reach and engagement with extremist material on YouTube, Twitter and Telegram. Phase 1 also includes a qualitative study through data scraping of content and textual analysis of social media extremist material. Finally, Phase 1 will collate and classify characteristics of existing videos and content to create a searchable database and an open data portal. This will help to identify key factors associated with online extremist material.

Phase 2 - Understanding the 'attractiveness' of the narrative

Phase 2 of the project involves key empirical data collection, and will include an online survey, focus groups and interviews with the 45-65 age group. We will develop, pilot-test and conduct an online survey to understand attitudes, beliefs, and the ability to critically evaluate extremist media. The survey development will be informed by the literature review in Phase 1. Five hundred participants will be drawn from the community, aiming to reach a diverse sample of middle-aged individuals. This will consider variables such as nationality, education, employment, occupation, as well as their intersections, which the literature review has identified as influential to individuals' beliefs. Participants will be recruited according to demographic requirements. None of the participants will be selected based on their known extreme political or personal views. On the contrary, SMIDGE aims to provide targeted counter narratives that will facilitate greater reflection on this content, thereby discouraging people from starting this journey.

Participants will be drawn from organisations such as Age Network and other groups or networks that offer services or advice for older working people, regardless of their political or societal viewpoint. In addition to the survey and drawing on early findings, two focus groups in each of the six focus countries will be carried out. These focus groups will represent the diverse countries of origin of the partners (Denmark, UK, Greece/Cyprus, Kosovo, Italy, Belgium) and reflect the potential for diverse opinions across different areas of Europe. The two groups are 'citizens/users' and 'journalists/bloggers/content creators'. We will examine the features participants find attractive and convincing in social media, as well as what helps shape attitudes and propensity to engage with extremist material. At the focus groups, we will invite the participants to help us to identify those key characteristics that make such content attractive. This work will provide key indicators for understanding what attracts people to online extremism. As noted, much work has been done in this area, particularly focusing on young people (Petersen and Peters, 2020). However, this study will be the first of its kind to address this particularly under-researched demographic.

Phase 3 - Creating the counter narratives

Phase 3 of the project involves the creation of counter narratives and content specifically designed for the 45-65 age group. The understanding of the landscape will be informed by the initial literature review. It will be kept current and relevant through the second horizon scanning exercise and the creation and continuation of the database. The work undertaken will provide demographic specific insights and psychological understanding, including those uncovered during the co-creation exercise, to provide targeted and specific approaches to the creation of counter videos and micro-content. The second set of focus groups in the final year, will involve participants engaging with the created media, to provide their insights and observations through the process of watching while talking, thereby further engaging participants in the co-creation approach and eliciting second-order reflexivity. This time, their insights will directly inform revisions to content. In the case of videos, this may include editing or clarification in the form of subtitled additions or notes. One task will focus on using this content to create training materials and resources for journalists, security trainers and others who are directly trying to address the problems of misinformation and online extremism. These materials will be delivered as a set of resources for educational and other organisations, and a MOOC to enable broader engagement with online counter-extremism materials and training.

Phase 4 - Guidelines and policy briefs: spreading the word

Drawing on the previous three phases, guidelines and recommendations for policy and decision-makers will be produced. First, the requirements for guidelines (Wilford, 2019) will be identified. This will be informed by the RRI requirements for guidelines tool developed by DMU in the GREAT project GA n°321480, which has also been used in the development of guidelines for Universal Design for Learning (UDL), thereby further disseminating EU funded work. This approach will enable the guidelines, recommendations and policy briefs being developed to be tailored and targeted towards the stakeholders, and will be formatted and developed with the key recipients.

3. Conclusion

Middle-aged people are frequently influential decision makers, yet have often remained invisible in research, and can be vulnerable to online extremist narratives which SMIDGE is aiming to address. With the advancing spread of conspiracy theories, some of which now inform policy decisions, are influenced by disinformation and extremist narratives online. The SMIDGE project will analyse and address extremist discourse and narratives across Europe through social network analysis, textual, and content analysis. The key insights from the empirical research, such as online surveys and focus groups, probe the psychological, national, demographic and intersectional aspects in Europe and the UK. A broad range of stakeholder engagement activities feed into our co-production of counter-narratives, a documentary, plus guidelines and training resources. Finally, SMIDGE will promote reflexivity and design tools for researchers, policy makers, journalists and security professionals.

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