JUNE 2026

FROM CLASSROOMS TO CHATBOTS:

Tackling Online Violent Extremism's Impact on Children and Youth through Education and Parental Engagement

OSCE Policy Brief

OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

Published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Vienna, June 2026

ISBN 978-92-9271-545-8

Transnational Threats Department / Action against Terrorism Unit (TNTD/ATU)
OSCE Secretariat
Wallnerstrasse 6, A-1010 Vienna, Austria
www.osce.org/atu

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the challenges and opportunities in addressing the impact of online violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT) on children and youth,[1] with a focus on the roles of formal education and parental engagement. The brief then further explores how media and information literacy can mitigate the risks posed by VERLT, using youth-focused, human rights and gender-sensitive approaches.

Key challenges identified include:

1. **Complex and evolving digital threats:** Violent extremist and terrorist actors increasingly exploit the digital information disorder and leverage sophisticated technologies such as generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), interconnected instant messaging and gaming communications platforms to target, recruit and radicalize young people in their online social spaces.
2. **Barriers in education systems:** Outdated curricula and limited teacher training can hinder efforts to integrate media and information literacy effectively and to keep up with complex, wide-scale and ever-evolving threats. This falls into the broader context of increasing pressure on teachers to take on responsibilities beyond their curriculum subjects, often providing pastoral or co-curricular services. This can lead to increased workload, while capacity decreases.
3. **Parental knowledge gaps:** Parents/carers often lack awareness of evolving online risks, as well as the necessary tools to help protect their children.
4. **Intersectionality:** Algorithms may amplify racist, misogynistic and stereotypically gendered narratives, while anonymity and a lack of accountability in online spaces may contribute to the radicalization of young people and children.

The findings of this policy brief highlight the importance of addressing these challenges with systematic, inclusive approaches that empower educators and parents/carers while actively engaging young people. Age and gender considerations are central to designing effective interventions, as are innovative responses to the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

1 The United Nations defines those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. United Nations. (1981) *Policies and programmes involving youth: Resolution adopted by the General Assembly (A/RES/36/28)*. https://docs.un.org/A/RES/36/28

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Proactive youth engagement:** Develop youth-led initiatives that empower students as digital citizens and active partners in addressing VERLT.
2. **Filling media and information literacy gaps:** Integrate into formal education curricula, with regular updates: critical thinking, evaluation skills and awareness of digital dynamics through a combination of cognitive, emotional and social elements, also addressing belonging and trust.
3. **Proactively address the implications of AI:** Recognize AI's potential to amplify the impact on VERLT and integrate forward-looking and innovative responses in policy and practice.
4. **Parental engagement:** Provide parents/carers with targeted training and resources to effectively support their children's digital experiences and responses to online risks.
5. **Rights-based education:** Embed human rights into educational strategies, ensuring inclusivity and fostering resilience against VERLT online.

This policy brief highlights the urgency of these actions to protect young digital users from harm, foster critical engagement with online content and build a resilient foundation for preventing VERLT across the OSCE area.





2. GLOSSARY

- **Algorithm**
  Set of rules used by digital platforms to determine what content is shown to users, often based on previous interactions. Algorithms can unintentionally create "echo chambers" (see below) that reinforce existing beliefs.
- **Confirmation bias**
  The tendency to seek out, interpret or recall information that confirms one's existing beliefs. Can be exploited in radicalization processes to reinforce violent extremist views.
- **Conspiracy theory**
  A belief that events are secretly manipulated by powerful groups, often with little or no credible evidence. These narratives are commonly used by violent extremist groups to build mistrust and recruit followers.
- **Critical thinking**
  The ability to analyse information and make reasoned judgments. This is key to building resilience to the "digital information disorder" (see below) and violent extremist and terrorist propaganda.
- **Digital citizenship**
  The responsible use of technology and online platforms, including understanding rights, responsibilities and respectful behaviour in digital spaces.
- **Digital information disorder**
  Information disorder encapsulates the concepts of disinformation, misinformation and malign information (malinformation). It refers to different harmful developments in the domain of mass media and information technology and the way they impact the world.
- **Disinformation**
  Defined by UNESCO as information that is false or fake and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.[2]

2 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552

- **Echo chamber**
  Phenomenon whereby media users are only exposed to content that reinforces their existing social and political views, as well as the hyper-personalization of information.[3] Research suggests that people in morally homogenous environments are more likely to resort to radical means to defend themselves and their values.[4]

- **Fogging, flooding and surfacing**
  Tactics used by violent extremist actors:

  - *Fogging:* creating confusion through excessive or contradictory content
  - *Flooding:* overwhelming platforms with repetitive messages
  - *Surfacing:* boosting content visibility through co-ordinated efforts

- **Generative AI**
  Generative AI models and tools are being trained on multiformat datasets using deep-learning techniques, allowing them to respond to prompts (or queries) by generating statistically probable outputs. These outputs can include a wide range of novel content (including video, audio, text and images), AI-generated or changes to existing content, AI-enhanced.[5]

- **Malign information (malinformation)**
  Defined by UNESCO as information that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization or country.[6]

- **Media and information literacy**
  Defined by UNESCO as competencies that enable people to critically and effectively engage with information, other forms of content, the institutions that facilitate information and diverse types of content, and the discerning use of digital technologies.[7]

- **Misinformation**
  Defined by UNESCO as information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.[8]

3 Julian McDougall, Marketa Zezulkova, and Barry van Driel, Dalibor Sternadel, *Teaching Media Literacy in Europe: Evidence of Effective School Practices in Primary and Secondary Education* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018), https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/0920fdbf-ff55-11e8-a96d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en

4 Mohammad Atari, Aida Mostafazadeh Davani, and Morteza Dehgani, "Morally Homogenous Networks and Radicalism," *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, (2021), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19485506211059329

5 Definition adapted from Tim Mucci, "What Is AI-Generated Content?" International Business Machines Corporation (IBM), 27 November 2024, https://www.ibm.com/think/insights/ai-generated-content

6 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Journalism, "Fake News" and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552

7 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *"About Media and Information Literacy"*, https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/media-and-information-literacy

8 Ibid.

- **Parent/carer**
  Defined for this publication as an adult aged 18+ with parental responsibility who provides unpaid care and support to a child or young person.
- **Parasocial relationships**
  One-sided emotional connections that users form with influencers or content creators, who appear relatable or trustworthy. Can be exploited by violent extremist influencers for recruitment.
- **Prosumers**
  Individuals who are both producers and consumers of content. In violent extremist contexts, even young people may be prosumers.
- **Swarming**
  The rapid mobilization of individual users or groups online to amplify content or react to events, often used by violent extremist groups, to create visibility or pressure. Often related to harassment and spamming.[9]
- **Violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism**
  "The dynamic process whereby an individual comes to accept terrorist violence as a possible, perhaps even legitimate, course of action. This may eventually, but not necessarily, lead this person to advocate, act in support of, or engage in, terrorism".[10] The term highlights the importance of distinguishing between criminal and lawful activities, as "radicalization" is not necessarily a threat if it is not connected to violence or other criminal acts. Most who hold radical ideas will not engage in, or support, violent activity. The ability to hold ideas — regardless of their nature — is enshrined and protected as a fundamental human right and is important for beneficial societal progress and change.
- **XRIRB**
  Term used by the United Nations to refer to terrorism that is based on xenophobia, racism and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief.[11]

9 Definition adapted from: The Technology and Social Change Project, *The Media Manipulation Casebook*, "Swarming," https://mediamanipulation.org/definitions/swarming/

10 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism* (Vienna: OSCE, 2019), p. 19, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/2/400241_1.pdf

11 Definition adapted from: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Manual on the Prevention of and Responses to Terrorist Attacks on the Basis of Xenophobia, Racism, and Other Forms of Intolerance, or in the Name of Religion or Belief* (Vienna: UNODC, 2022), https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/ManualXRIRB/UNODC_Manual_on_Prevention_of_and_Responses_to_Terrorist_Attacks_on_the_basis_of_XRIRB.pdf





3. INTRODUCTION

The current digital information disorder, characterized by a rise in mis/dis/malinformation in the online space, impacts individual and communal relations, and can contribute to violence online and offline.[12] For young people as well as adults, navigating these spaces is increasingly challenging: 'truths' are contested and shifting, trust in reliable information sources is low, and the sheer volume and speed of content disseminated across multiple mainstream platforms is overwhelming. One study, for example, reveals that three-quarters of 12- to 15-year-olds say they are aware of 'fake news', but only 2 per cent of them have the critical literacy skills to determine whether an online news story is real or fake.[13]

The exploitation of the information disorder by violent extremist actors and groups promoting violence in this on/offline nexus presents a complex set of challenges. It is important to be aware of the transnational context of violence in the digital space, including how real-world violence globally can be mirrored and normalized online. The normalization of violence can contribute to a mainstreaming process while creating a facilitating environment for VERLT, which may shape the ways in which we can respond to the challenges young people and children face. Such violent content is often found within a context where a 'pick and mix' of ideological and non-ideological material is curated — often by algorithms — and may be consumed as part of the radicalization process towards violent extremism. Such content may include footage of fights, online threats of physical harm and gang violence, as well as more extreme "gore" content, where, for example, cartel executions are displayed alongside Daesh propaganda.[14] This proliferation of and ease of access to violent content — combined with the increased targeting of young people by violent extremist actors and other exploiters — raises serious concerns for educators and parents/carers.

One study found that nearly two-thirds of teenagers who committed acts of violence in 2024 acknowledged the role of social media in their behaviour. Vulnerable groups, such as children with special educational needs or those excluded from school, are disproportionately affected,[15] with the first group three times and the second group 14 times more likely

12 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Strengthening Media and Information Literacy in the Context of Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Focus on South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2024), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/4/575970.pdf

13 All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy (APPG) and National Literacy Trust, *Fake News and Critical Literacy: The Final Report of the Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy in Schools* (2018), https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Fake_news_and_critical_literacy_-_final_report.pdf

14 James Hardy and Christopher Stewart, *Gore and Violent Extremism: How Extremist Groups Exploit "Gore" Sites to View and Share Terrorist Material* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023), https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/gore-and-violent-extremism-how-extremist-groups-exploit-gore-sites-to-view-and-share-terrorist-material/

15 Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), *Children, Violence and Vulnerability 2024: Report 2* (London: YEF, 2024), https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVV24_R2_Online.pdf

to seek out violent content compared to their peers.[16] This evidence also underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive approach that encourages collaboration between educators and parents/carers to mitigate these risks and protect young users from the pervasive harms of VERLT content online. Across the OSCE area and beyond, policymakers and practitioners should therefore develop responses to this fast-paced and difficult environment, including prevention and intervention approaches.

Socio-economic factors can also play a role in fuelling VERLT: for instance, in Member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), youth unemployment, military expenditure, low confidence in the media and inequality-adjusted life expectancy correlate with higher terrorism risks. In non-OECD countries, historical internal violence, regional conflict and corruption serve as additional predictors.[17] VERLT is increasingly complex, intersectional and dynamic, operating transnationally and via modes of digital communication, incubation and evolution, with ever-increasing access to global mainstream audiences.

This policy brief focuses on understanding the role of formal education in addressing VERLT online. Specifically, it explores which formal educational approaches are feasible and desirable within the framework of existing policy and practice, in the various contexts of the OSCE area. Through data and literature analysis, and interviews with experts, it explores what gaps currently exist and how future measures may address this problem. Additionally, it examines the role of parents/carers as community members and their responsibility toward their children, exploring the intersection of formal educational approaches with parental engagement.

16 Youth Endowment Fund (YEF), Children, *Violence and Vulnerability 2024: Report 3* (London: YEF, 2024), https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVV24_R3_Gender.pdf

17 Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), *Global Terrorism Index 2024: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: IEP, 2024), https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf





4. METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on a qualitative methodological approach. First, a desk-based literature review, including relevant academic and practitioner literature, was conducted. Following the literature review, semi-structured interviews of 15 experts were carried out with a subsequent thematic analysis. The 15 participants consulted for the policy brief are international experts in the fields of preventing/countering VERLT (P/CVERLT), media and information literacy, and education from Central Asia, North America, Northern/Western Europe and South-Eastern Europe.

Findings from the literature review and thematic analysis were synthesized to develop practical, evidence-informed recommendations. These aim to support the education sector, parents/carers and relevant stakeholders in enhancing resilience against online VERLT, with a focus on inclusive, rights-based and gender-sensitive practices.





5. FINDINGS

VERLT online is a multifaceted topic to address, presenting significant challenges for the education sector's efforts and responsibility when it comes to general and specific violence prevention. Adding to the complexity, especially in relation to young people, is the intersection with other forms of violence, criminality and exploitation in the online space, including financial crime, organized crime, urban street gangs and sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the challenges of VERLT online are in very different spheres of expertise, from tackling the dis/mis/malinformation itself, to the exploitation of technology, such as algorithms and AI, and the psychological challenges of individual and collective consumers of content, such as confirmation bias.[18]

Based on key research questions, the findings combine an exploration of the existing literature and expert perspectives on current challenges related to VERLT online for the education sector and its capacity to respond to these challenges as they negatively impact children and youth (of all ages) — in relation to their mental and social health, and vulnerability to exploitation and/or victimization by violent extremist actors. This policy brief also examines how parents/carers may be most effectively involved.

5.1 THE NEED TO KEEP ABREAST OF THE EVOLVING NATURE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ONLINE

THE DIVERSE RANGE OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM ONLINE

One of the primary challenges for educators and policymakers is staying up to date on the evolving nature of violent extremism. This includes understanding the online social dynamics in spaces frequently used by children and youth, and why and how radicalization to violence can happen within specific socio-political contexts. In Central Asia, the threat posed by violent extremist Jihadi and Salafi groups remains dominant.[19] The 2024 Global Terrorism Index[20] reports that, politically motivated attacks now outnumber religiously

18 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) , *Strengthening Media and Information Literacy in the Context of Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Focus on South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2024), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/4/575970.pdf

19 SecDev Analytics, Trouble Ahead: *Risk, Resilience and the Challenge of Online Violent Extremism in Central Asia* (Ottawa: SecDev Group, 2021), https://www.secdev.com/Whitepapers/2021-06-21+Trouble+ahead+Central+Asia.pdf; Lucas Webber, "ISKP Posing Rising Threat to Central Asia," Eurasianet, 2024, https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-iskp-posing-rising-threat-to-central-asia

20 Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), Global Terrorism Index 2024: *Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: IEP, 2024), https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GTI-2024-web-290224.pdf

motivated ones fivefold in Western states, although threats from ISIL/Daesh-inspired groups and individuals remain high and serious.[21]

This shift points to the resurgence of violent extremism and terrorism based on xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance and belief (XRIRB) globally, including in the OSCE area. Violent extremism based on XRIRB is diverse, ranging from groups targeting religious and social minorities, including migrants, to those propagating ethnonationalist and identitarian ideologies such as the "great replacement" theory.[22] This includes South-Eastern Europe, where disinformation online has "served to fuel polarization and division within society, with some content being openly nationalistic, xenophobic, hateful and hostile in nature".[23] Although violent extremism takes different forms across regions, common drivers and factors continue to underpin the recruitment and exploitation of individuals in digital, social and information spaces by the range of actors who have become adept at nefariously using such spaces.

The wider socio-political context can be amplified in the digital space where these trends and dynamics may be exploited, misrepresented or used to fuel forms of radicalization towards violent extremism. Policymakers should therefore be aware of four concerns:

1. how VERLT is manifesting in their countries;
2. what sorts of ideologies people are being exposed to online;
3. how conflict and violent extremism in other countries may impact domestic social and political dynamics; and
4. how violent extremist groups are capitalizing on this. An attack in one country may contribute to the digital information disorder and deep divisions in another.

The multitude of violent extremist actors and ideologies online makes it challenging to keep track of existing trends and developments. The spectrum now extends beyond groups with distinct political or religious ideologies to include violent misogynists, such as

21 European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (EUROPOL), *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024* (The Hague: Europol, 2024), https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/TE-SAT%202024.pdf

22 'Great Replacement' is a conspiracy theory which focuses 'on the premise that white people are at risk of being wiped out through migration, miscegenation or violence' especially by Muslim communities, and is increasingly utilised by a range of movements and groups promoting VE based on XRIRB to motivate and justify their activities. Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, *"The Great Replacement": The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf

23 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) , *Strengthening Media and Information Literacy in the Context of Preventing Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism: A Focus on South-Eastern Europe* (Vienna: OSCE, 2024), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/4/575970.pdf

the so-called incels,[24] conspiracy theorists, violent nihilists motivated by a hatred of society, and those characterized by ideological ambivalence. The convergence and overlap of violent extremist groups create ambiguity when formulating alternative narratives and prevention/intervention strategies.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION AND PARENTS/CARERS

During interviews, experts illustrated the need to keep abreast of highly varied and dynamic knowledge. They suggested different approaches to mitigate this challenge, including regularly updated knowledge-based learning that promotes media and information literacy; peer support within educational settings and among parents/carers; and the development of practical tools to adapt to changing contexts without the need to revise the entire curriculum. Experts equally underlined that understanding the methods used within digital spaces by groups promoting VERLT, such as fogging, flooding and surfacing, can be of direct practical use for educators, young people and parents/carers in identifying and resisting violent extremist narratives.[25]

IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE AND CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES

The interaction and overlap between different violent extremist ideologies further complicate P/CVERLT efforts. Many violent extremist groups also integrate conspiracy theory narratives into their rhetoric to appeal to a broad spectrum of individuals by offering status upgrades within the in-group while demeaning the relevant out-group(s). Violent extremist influencers deploy narratives centred on the control by powerful elites and perceived threats to societal structures. This illustrates the connection between violent extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories.[26] Many violent extremists adopt some form of conspiracy-driven worldviews rooted in longstanding tropes about global elites orchestrating conflicts and social divisions.

A 2024 News Literacy Survey in one OSCE participating State revealed that 80 per cent of teenagers encounter conspiracy theories on social media. These range from innocuous misconceptions, such as the belief the earth is flat, to more dangerous claims about election fraud and vaccine misinformation. These are all examples of how the information disorder erodes digital consumers' sense of truth and confidence in information, as well as

24 Incels, a portmanteau short for "involuntary celibates" may be broadly defined as violent extremists with discrete ideological hallmarks promoting violent misogyny for excluding – from social and sexual engagement – men identifying themselves as incels. Lewys Brace, *A Short Introduction to the Involuntary Celibate Sub-Culture* (London: Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2021), https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-short-introduction-to-the-involuntary-celibate-sub-culture/

25 Martin Innes, "'Fogging' and 'Flooding': Countering Extremist Mis/Disinformation After Terror Attacks," GNET, 2021, https://gnet-research.org/2021/11/08/fogging-and-flooding-countering-extremist-mis-disinformation-after-terror-attacks/

26 European Commission, *Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU* (Brussels: Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2022), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2307d85a-c136-4f0f-9566-11dc313dc5eb_en?filename=ran_paper_c-n_conspiracy_narratives_16-17112021_en.pdf

in the authority of science, political leadership and social institutions. While most teens do not believe every theory they see, 81 per cent admitted to believing at least one conspiracy theory.[27] Notably, youth, who are often more digitally adept than their parents/carers, can act as "tribal messengers", amplifying conspiracy narratives within their households.

For many violent extremist and terrorist actors, conspiracies are attractive and effective recruitment tools, and an ideological justification for their views. It is therefore important to understand how young people engage with conspiracy theory narratives, whether it is unquestioning belief, humour and irony, or fear and anxiety. Each form of engagement requires a comprehensive analysis before an appropriate response can be developed.

This raises crucial points of consideration for developing formal educational approaches, especially relating to media and information literacy, as well as parental engagement:

1. The digital well-being of young people may be eroded through conspiracy theory content;
2. This content — often presented as gossip, humour or "alternative" thought — can obscure and disrupt the flow of information online and can reduce critical thinking;[28]
3. When online conspiracy content intersects with VERLT, it may create a vulnerability or potential pathway for radicalization to violence.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

Parents/carers may encounter conspiracy content directly, or learn about it from their children. This highligths the need for a two-pronged response that combines formal educational approaches and parental engagement. Family support can play a critical role in questioning and eventually withdrawing from violent extremist ideologies, groups, or activities, provided parents/carers are educated about violent extremist and terrorist dynamics. From both a preventative and a responsive perspective, parents/carers remain vital partners in preventing VERLT online.[29]

27 European Commission, *Conspiracy Narratives: Current State and Future Expectations for P/CVE in the EU* (Washington, DC, 2024), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2307d85a-c136-4f0f-9566-11dc313dc5eb_en?filename=ran_paper_c-n_conspiracy_narratives_16-17112021_en.pdf;
News Literacy Project (NLP), *News Literacy in America: A Survey of Teen Information Attitudes, Habits and Skills* (2024), https://newslit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/NLP-Teen-Survey-Report-2024.pdf

28 Nicholas Holm, "Deadpan Humour, the Comic Disposition and the Interpretation of Ironic Ambiguity Online," *New Media & Society* 26, no. 1 (2021): 253–270, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/14614448211054011

29 Elga Sikkens, Marion van San, Stijn Sieckelinck, Hennie Boeije, Micha de Winter, "Participant Recruitment through Social Media: Lessons Learned from a Qualitative Radicalization Study Using Facebook," *Field Methods* 29, no. 2 (2017), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1525822X16663146; Lynn Davies, *Report 5: Review of Educational Initiatives in Counter-Extremism Internationally: What Works?* (Gothenburg: The Segerstedt Institute, 2018), https://www.gu.se/sites/default/files/2020-03/1673173_review-of-educational-initiatives-180110.pdf

5.2 SOCIO-TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

EXPLOITING TECHNOLOGY FOR RECRUITMENT AND CO-ORDINATION

Violent extremist and terrorist groups increasingly exploit a variety of digital platforms to create diverse ecosystems of influence. Organized groups promoting violent extremism, including neo-Nazi or Daesh-inspired networks, have benefitted from online connectivity. Digital networks can allow these groups to overcome their historical fragmentation, even in national contexts, and recruit and strengthen their in-group within imagined communities formed through temporary coalitions of individuals with varying affiliations. Violent extremist activities also involve "swarming".[30]

The current development of ecosystems within mainstream platforms has even greater implications for young people and citizens engaging in digital spaces. These spaces bring together individuals with shared identity markers, such as ethnicity, faith or gender, as well as a sense of grievance resulting from actual, perceived or fabricated experiences of discrimination and/or exclusion, including socio-political or economic exclusion. Experts interviewed for this policy brief discussed the powerful connectivity of these digital social spaces across geographic and social contexts. The presence of violent extremist actors on mainstream platforms, including social media and gaming platforms, expands their reach and enables them to target wider audiences, often attracting young people through conspiracy narratives or influencers.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

The digital environment's volatility complicates the identification and disruption of violent extremist activities, and presents ongoing challenges for educational institutions and policymakers. Understanding the intersection of these ideologies, technologies and actors, enables stakeholders to better anticipate and counter violent extremists' evolving strategies. This requires a co-ordinated approach from governments, policymakers and educators with specific mandates and/or skills in P/CVERLT to consider the implications and potential actions within relevant contexts.

30 David Faggard, "Social Swarming: Asymmetric Effects on Public Discourse in Future Conflict," *Military Review* (2013), https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20130430_art012.pdf

IMPACT OF ALGORITHMS

There is growing concern about developments in the online space and the technology that drives them, such as disinformation, bots and deepfakes. These tactics may be viewed as contributing to the information disorder by undermining rational discourse and fostering environments where violence and hate flourish.[31] In this digital evolution, groups promoting violent extremism have become more sophisticated in their use of digital spaces and exploitation of technology.

For instance, social media algorithms are increasingly tailored to niche and personalized interests, an important tool for curating content to match individual interests. However, this may also limit the type of information users are exposed to, potentially magnifying harmful content through shock value and "clickability", especially among younger users. Algorithmic content curation contributes to the creation of echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to the same viewpoints, which often reaffirm their opinions and validate their grievances. These echo chambers are often "anger chambers" generating and exploiting consumers' emotions, and fuelling engagement by allowing and encouraging hate. In this way, algorithms discourage exposure to diverse perspectives or any challenge to the harmful or angering narratives, regardless of their truthfulness. For violent extremists, this is an ideal environment, where users are exposed to a feedback loop of perceived validation and angering content that increasingly justifies violence.

Experts highlighted that tech companies should improve moderation and take a more transparent approach to algorithms so that audiences can understand them. However, they also emphasised that audiences cannot solely rely on platforms to provide more moderation and transparency.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

The very specific forms of hate that can be found in these echo or anger chambers along with the rapidly changing media formats and references (such as memes) used to spread them, present a fundamental problem: how can we keep up with and respond to the sheer volume and pace at which such content spreads?

Resources or guidelines on media and information literacy, including digital literacy, often become outdated quickly or are too generalized to be meaningful. Experts highlighted the need for methodological approaches focused on understanding processes rather than specific pieces of content, which would allow practitioners to consider the mechanisms and tools to build resilience. Such tools may include helping young people understand algo-

31 Marianna Diomidous, Kostis Chardalias, Adrianna Magita, Panagiotis Koutonias, Paraskevi Panagiotopoulou, John Mantas, "Social and Psychological Effects of the Internet Use", Acta Inform Med. (2016);24(1), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27041814/;
Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, *Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2017), https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html

rithms and violent extremist and terrorist propaganda, and teaching them how to navigate online spaces with engaged, critical thinking, in conjunction with hybrid programmes, that combine cognitive, emotional and social elements addressing belonging and trust, as well as traditional safety protocols.

GAMING AS A METHOD OF RECRUITMENT

As mentioned above, violent extremist and terrorist actors' use of popular online social spaces inhabited by a wide range of people, especially younger generations, creates an urgent need to better understand these forums. One example is their use of gaming platforms, games and associated chat rooms to groom and recruit individuals, plan attacks and disseminate propaganda. While experts pointed to the tendency — from governments to parents/carers — to censor or restrict youth and children's access to technology, they also emphasized that educational safety measures promoting prosocial online engagement would be more sustainable. For example, initiatives such as the Extremism and Gaming Research Network[32] and the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism[33] are working to better understand and address how violent extremist and terrorist actors' exploit digital (gaming) spaces. However, gaming platforms are difficult to monitor, making it more complicated for educators and parents/carers when they wish to address VERLT online with youth and children who may spend a lot of time in these gaming spaces as a social opportunity.

Violent extremist and terrorist actors have capitalized on this. For example, Daesh developed custom content for popular games including Grand Theft Auto V, as well as military simulators such as Arma. These modifications allow players to re-enact terrorist acts or play as Daesh insurgents. Similarly, XRIRB actors have created games promoting xenophobic narratives.[34]

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

The experts consulted for this policy brief emphasized the need to engage with the social spaces young people often inhabit, understand how they work, what young people do and enjoy, and how and why they may be exploited in spaces that they may otherwise view as safe. Educators and parents/carers should consider avoiding approaches that solely restrict online access and instead try to bridge generational and cultural gaps to better protect and support young people in enjoying these spaces safely.

The experts also cautioned against assuming that internet safety or awareness alone is enough to solve the problem. This is especially important in contexts where schools and colleges may use less sophisticated IT than those used by young people in their homes or

32 Extremism and Gaming Research Network (ERGN): https://extremismandgaming.org/

33 Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT): https://gifct.org/

34 Menso Hartgers and Eviane Leidig, *Fighting Extremism in Gaming Platforms* (The Hague: ICCT, 2023), https://icct.nl/publication/fighting-extremism-gaming-platforms-set-design-principles-develop-comprehensive-pcve

on their phones. This mismatch between institutional provision and young people's actual digital practices means that young people are often left to teach themselves and engage in digital social spaces with very little guardrails or guidance from educators or parents/carers. Understanding the realities of young people's experiences is crucial to developing effective media and information literacy.

Co-creation techniques involving young people, parents/carers and teachers are paramount. Similarly, embedding these techniques into formal curricula and teacher training rather than relying on individual teachers with some experience in digital social spaces is necessary to address challenges systemically.

THE ROLE OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI has added another layer of complexity to the digital dissemination of violent extremist and terrorist content. AI tools are increasingly being used to create realistic yet fake or manipulated images and videos. In this context, they can generate, recycle and repurpose footage from various sources for different purposes, from using real women's images for content promoting misogynistic sexual violence, to drawing on imagery from diverse global conflicts for propaganda. In Europe, violent extremist groups have misused generative AI to produce photorealistic images and memes that dehumanize targeted groups and mislead the public into believing fabricated material is authentic.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

In this most novel and rapidly developing area, experts see an opportunity for practitioners, policymakers and educators to consider ways to use AI for P/CVERLT. This will be crucial to navigate, challenge and resist violent extremism and radicalization to violence by engaging young people in conversations about how to use AI responsibly, as well as to better understand how AI works and be aware of its limitations and implications. A pertinent example is the use of AI technology for fact-checking.[35] In an era when the boundary between truth and fabrication has eroded to such a great extent in such a short span of time, the solutions for addressing these issues require serious, multilayered consideration from the government to the grassroots level. These solutions will require systematic educational approaches, with curricula at the forefront alongside the critical support of parents/carers.

35 David Walsh, "MIT Study: An AI Chatbot Can Reduce Belief in Conspiracy Theories," MIT Sloan, 2024, https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/mit-study-ai-chatbot-can-reduce-belief-conspiracy-theories

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS PROMOTING HATEFUL NARRATIVES

The rise of social media influencers has grown with social media usage itself. Influencers are individuals appealing to users consuming and engaging with their content, ranging from those with mass appeal to micro-influencers with niche content and more specific appeal. These influencers, usually humans but increasingly also AI-generated, engage their followers through thought leadership and information-sharing.

Social media influencers foster parasocial relationships with their predominantly young audiences. Violent extremist actors often exploit these dynamics by integrating into influencer ecosystems. Such influencers and networks may facilitate radicalization through guest appearances and interconnected but diverse content, facilitating a seamless transition from mainstream to (violent) extremist narratives. Content is often framed as rebellious, entertaining or light-hearted, masking its potential harmful impact on marginalized communities, including women, immigrants, people of colour and persons with diverse gender identities.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

Violent extremist and terrorist actors embrace influencer techniques and shape their content to fit youth-orientated content and platforms. Experts interviewed for this policy brief highlighted the contrast between the dynamic adaptation of these actors to the online environment and the slow pace of change within formal educational approaches, where understanding, building resilience to and intervening against violent extremist influencer content is far behind, in all regions and contexts.

Interviewed experts underlined that there remains an urgent need for robust media, information and digital literacy education to understand social media dynamics. Young people and their parents/carers need a better understanding of how social media influencers operate, how they earn money from their content and, in case of violent extremist/terrorist content, how they can exploit the online space and their audience. While local contexts play a role, experts agreed that the overall methodological approach within formal education can focus on the principles and processes to build resilience to violent extremist influencers through media and information literacy. Complementary work with parents/carers alongside formal education for young people and children is also needed for a comprehensive approach.

5.3 CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES: AGE CONSIDERATIONS, INSIGHTS INTO YOUNG DIGITAL USERS' LIVES AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD, AND UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF GENDER

Worldwide internet consumption is growing exponentially, even in regions where governments have controlled or stalled this expansion. Across Europe, 96 per cent of individuals aged 16-29 use the internet daily.[36] In areas with lower internet penetration, including Central Asia, usage continues to rise. According to DataReportal, at the start of 2025, internet usage among the general population was estimated at 93 per cent in Kazakhstan, 89 per cent in Uzbekistan, 89 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, 57 per cent in Tajikistan and 35 per cent in Turkmenistan.[37] In addition, the proliferation of smartphones means that more people in the region, in particular youth, have constant access to the internet but, in many cases, lack experience with using the internet and digital technologies.

Research highlights the changing behaviour, aesthetics and tactics of online violent extremist communities, with the rise of a younger generation of violent extremist/terrorist actors engaging in "trolling" and content creation, such as Al-Qaida and Daesh propaganda.[38]

The ability of individuals to navigate and respond to online harms often depends on their age. The intersection of age, gender and developmental stages can shape the vulnerability profiles of individuals exposed to online violence. To prevent the victimization and exploitation of children and young people by violent extremist/terrorist actors, experts discussed the importance of age considerations in the education sector when planning P/CVERLT curricula and activities.

The experts interviewed for this policy brief and the literature highlight the importance of factoring in age in relation to support for P/CVERLT, especially during the transition to early adulthood.[39] Factors such as changes in social identity, weakened social control and the

36 European Commission, "96% of Young People in the EU Use the Internet Daily," Eurostat, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230714-1

37 Simon Kemp, "Central Asia — Reports," *DataReportal*, March 3, 2025, 2025, https://datareportal.com/reports/tag/Central+Asia

38 Henry Tuck, Jakob Guhl, Julia Smirnova, Lea Gerster and Oliver Marsh, *Researching the Evolving Online Ecosystem: Telegram, Discord & Odysee* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2023), https://www.isdglobal.org/publication/researching-the-evolving-online-ecosystem-telegram-discord-odysee/

39 Jessica Trisko Darden, *Tackling Terrorists' Exploitation of Youth* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2019), https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Tackling-Terrorists-Exploitation-of-Youth.pdf.
See also: Amy Nivette, Lea Echelmeyer, Frank Weerman, Manuel Eisner, Denis Ribeau, *Understanding Changes in Violent Extremist Attitudes During the Transition to Early Adulthood* (2022), https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36340926/;
Claudia Wallner, *The Contested Relationship Between Youth and Violent Extremism: Assessing the Evidence Base in Relation to P/CVE Interventions* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2021), https://static.rusi.org/234_op_pcve_youth_web_version_0.pdf.

intensified influence of peer groups during adolescence make individuals more vulnerable to violent extremist influences. This life stage is marked by increased uncertainty and vulnerability, which can heighten the risk of being attracted to violent extremist/terrorist content. Conversely, as young people mature, developmental shifts may be associated with lower susceptibility to such influences.[40]

Minors are more frequently being identifiedin terrorist-related investigations. According to an anglosphere intelligence alliance, children under the age of 18 exhibit capabilities akin to adults in creating and distributing violent extremist content, leading groups, recruiting and even conducting attacks.[41] This has been characterized by the rise of online prosumers and the use of gaming platforms as hubs where pathways to radicalization to violence may develop.

Addressing minors in this context requires nuance and care. This includes having an age-sensitive approach that acknowledges their unique developmental stage and takes into consideration the special needs and rights of the child under international human rights standards, which demand that they are treated as victims first and foremost.[42] While violent extremist/terrorist actors may exploit young people and children to the point of making them perpetrators themselves, it is crucial to avoid stigmatization as far as possible, not only for ethical reasons, but also because radicalization feeds off grievances and stigma, whereas the aim of intervention work is to de-escalate.

Youth prevention programmes often rely on oversimplistic explanations of why some young people may be drawn to violent extremism. As a result, these programmes may struggle to effectively target their activities and fail to address the complex drivers of radicalization to violence. The emphasis on youth, particularly young males, as a potential violent extremist threat can lead to the securitization of everyday activities and the framing, as well as perception of young people as a suspect group.

Although radicalization leading to violence is often associated with religiously or politically motivated ideologies, violent misogyny has emerged as a key feature across the ideological spectrum.[43] Digital content with explicit and implicit commentary on gender is common-

40 Lisa J. Knoll, Jovita T. Leung, Lucy Foulkes, and Sarah Jayne Blakemore, "Age Related Differences in Social Influence on Risk Perception Depend on the Direction of Influence," *Journal of Adolescence* 60 (October 2017): 53–63, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28753485/

41 Five Eyes Insights, *Young People and Violent Extremism: A Call for Collective Action* (2024), https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/assets/NZSIS-Documents/Young-People-and-violent-extremism-a-call-for-collective-action.pdf

42 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System* (Vienna: UNODC, 2017), https://unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf

43 Arie Perliger, Catherine Stevens, and Eviane Leidig, *Mapping the Ideological Landscape of Extreme Misogyny* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter Terrorism, January 26, 2023), https://icct.nl/publication/mapping-ideological-landscape-extreme-misogyny

place across violent extremist/terrorist ideologies and materials, including content about the roles of men and women, anti-trans and homophobic material, and violent, often sexual, misogyny. This is partly fuelled by an increasingly polarized public discussion on gender-related topics. The role of gender in violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism therefore warrants particular attention.

According to one study, 33 per cent of teenagers have encountered social media content encouraging violence against women and girls. The study also found that amongst 13-17-year-olds, 27 per cent have seen imagery or threats of sexual assault.[44] While not all boys and young men influenced by violent misogynist ideologies become physically violent or are recruited into violent extremist groups, violent misogyny itself can be considered as both a form of violent extremism and an ideology. As an example, the so-called incel community, after several deadly attacks, is increasingly viewed as a potential terrorist threat.[45] Such gender-specific violent mindsets should therefore be considered as part of broader P/CVERLT strategies.

Opportunities for education and parents/carers

Experts interviewed for this policy brief pointed to the wider field of intervention work, with lessons learned from successful interventions for criminal desistance and gang disengagement, which can be useful to inform programmes aimed at reducing support for violent extremism. These strategies may include fostering positive social connections and addressing underlying grievances that drive radicalization. Experts also cautioned against overgeneralizing the role of age, as most young people do not engage in violent extremism and focusing on age alone does little to help identify the minority who do. Similarly, it is difficult to develop formal educational material that acts as a catch-all, even within a specific age group. Gender-sensitive and explicit awareness must be embedded into all formal educational approaches to media and information literacy in the context of P/CVERLT. The variation in maturity and experience can differ vastly within a classroom or group of peers. Once again, experts suggested process- and method-focused curricula with practical tools, in conjunction with tailored approaches suited to age, maturity and experience of young audiences.

44 YEF, *Children, Violence and Vulnerability 2024, Report 2* (2024), https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CVV24_R2_Online.pdf

45 Shannon Zimmerman, Luisa Ryan, and David Duriesmith, *Recognizing the Violent Extremist Ideology of 'Incels'* (Washington, DC: Women In International Security, 2018); Gavin Hart and Antoinette R. Huber, *Five Things We Need to Learn About Incel Extremism: Issues, Challenges and Avenues for Fresh Research*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2023),: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2195067

5.4 ADDRESSING MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY GAPS

Experts interviewed for this policy brief indicate that there are significant gaps in media and information literacy. For instance, on average, only 8.7 per cent of students in OECD countries have the ability to distinguish fact from opinion, a cornerstone of digital literacy.[46] Furthermore, only 2 per cent of children demonstrate the critical literacy skills necessary to discern whether an online news story is real or fake.[47] Within the European Union, 15 per cent of young people are considered to lack adequate digital skills, and 42 per cent believe that critical thinking, media and democracy skills are not taught enough.[48]

These statistics reflect a lack of systemic, formal educational approaches to challenging violent extremism online, according to experts. While internet safety is a well-established topic in all regions and non-formal educational programmes are delivered by civil society organizations, though inconsistently, formal curricula on media and information literacy that can effectively tackle local expressions and transnational patterns of violent extremism are often yet to be developed.

The barriers to addressing these challenges include:

Outdated teaching methods and curricula

Education systems across Europe have been slow to adapt to the digital age. In South-Eastern Europe, for example, many teaching methods rely on rote memorization, i.e. a learning process that involves repeating information until it is remembered verbatim, usually without focusing on its meaning or context, instead of fostering critical or analytical thinking skills.[49] This has resulted in low levels of media and information literacy, including digital literacy, across all age groups.

Experts interviewed for this policy brief highlighted that governments and policymakers can be reluctant to discuss controversial, sensitive or critical topics, particularly in relation to VERLT. This potentially limits the methods and materials used by teachers — ranging from a complete lack of resources to the omission of important topics deemed too sensitive — and restricts the development of curricula.

46 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *21st Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World*, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021), https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2021/05/21st-century-readers_26f2b462/a83d84cb-en.pdf

47 Josh Phillips, Cooper Gatewood, and Lucie Parker, *Be Internet Legends and Be Internet Citizens: Impact Report* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Be-Internet-Legends-and-Citizens-digital-report.pdf

48 OSCE. (2024). *Strengthening Media and Information Literacy*.

49 Ibid.

Lack of knowledge about youth media use

Teachers and parents/carers often lack insight into the digital habits of young people and the operational dynamics of online environments.[50] Institutional capacities to counter disinformation are limited, as are teachers' abilities to address online pastoral issues or comprehend violent extremist tactics and techniques.

Insufficient resources

High-quality resources explicitly addressing online VERLT remain scarce.[51] The absence of robust digital citizenship resources exacerbates young people's vulnerabilities.

Challenges of securitization and free speech

The increasing securitization of education raises concerns about student freedoms of expression, thought, belief and religion, as well as the right to privacy. For instance, the fear of surveillance or being treated as suspects may discourage open dialogue among students. Balancing free speech and safeguarding obligations is not straightforward, and the views of governments can differ significantly from those of NGOs, educators or youth themselves.

Critical thinking limitations

Critical thinking is important for countering violent extremist narratives, but it is insufficient on its own. This is especially true when grievances over poverty, injustice and discrimination are real and resonate with youth. Relevant programmes will equally need to address cognitive, emotional and social elements addressing belonging and trust. The concept of critical thinking can be used by conspiracy theorists to challenge or attack evidence-based discourse. Similarly, critical religious education must carefully navigate interpretations of sacred texts, balancing respect for beliefs and traditions with the promotion of equality, tolerance and non-discrimination.

Monitoring and evaluation challenges

It is difficult to review and evaluate what works in P/CVERLT and media and information literacy, as baselines are subjective and complex. However, the experts consulted for this policy brief discussed the possibility of conducting research and evaluations to assess academic engagement, civic attitudes, social and emotional skills, and moral reasoning through small-scale pilot studies that could then be scaled up. Initiatives such as the EU-wide Project INDEED,[52] which brings expertise on P/CVERLT to develop evaluative

50 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *PISA High Performing Systems for Tomorrow: Education for Human Flourishing, 57th Meeting of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Governing Board, 17–19 April 2024* (OECD, 2024), https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/pisa-high-performing-systems-for-tomorrow-hpst.html

51 Louis Reynolds and Ralph Scott, Digital Citizens: *Countering Extremism Online* (London: Demos, 2016), https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Digital-Citizenship-web-1.pdf

52 For more information see: *Evidence Based Model for Evaluation of Radicalisation Prevention and Mitigation*, INDEED Project, https://www.indeedproject.eu

good practices, may also be applicable to media and information literacy in the context of formal education. In educational settings and for parents/carers, the practical challenges may mean that time and logistical constraints make it difficult to deliver such programmes consistently.





6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 PROACTIVE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Formal educational programmes should proactively engage young people as active partners to reduce VERLT through media and information literacy. The development of human rights-centred and effective curricula requires meeting young people where they are, enabling them to navigate online spaces safely and develop resilience to exploitative VERLT content and actors.

Experts interviewed for this policy brief noted that empowerment initiatives should be context-specific and informed by a deep understanding of local drivers of radicalization, youth-specific vulnerabilities and the mechanisms of previously successful interventions with regards to addressing VERLT online. In the context of formal education and parental engagement, a sensitive youth-focused approach can support the development of engaging and impactful curricula for media and information literacy.

Beyond media and information literacy, the wider challenge is equipping young people and communities with a healthy approach to online social spaces that respects free speech, as a precursor to what may be termed digital citizenship. Formal education and engagement with parents/carers are crucial elements of this effort.

6.2 CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

Addressing the above-mentioned gaps requires a holistic approach that encompasses updated teaching methods, targeted resource development and robust evaluation frameworks that can effectively measure impact. It also requires a multifaceted approach. Five key directions must guide these efforts:

ENSURING A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH

Research into P/CVERLT highlights the effectiveness of embedding interventions within a school's culture, as well as the need for an integrated approach that includes students, teachers and parents/carers as resources to build environments that allow for sharing different perspectives and opinions through discussion to build analytical skills and foster inclusion and community.[53]

53 Claudia Lenz, *"Skolens bidrag til forebygging av radikalisering og voldelig ekstremisme," Bedre Skole* 4/2020 (2021), https://utdanningsforskning.no/artikler/2021/skolens-bidrag-til-forebygging-av-radikalisering-og-voldelig-ekstremisme/

The suitability and skills of individual teachers are also important factors. According to an expert interviewed for this policy brief, there appears to be a generational gap among educators. Younger teachers are often more familiar with current trends and digital developments. As they are typically closer in age to their students, many have grown up with the internet and possess stronger media literacy skills. These teachers tend to be highly engaged and often dedicate personal time to staying informed. This includes integrating strategies that foster critical thinking. In contrast, older teachers may be less familiar with digital media, sometimes even less than parents/carers.

FOCUSING ON WIDER COMMUNITY, BEYOND SCHOOL

Most existing P/CVERLT programmes focus on high school students and teachers, leaving a gap in the coverage of other demographics with low digital literacy, including primary school age children (roughly ages 5–11) and college students, as well as adults/parents/carers. Community-wide initiatives are essential, as informal leaders and older generations play a significant role in P/CVERLT yet are often less digitally savvy. Only 9 per cent of Europeans across 11 countries participated in digital literacy training, despite 58 per cent expressing interest.[54] Collaborative training sessions involving parents/carers and even grandparents can foster mutual understanding and enhance strategies in both school and home environments. This community approach could be integrated into formal educational programmes.

INVOLVING A WIDE RANGE OF ACTORS

P/CVERLT programmes are more sustainable when diverse stakeholders are engaged. OSCE consultations and collaboration with a wide range of experts over many years have highlighted the importance of engaging with local law enforcement, religious leaders, community actors and social workers.[55] Actors formally involved in violent extremism radicalization and recruitment, for example, can provide valuable insights into grooming tactics and online enticement. Partnerships with tech companies are also crucial.

EXPANDING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Critical thinking training should be integrated into curricula alongside robust political education and the teaching of democratic principles. The London School of Economics'

54 Ipsos MORI, *Online Media Literacy: Across the World, Demand for Training Is Going Unmet* (2021), https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/online-media-literacy-across-world-demand-training-going-unmet

55 OSCE, *The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism*, 2019; OSCE, *Understanding Referral Mechanisms in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism* (Vienna: OSCE Secretariat, 2019), https://www.osce.org/secretariat/418274

Rapid Evidence Assessment[56] for Ofcom identifies three effective media and information literacy skills:

1. Critical thinking, including questioning the origins of information;
2. Evaluation strategies, such as reflecting on audience biases;
3. Knowledge of how the news and media industry operate.

Experts have underlined the need to combine these approaches with cognitive, emotional and social elements, also addressing belonging and trust. This leads to approaches that go beyond simply promoting digital skills.

This comprehensive approach would ensure students are equipped to navigate complex digital environments.

A RIGHTS-BASED FRAMEWORK

Human rights education has proven effective in preventing conflict and fostering behavioural change.[57] It goes beyond theoretical understanding of conventions like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, aiming to incorporate human rights principles into daily practice. Programmes such as the United Nation's Children's Fund's "Rights Respecting Schools Award" demonstrate how educating students about their rights — to dignity, participation and freedom from harm — can encourage respect for others' rights. Teachers also learn how to uphold their students' right to respectful treatment.[58]

A rights-based framework enables students to engage critically when exposed to violence and violent extremism, guided by universal values such as freedom from harm and the right to life. Within free speech debates, a rights-based education framework should ensure that all forms of hate speech, whether religious or otherwise, are addressed equitably. The Global Coalition for Digital Safety's toolkit for Digital Safety Design Interventions provides practical guidance for translating human rights into digital contexts, empowering young people to become informed agents of change.[59]

56 Lee Edwards, Mariya Stoilova, Nick Anstead, Andra Fry, Gail El Halaby, and Matthew Smith, *Rapid Evidence Assessment on Online Misinformation and Media Literacy: Final Report for Ofcom* (London: Ofcom, 9 June 2021), https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/online-research/online-nation/2021/rea-online-misinformation.pdf?v=326529

57 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), "Student Study Shows Human Rights Education Helps Conflict Prevention," OHCHR, August 11, 2021, https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/08/student-study-shows-human-rights-education-helps-conflict-prevention

58 UNICEF, *About the Rights Respecting Schools Award*, https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/the-rrsa/about-the-rrsa/

59 For more information, see Toolkit for Digital Safety Design Interventions & Innovations: Typology of Online Harms, World Economic Forum, August 4, 2023, https://initiatives.weforum.org/global-coalition-for-digital-safety/interventions-innovations

6.3 HOW CAN PARENTS/CARERS BE BETTER ENGAGED IN THIS WORK?

Parents/carers should play an integral role in tackling the challenges related to the impact of violent extremist content online on children and youth, and that interventions should be done in partnership with parents/carers wherever possible. Typical recommendations from experts include using parental controls on electronic equipment with access to media, engaging children in conversations about their online activities and showing interest in how they choose friends online and which platforms they use.[60]

However, many children may resist parental controls and avoid sharing information about their digital lives with their parents/carers. The Southern Poverty Law Center stresses the importance of parents/carers directly engaging in discussions with their children about how content may be used for propaganda and manipulation purposes in order to encourage critical thinking.[61]

Parents/carers are increasingly recognized as allies in addressing harms associated with gaming platforms and similar to educational institutions and mental health professionals, parents/carers are considered vital in combating hate and extremism rooted in these environments.[62] Raising awareness among families about gaming-related risks and facilitating healthy engagement in gaming spaces is an important step,[63] but requires sufficient subcultural knowledge in order to adequately support families.

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP AMONG PARENTS/CARERS

The limited knowledge parents/carers have about the online world and its regulatory mechanisms is a significant issue. In some cases, the spread of violent extremist material on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram has led some parents/carers to delete their

60 UK Department for Education, Educate Against Hate, Top tips to help parents discuss radicalisation and extremism with young people, 2023, https://educateagainsthate.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/EAH_Parents_Top-Tips_English_AW_Interactive-ACCESSIBLE4.pdf

61 Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Polarization and Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL), *Building Resilience & Confronting Risk: A Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization* (Montgomery, AL: SPLC, 2022), https://www.splcenter.org/resources/guides/peril-guide-online-youth-radicalization/

62 Linda Schlegel and Amarnath Amarasingam, *Examining the Intersection Between Gaming and Violent Extremism* (United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism/United Nations Counter Terrorism Centre, 2022), https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/default/files/221005_research_launch_on_gaming_ve.pdf

63 Linda Schlegel, Extremists' Use of Gaming (Adjacent) *Platforms: Insights Regarding Primary and Secondary Prevention Measures* (Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN] Practitioners, 21 September 2021), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ec83092-d946-45d8-a3d7-6e790d5dbf4e_en?filename=ran_extremists_use_gaming_platforms_082021_en.pdf

children's social media apps.[64] While this response may be understandable, it is not a long-term solution. Sustainable digital, media and information literacy training for parents/carers and children is essential.

Studies have also highlighted the need for parents/carers to be able to identify warning signs, including fixation on conspiracy theories like the "great replacement" or advocacy for violent insurrection.[65] They also underlined that the effectiveness of educating young people about the risks they may face online depends on the parents/carers' own understanding of these issues.

STRENGTHENING SCHOOL-HOME INTEGRATION

To effectively counter VERLT online, schools and parents/carers must work collaboratively. While resources often target parents/carers directly, fewer emphasize the integration of their efforts in school strategies. When students express VERLT-related views, early intervention through fostering dialogue with families without punitive measures can be effective.[66] Schools can support this by communicating safeguarding protocols and providing parents/carers with clear information about subsequent procedures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENT-SCHOOL COLLABORATION

To better integrate parents/carers into educational efforts on P/CVERLT, the following activities could be undertaken:

- **Joint training sessions:** organize collaborative sessions for parents/carers and educators, facilitated by external experts.
- **Parent-led discussion groups:** establish forums where parents/carers can share insights and receive guidance from schools and each other.
- **Student-led projects:** encourage young people to lead community education initiatives on topics like digital safety and countering VERLT.
- **Resource development:** co-create materials such as information packs, slides and presentations.

64 Commonwealth Centre of Connected Learning Foundation, *Combatting Extremism through Digital Literacy: Empowering Young Minds in the Digital Age* (2023). https://www.3cl.org/combating-extremism-through-digital-literacy-empowering-young-minds-in-the-digital-age/

65 Cassie Miller and Rachel Carroll Rivas, *The Year in Hate & Extremism 2021* (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021) https://www.splcenter.org/resources/guides/year-hate-extremism-2021/

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- **Advocacy:** collaborate with parents/carers to engage tech companies and policy-makers in addressing harmful online content.

By positioning parents/carers as active contributors rather than passive recipients, these strategies can strengthen efforts to address online VERLT and ensure a safer digital environment for young people and children.





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