Conference Note: The Challenges of Researching Extremism Today

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Abstract

On June 22, 2021, the DRIVE (**D**etermining multilevel-led causes and testing intervention designs to **R**educe radicalisation, extrem**I**sm and political **V**iolence in North-Western **E**urope through social inclusion) Horizon 2020 launch event was the occasion for five scholars who specialise in violent extremism and political violence to address the challenges of researching extremism today, both online and offline. The panellists discussed the need for a more inclusive and intersectional research landscape. Theories and methods for researching extremism were discussed alongside the responsibilities of researchers, including how to avoid the pitfalls of securitization and stigmatization. This conference note sums up the key takeaways discussed by the panellists.

Introduction

DRIVE (**D**etermining multilevel-led causes and testing intervention designs to **R**educe radicalisation, extrem**I**sm and political **V**iolence in North-Western **E**urope through social inclusion) is a research project funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Actions programme. It brings together six universities from across North-Western Europe and two civil society organisations to try and understand the interplay between social exclusion and radicalisation. The DRIVE launch event was the occasion for five academics to engage with a discussion on the challenges of researching extremism today. A total of 130 participants tuned in to attend this online event in which Professor Tahir Abbas (Leiden University), Dr Cathrine Thorleifsson (University of Oslo), Dr Joel Busher (Coventry University), Dr Jennifer Philippa Eggert (University of Warwick & Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities) and Dr Chris Allen (University of Leicester) shared their

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research insights in an interactive setting. This discussion was moderated by Dr Anouk de Koning (Leiden University) and organised by the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University. This conference note summarises the crucial insights for researchers and practitioners in the fields of radicalisation, political violence and extremism and suggests key takeaways for future research in this domain.

Researching online extremism

Cathrine Thorleifsson addressed the challenges of researching online extremism in the digital age, which has created new spaces for extremist groups to spread their ideas quickly and anonymously online. At the same time, these spaces provide new opportunities for individuals to form communities. As some extremist movements are born online, digital spheres represent an important space where radicalisation processes unfold (Guhl & Davey, 2020).

Current research lacks bridges between online and offline spheres, which makes it difficult to grasp the extent to which these two spaces intertwine. Some offline grievances appear to be translated online and vice-versa – for instance, concerns about masculinity being under threat are often present in alt-right milieus. This phenomenon can be observed among specific groups such as so-called "involuntary celibate" (incels) communities (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020). While these grievances might appear both online and offline, they are not articulated in the same way. Cathrine Thorleifsson points out a need for investigating how interconnected online and offline extremisms are. Instead of focusing solely on one of the two, future research should simultaneously investigate both spheres, as well as who engages with them and how.

In practice, it is essential to consider the sense of belonging of individuals who radicalise online to understand how they become drawn to extremist ideas. People engaging with extremist content online might be interested in being part of a community of like-minded individuals (Simi & Futrell, 2006) who support and validate one another (Bowman-Grieve, 2013). Symbols borrowed from digital and gaming culture, such as memes, allow for the production of transnational artefacts that spread beyond local circles. These symbols participate in the creation of a common subculture (O'Malley, 2008), which reinforces the

Hannah Bieber: Conference Note: The Challenges of Researching Extremism Today

users' sense of belonging. Against this backdrop, the emotional dimension of online extremism also needs to be accounted for.

Researching online extremism also prompts ethical challenges. For instance, the question of the consent of the participants under observation and the protection of their identity needs to be taken into account when creating research designs. Protecting researchers is also important, with extremists often resorting to online harassment campaigns and trolls. Researchers can use tools such as the Voxpol privacy and security guidelines (Voxpol, n.d.), which provide advice to ensure their welfare when conducting online research on such groups.

To gain a better understanding of the interplay between online and offline extremism, future research will have to rethink traditional methods. Cathrine Thorleifsson suggests drawing from subfields such as digital ethnography and digital anthropology, which offer new methods and methodologies, challenge existing paradigms, and adapt to the new realities that come with the development of the digital world (Horst & Miller, 2012; Markham, 2013; Pink et al., 2015; Waltorp, 2020).

Gender and Intersectionality

Gender and intersectionality and how they relate to research on political violence and extremism were addressed by Jennifer Philippa Eggert.

Gender can be understood as a social construct that defines who individuals are but also how they are perceived and expected to behave. In the context of researching violent extremism, gender is under-researched and the rare contributions that explore this concept focus on women (e.g. T. J. Allen & Goodman, 2021; Bakker & de Leede, 2015; Blee & Linden, 2012; Farris, 2017; Huckerby, 2015; Saltman & Smith, 2015). Against this backdrop, women are often considered as the only ones concerned by gender norms, although these norms also affect men. To bridge this gap, Jennifer Philippa Eggert recommends drawing from the field of critical masculinities studies (Connell, 1995). She also points out that beyond adopting a mere gender perspective, research on political violence needs to be more holistic and take into account ethnicity, race, class, religion and other ethnocultural factors.

In addition, gender plays a role on various levels when researching political violence and violent extremism. Politically violent groups often instrumentalise gender norms and stereotypes for recruitment and organisational purposes, but also for upholding their power structures. Examples of this phenomenon are how women are used in the propaganda and protests of far-right groups in Germany (Bitzan, 2017), or how females have engaged in organisations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS (Eggert 2016). On the other hand, little attention has been given to the way gender affects men's roles in extremist groups. As such, analysing politically violent groups from a gender perspective allows for a better understanding of how these groups work and organise.

When reflecting on gender in relation to research on extremist groups, it is also important to acknowledge that it affects engagement with these groups as a researcher. Gender norms and stereotypes can influence the ability to access and build trust with participants, sometimes in positive and other times in negative ways. Depending on factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age and religion, interviewing some groups and individuals might also have implications for the researchers' safety. Jennifer Philippa Eggert and Anouk de Koning encourage scholars to reflect on how they access data and respondents and why they can access them.

Finally, gender affects researchers and practitioners in their engagement with wider society. Recent contributions have attempted to provide a more intersectional approach to understanding violent extremism (Abu-Bakare, 2020; Snipes & Mudde, 2020), but these remain rare. Researchers' self-reflection is necessary to determine positionality, but institutions also have a responsibility to become more inclusive. For Jennifer Philippa Eggert, an intersectional approach to the topics of political violence also relies on the diversification of research environments such as academia, think tanks and events.

Theories and Practices to Research the Far Right

Research on extremism is conducted in a wide variety of fields, from history to science. But which theories are the most suitable when researching extremism? Joel Busher provided some

reflections to answer these questions, based on his latest edited book, *Researching the Far Right: Theory, Method and Practice* (Ashe et al., 2021).

When researching the far right, it is possible to focus on specific groups or on the mainstreaming of extremist ideas. These two aspects need to be addressed in order to understand both the ideological and tactical influence of the far right and the way it penetrates the popular landscape. As a consequence, the far right is a particularly broad movement that needs to be studied from various angles. Against this backdrop, three overarching theoretical frameworks are usually used to illustrate the dynamics facing research on the far right (Ashe et al., 2021).

The first is the social movement theory, which in recent years has served to understand the way extremist groups are organised (Della Porta, 2018; Gattinara & Pirro, 2019) but also how individuals are drawn to them (Assche et al., 2017; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Sageman, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2006). However, Joel Busher warns of the difficulties to grasp the specificities of newly emerging online and transnational groups with the tools provided by social movement theory.

The second theory is that of radicalisation, which draws its strength from a much wider literature. It is a field that has been heavily funded over the recent years. On top of being a contested theory (Bailey & Edwards, 2017; Schmid, 2013), it often resorts to security-oriented research, which can fail to account for the mainstreaming of extremist ideas.

Third, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) provides a theoretical framework that helps to understand how significant racism is in the political and cultural influence of far-right extremism. However, this theory does not yet provide the tools necessary to grasp the mobilisation processes of these groups.

Notwithstanding which theory researchers choose, Joel Busher advised the audience to be aware of their limitations. One of the main pitfalls that should be avoided is the creation of false equivalences between various groups – for instance between far right and Islamist extremist groups. Attempting to make research on extremism colour-blind might in the end contribute to normalizing movements such as the far right.

Hannah Bieber: Conference Note: The Challenges of Researching Extremism Today

Data Collection and Participant Observation

When collecting data on extremist groups, researchers often have the choice between two approaches. It is possible to adopt an externalist approach and study material that is publicly available – for instance, online content. Another approach, consists in accessing data by getting inside extremist groups – for instance, participant observation, a method that has both advantages and drawbacks, as Joel Busher and Chris Allen highlighted.

Blee (2007) argues that participant observation allows observing extremist groups from the inside, which helps to gain a better understanding of how they are organised and who their members are. Ultimately, this methodology allows for discovering new dimensions of extremist groups (Allen, 2015; Allen, 2019). Joel Busher and Chris Allen both stress that it also permits researchers to move beyond publicly available data and dig deeper into informal material that allows for a wider approach to understanding how extremism unfolds (Allen, 2019).

However, this method poses several challenges. Goodwin (2006) points out the difficulty some researchers encounter when trying to approach participants – especially activists of far-right groups. The safety of researchers also need to be taken into consideration (Blee, 2007), as they might be threatened by activists who can sometimes be hostile to their work (Blee, 1998). The intimidation of researchers across research sites highlights the importance of preserving scholars' welfare. A way of coping with these difficulties is to build support networks with other scholars who understand the implications of researching extremism and to develop safety protocols.

Additionally, researchers need to find a balance between their personal views and opinions and the data they are trying to collect, which might clash. At times, they may struggle when confronted with things that they feel uncomfortable hearing. This prompts the question of how researchers connect their experiences to what they do. Teitelbaum (2019) offers perspectives on the scholar-informant relationship and argues that it is immoral for researchers to side with their interviewees. Besides, one may argue that, as citizens, researchers have a responsibility and should promote values such as shared humanness.

Hannah Bieber: Conference Note: The Challenges of Researching Extremism Today

Extremism can also be a painful topic to study: one can be confronted with violent content which can make taking intellectual distance difficult. As such, there is a need for reflexivity, a process through which researchers need to address their relationship with the context of their research, the participants, and the data they gather (Corlett & Mavin, 2017). Epistemological and ontological reflection is also crucial for researchers, who should question what they know and how they know it, but also how they perceive and conceptualize their object of study (Abbas, 2006). Such self-reflection on the researchers' positionality also allows for more transparency.

Ethical Concerns & Positionality of Knowledge

Another challenge of researching extremism is that of ethical considerations and such as respecting the identity of participants or being aware of one's responsibilities towards respondents, their communities and the wider society when conducting this type of research. When resorting to methodologies such as participant observation, the decision to conduct overt or covert research – that is, whether to inform or not the respondents that they are being part of a study – is a sensitive topic. Falcone (2010, 270) warns about potential "ethical grey areas" when resorting to participant observation. There is no clear answer to this problem: researchers position themselves somewhere on a spectrum and have to decide to which extent they wish to be transparent with their research.

In addition, ethical considerations imply a responsibility towards the participants, the broader communities they belong to and the wider society. In practice, researchers should be mindful to protect their respondents, mitigate the risks of stigmatising specific communities, and not inflate narratives of risks that instigate fear among the general public. Engaging with communities sensitively must become a staple of research on extremism.

Finally, the position of the researchers within academia might also prompt ethical concerns, as there is a growing tendency to see critical research on extremism being accused to be 'activist research' (Standen, 2021), 'cultural Marxism' (Tuters, 2018) or 'islamo-gauchisme' (Ceaux et al., 2021). To navigate this criticism, researchers need to be transparent and responsible while conducting their studies. Challenging such accusations, which are

becoming more widespread in academia, governments, institutions and among some political groups, is crucial.

DRIVE is one of three Horizon 2020 research programmes that deal with radicalisation and the role of social inclusion. The insights gathered and shared at the workshop will benefit the DRIVE team, other research groups, researchers and practitioners in the field of extremism and political violence. The full recording of the event can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOB-bBwu1EQ.

Acknowledgements

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