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Conference Note: Offline Exclusion, Online Inclusion?

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Abstract
On April 14, 2022, the DRIVE project *(Determining multilevel-led causes and testing intervention designs to reduce radicalisation, extremism and political violence in North-Western Europe through social inclusion)* workshop was an opportunity for academics specialising in violent extremism to discuss the role of online spaces, such as social media platforms, in radicalisation towards extremist attitudes. Academics Dr Bharath Ganesh (University of Groningen), Dr Ashton Kingdon (University of Southampton), and Dr Eviane Leidig (Tilburg University) shared their insights during this workshop. These three scholars explored questions about the disconnect between online and offline worlds in relation to questions on extremism. The consideration of what exclusion in the offline world means for inclusion in the online world is particularly important, as it allows us to track how issues in the offline world can create impacts in the online world, such as violence – and vice versa. Therefore, this conference note explores the relationship between offline and online experiences of exclusion, and how these interact. This conference note sums up the key takeaways of this workshop for researchers and practitioners who work within the fields of radicalisation and violent extremism.

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Introduction

DRIVE (*Determining multilevel-led causes and testing intervention designs to reduce radicalisation, extremism and political violence in North-Western Europe through social inclusion*) is a research project funded by the European Union Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Actions programme (*DRIVE: Resisting Radicalisation Through Inclusion*). It brings together six universities from across North-Western Europe and two civil society organisations to research the interplay between social exclusion and radicalisation in Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. By looking at this interplay, this research project will advise policymakers on how to take into account social inclusion without further alienating and marginalising communities when making policies on radicalisation.

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When looking at the interplay between social exclusion and radicalisation, this project considers that significant numbers of young people have expressed dissatisfaction with generational inequalities within European societies (*DRIVE: Resisting Radicalisation Through Inclusion*). This dissatisfaction can lead to frustration, anger, resentment, and disconnection – all factors that have been included in theories of political violence and societal polarisation (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019). This DRIVE workshop was an occasion for scholars to explore questions on the disconnect between online and offline worlds in relation to questions on extremism. Considering what social exclusion in the offline world means for inclusion in the online world is particularly important, as it allows us to understand how issues in the offline world can create impacts in the online world, and vice versa.

Participants tuned in online and also came in-person to attend this hybrid event at the Institute of Security and Global Affairs of Leiden University, in which Dr Bharath Ganesh (University of Groningen), Dr Ashton Kingdon (University of Southampton), and Dr Eviane Leidig (Tilburg University) shared their research insights in an interactive setting. The event was moderated by Prof. Tahir Abbas (Leiden University) and organised by the DRIVE project team in the Netherlands. The author made observations and notes during the workshop on which this conference note is based. In addition, the speakers at the conference provided feedback on the publication, to ensure that their narration was interpreted correctly. This conference note summarises the insights and suggests key takeaways for researchers and practitioners who work within the fields of radicalisation and violent extremism.

Exclusion and inclusion

Firstly, this paper will discuss how concepts of exclusion and inclusion are understood and used by the author. These concepts are contrapuntal, acting in relation to each other (Rawal, 2008). Therefore, the meaning, as understood by the author, of these concepts will be addressed concurrently.

In this conference note, social exclusion is defined as "the process through which individuals or groups are wholly or partially excluded from full participation in the society within which they live" (Rawal, 2008, 164). This process of exclusion can be seen as a process of "othering" in which a dominant in-group (us) constructs an out-group (them) by

stigmatising difference (Staszak, 2008). A group can never be entirely inclusive and will therefore always exclude something (Leistle, 2015). The constructed "them" can be seen as a process of exclusion, and the constructed "us" can be seen as a process of inclusion. Such practices have been linked as a core facet in the construction of "extremism" (Hellyer & Grossman, 2019). Therefore, the processes of exclusion and inclusion are intertwined with each other and, in turn, with the discussion on "extremism".

In relation to the definition of social exclusion, online inclusion is seen as being part of a (online) community in this conference note. There is often considered to be a natural tendency to want to be part of a community (Notley, 2009). As part of a community, possibilities are created, whilst outside of a community, survival is more likely to face greater barriers (Notley, 2009). The development of the internet and digital technologies has facilitated online interactions of people with shared interests, allowing for the creation of communities over greater stretchers of space (Wilson & Peterson, 2002). Individuals in such online communities may not know each other, but share the idea of a common belonging. Therefore, they can potentially be classed as a form of an imagined community (Anderson, 2016). These constructed online communities exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve a variety of purposes (Wilson & Peterson, 2002).

These definitional discussions are not definitive and there are issues with their usage. For instance, recent research has questioned the ontological credibility of drawing a distinction between online and offline worlds, within the context of understanding contemporary violence (Whittaker, 2022). Because of this distinction, the internet and the "real" world are often treated as two separate worlds which operate as independent spheres – something considered to be a "false dichotomy" by Valentini, Lorusso and Stephan, who suggest that one should consider online and offline worlds in an integrated way (Valentini et al., 2020). They suggest that we should no longer examine them as being separate entities, but rather as hybrid environments that incorporate elements from individuals' online and offline experiences, which they refer to as "onlife" spaces. This paper, however, considers the terms online and offline to be important in the context of this particular paper, as they are used to create a holistic understanding of how social exclusion – a term primarily applied in an offline context – has significant implications for online interactions (Abbas et al., 2022). The following sections explore this further, the first focussing on White victimhood in online

communities, the second on the role of online forums in contemporary articulations of fascism, and the final examining extremism mainstream social media platforms that intersect with aspects of gender. These three discussions are then drawn together to provide findings on how we can use concepts of social exclusion and inclusion when engaging with research into extremism online.

Synthetic victimhood and communities

During the discussion, Dr Bharath Ganesh addressed the construction of White victimhood (White thymos), which seeks recognition for "injustice" and is usually framed through racist conspiracies (Ganesh, 2020). The primary social discourse in the construction of White victimhood consists of this idea of white Europeans as marginalised and facing the most oppression in Europe. This social discourse contradicts the position they are actually enjoying, namely a certain dominance within European societies. Therefore, this discourse is a specific kind of racial construction.

Such social discourse is used by members of the far right to frame themselves as being part of a certain community. A community is created by the way in which we position ourselves within a community and how we construct boundaries to create divisions between different communities (Brubaker, 2004). Within these communities, there are shared norms, values, and moral evaluations that construct a collective identification and the production of boundaries (Amit & Rapport, 2002). Members of the far right frame themselves as being members of this marginalised group, which gives them the sense of being excluded. This sense of social exclusion allows them to more successfully develop the concept of a community. This idea of being part of this marginalised social community is reinforced because members translate events that happen in their everyday lives using a victim lens, within their use of social media.

In the far right in European and settler-colonial states, it is White men within those milieus who frame themselves as threatened by the recognition of the equality and dignity of racial and sexual minorities. Therefore, they are focused on the retention of their dominance over other groups (Ganesh, 2020). Dr Bharath Ganesh stated that when looking at the far right, we are not looking at an excluded group. Instead, we are looking at backlash politics or

revanchism: a movement that wants the return of their dominance and superiority, which democracy has been eroding.

Finally, Dr Bharath Ganesh suggested that a key dynamic is the exclusiveness of the public spaces that humans inhabit and the inclusiveness of digital communication. This is because the public maintains injunctions against taboo expression and ostracisation of those who violate them. White supremacist speech is rendered as taboo and therefore excluded in public spaces. Consequently, White supremacist speech is housed and nurtured by the inclusiveness of digital communication.

The power of forums

Dr Ashton Kingdon has been conducting research into platforms such as the Fascist Forge forum. Examining web 2.0, the new wave of social media platforms and the advancements in technology, she explores the ways in which extremists use these social media platforms. Moreover, she looks at Web 1.0, which is often overlooked in academic studies of contemporary extremism. She states that it is important to remember that extremists communicate via these particular platforms and that these platforms remain as dangerous incubators.

Dr Ashton Kingdon stated that when looking at motivating factors for people to join these kinds of platforms, members of the Fascist Forge platform generally thought they could not express their views they wanted in their "normal" communities, both online and offline. This is because these views are seen as extreme. Therefore, being able to express those views among likeminded people is one of the key reasons why these members wanted to join such a platform.

However, people who are generally on these traditional White supremacist platforms have not been radicalised online. Rather, their ideological views have generationally been developed and reinforced through familial interaction. Such individuals tended to have had these views passed down to them by family members that exist beyond the traditional White supremacist platforms. Therefore, these represent deeply embedded views that have not been influenced by socio-political issues or technological advancements. In conclusion, the individuals studied by Dr Kingdon were found to have had these views their entire lives and

have not been radicalised by an algorithm or misinformation. Technology is thus redundant in their radicalisation processes, yet remains a key part of their communication strategies.

Gendered dynamics

Dr Eviane Leidig explored how far-right female influencers use social media to recruit audiences using mainstream social media platforms. In the present day, social media and alternative media have opened up new avenues for propaganda, recruitment, radicalisation, as well as community building. Instead of making use of the dark web and closed social media platforms, such far-right female influencers spread their message on mainstream platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter to recruit followers and build audiences for the movement. These women have several key roles such as recruiters, propagandists, organisers, and fundraisers.

On these mainstream platforms these influencers share similar backgrounds, and frequently attribute their unhappiness to feminism. They use networked intimacy techniques such as relatability, accessibility, authenticity, and responsiveness to connect with their audience. Common for these influencers is the loss of social support (family and friends), but this is seen as worthwhile and courageous. Ultimately, narratives of authenticity mask a hateful ideology.

In conclusion, mainstream platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, are ideal for visuality and offer opportunities for influencers to reach a wide audience. Far-right women legitimise and normalise the movement by presenting it through subtle framing and through content that is assumed to be non-political. Dr Eviane Leidig stated that this effect should be taken seriously in the drivers of radicalisation, recruitment, and propaganda. Looking at the impact of far-right women on producing dominant narratives is crucial in developing effective interventions. Interventions, for instance, often overlook the importance of gender dynamics in shaping an individual's worldview (Pearson et al., 2020; White, 2023).

Discussion

This discussion considers how factors linked to social exclusion lead to individuals engaging with the far right in offline and online communities. Dr Bharath Ganesh stated that exclusion is understood by some on the far right as the perceived loss of dominance. However, online spaces have become profitable because they can, in some instances, act as places for people to identify as suppressed groups and become part of a community. In addition, Dr Ashton Kingdon stated that people are attracted to these online communities because the propaganda they receive offers them something that they perceive as lacking in their offline worlds. Otherwise, they would not have started looking for virtual communities. Moreover, Dr Eviane Leidig stated that we should keep in mind that there exists a false dichotomy between online and offline spaces. This dichotomy makes online spaces something separate from offline spaces. However, we should be wary in looking at these spaces as separate spheres, and rather consider them highly intertwined.

According to Dr Ashton Kingdon, technology has created communities where people can more easily express their extreme views. In addition, Dr Eviane Leidig explained that mainstream platforms are constantly looking for ways to detect the expression of these extreme views. She stated that countering the far right and the views they express online means working with a platform governance framework, addressing multi-stakeholder agendas and recognising blind spots in current approaches. In this context, platform governance can be explained as a form of media governance, characterised by self-regulation, informal mechanisms, and multi-stakeholder initiatives as a way to shape the behaviour of firms (Gorwa, 2019). Dr Bharath Ganesh also mentioned that less emphasis should be placed on content and more on networks, because algorithms cannot always detect if, for example, a picture can be described as certain extreme content.

The three scholars also considered the relevant ethics of doing such online research. Dr Ashton Kingdon mentioned that she can observe, but not interact when doing research online. In addition, Dr Eviane Leidig mentioned how she is constantly reflecting on her own position within her research and trying to think about how it affects the way in which she analyses her data. Moreover, Dr Bharath Ganesh stated that we should be careful when quoting online content, as we should be aware that there is always the risk that people can put

the quote in Google and find the person or the account that made the content. Therefore, we must be careful when gathering online data around extremism, as recent research in this field has emphasised (Conway, n.d.). An important point that Dr Bharath Ganesh made in relation to doing online research is that a discussion about how platforms are stopping academics from collecting data needs to take place within academia.

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