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## **Online Radicalisation: How Social Media, Global Conflicts, and Religious Content Create Distorted Narratives**

*By Noor Huda Ismail*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The rapid spread of extremist ideologies through social media, combined with global conflicts and the manipulation of religious content, plays a significant role in online radicalisation. The emotional amplification of conflicts and the distortion of religious teachings underscore the urgent need for stronger social media regulation, enhanced digital literacy, and access to authentic religious guidance. To effectively combat radicalisation, a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach is essential to protect individuals and societies from the harmful effects of extremist ideologies in the digital age.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In November 2024, three Singaporeans, influenced by online radicalisation, were detained under the Internal Security Act for attempting to engage in armed violence overseas. Unlike the usual recruitment methods, they were self-radicalised through digital content, particularly those related to the Israel-Hamas conflict.

This incident underscores the growing role social media plays in the spread of extremist ideologies, where radicalisation occurs rapidly through videos, memes, and encrypted messages. The digital age accelerates radicalisation, often making it difficult to detect until violent actions ensue.

So, what makes the digital age uniquely dangerous in terms of radicalisation? How do global conflicts like that between Israel and Hamas contribute to this trend? And, most importantly, how is religious content being distorted to fuel extremism in this age of instant communication?

## The 4N Framework

The 4N Framework helps us to understand the connection between social media, ongoing conflicts, and online radicalisation. It suggests that radicalisation is closely tied to four interrelated elements: Needs, Networks, Narratives and Naturalisation. [This framework is informed by Ariel Kruglanski's 3N model \(2019\).](#)

### *Needs*

At the heart of radicalisation is the human desire for meaning and purpose. In times of personal crisis, individuals may turn to radical ideologies that promise clarity and a sense of belonging, often framed through religious or ideological lenses. Religion, for many, offers validation and a clear worldview. When people feel marginalised or disconnected, they may become susceptible to radical ideologies that promise to fulfil these existential needs, providing them a sense of purpose and belonging.

### *Networks*

Social media networks play a pivotal role in the radicalisation process. Platforms allow individuals to connect with like-minded people, discuss global conflicts, and consume extremist content. These online communities amplify feelings of solidarity and emotional attachment, often framing global conflicts as struggles for justice or religious duty. Extremists leverage these networks to spread messages that resonate with the individual's emotional needs, reinforcing the ideology of violence.

### *Narratives*

Extremists craft compelling narratives that frame the world as divided into good versus evil, with the oppressed – usually a specific religious or ethnic group – needing to be defended. Social media amplifies these narratives, making them more persuasive and immediate. Radical narratives present violent action as a moral duty, particularly when framed as part of a religious or ideological cause. The narrative of defending the oppressed becomes a powerful motivator, especially for individuals who feel isolated or disconnected from mainstream society.

### *Naturalisation or "Going Native"*

Naturalisation, or "going native," refers to the psychological process whereby individuals independently adopt extremist ideologies through repeated exposure to online content. Over time, these ideas become ingrained in their identity, making the ideology feel like an intrinsic part of who they are. This process is particularly dangerous because it personalises otherwise abstract conflicts. When individuals internalise these ideologies, they perceive the struggles of others as their own, prompting them to take extreme measures to defend what they now see as a personal cause.

Social media is a powerful catalyst in this process. By leveraging algorithms and targeted content, it can immerse individuals in an echo chamber of extremist material, heightening their emotional engagement and creating a false sense of intimacy with the ideology. Global struggles are reframed as local and immediate threats, making

them feel as though they are part of a larger, righteous battle. This digital ecosystem not only normalises extremist beliefs but also transforms passive observers into active participants, ready to act on behalf of the cause.

### **Imagined Solidarity: The Globalisation of Grievances**

One powerful mechanism driving online radicalisation is “imagined solidarity” – the emotional connection individuals form with distant causes through social media. This global sense of unity makes people feel personally invested in conflicts from which they are physically removed. The Israel-Hamas conflict, for example, despite its geographical distance, becomes deeply personal to many through social media, creating an emotional tie between individuals and the cause.

However, it is crucial to recognise that the Israel-Palestinian conflict is primarily a political and territorial issue, not only a religious one. Empathy for the suffering of Palestinians is not to be confused with endorsement of extremist ideologies. Social media often distorts the nature of this conflict, amplifying political grievances into emotional fuel for radical narratives.

The global nature of social media fosters naturalisation or “going native”, where individuals feel that their identity is deeply intertwined with the causes they support. This emotional investment pushes individuals to internalise conflicts as their own, leading them toward extreme actions, as seen in the case of the Singaporean detainees.

### **Religious Content: A Double-Edged Sword**

Religious texts themselves are not problematic, but extremists manipulate interpretations to justify violence. The Internet amplifies this distortion, giving radical preachers a wide audience, including individuals who may be seeking spiritual guidance but are isolated or vulnerable.

In the case of the Singaporean detainees, two of the men sought religious knowledge but found themselves drawn into radical ideologies. Extremists often exploit individuals' spiritual quests, offering simple answers to complex questions and framing violence as a divine duty.

Combatting this requires promoting religious literacy, ensuring that individuals are exposed to authentic religious teachings emphasising peace, tolerance, and moderation, and countering the distorted interpretations often found online, which misrepresent the true spirit of many religious traditions.

### **The Emotional Amplification of Conflict**

Social media does not merely spread information – it amplifies emotions like anger, resentment, and fear, which extremists use to manipulate individuals. Conflicts like the Israel-Hamas war are often portrayed as cosmic battles between good and evil, deepening emotional divides. The “us versus them” mentality fuelled by social media can foster interfaith tensions and social polarisation, particularly in multicultural societies like Singapore.

This emotional amplification is one of the main drivers of radicalisation. It transforms personal grievances and emotional experiences into a desire to take violent action, not just as a political response but as a deeply emotional one. The process contributes to the fragmentation of social cohesion, making radicalisation a broader societal issue, not just an individual one.

### **A Multi-Pronged Approach is Needed**

A comprehensive, multi-faceted strategy is required to effectively counter social media-driven radicalisation. Social media platforms must be held accountable for the spread of extremist content. This should be combined with digital literacy programmes, especially for youth, to help them critically assess and engage with online content.

Counternarratives promoting peace, tolerance, and social cohesion should be created and disseminated in the same spaces where extremist content thrives. Religious communities, in particular, have an important role in offering authentic teachings that counter radical ideologies.

In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) plays a key role in guiding individuals away from extremist beliefs, offering counselling and rehabilitation programmes. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS) also provides religious guidance that emphasises peace and moderation, helping to prevent the misuse of religious teachings for radical purposes.

Furthermore, the influence of foreign radical preachers should be addressed, as they often exploit digital platforms to spread extremist views and recruit individuals. Families and communities must remain vigilant and responsive to early signs of radicalisation, supporting those at risk.

### **Conclusion**

Radicalisation in the digital age is a complex and evolving challenge. The acceleration of global conflicts and the widespread dissemination of extremist content online make individuals more vulnerable to manipulation. However, stronger regulation, enhanced digital literacy, and community engagement can counter the spread of extremist ideologies.

A comprehensive and proactive approach is necessary to protect individuals and communities from online radicalisation. This fight requires security measures and the creation of inclusive societies where individuals feel valued and connected.

This highlights the urgency for action at all levels of society, reinforcing the importance of social cohesion, community resilience, and protecting individuals from harmful influences. Through collective effort, we can mitigate the risks of radicalisation and promote lasting peace.

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