Listening to the Youth and Countering Online Narratives

Sabariah Hussin and Syed Huzaifah Alkaff

PONDER THE IMPROBABLE

RSiS | S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Listening to the Youth and Countering Online Narratives

By Sabariah Hussin and Syed Huzaifah Alkaff

SYNOPSIS

Online platforms and extremist content are often seen as the main causes of youth radicalisation in digital spaces. This commentary suggests that a deeper issue is how young people perceive recognition, credibility, and being taken seriously.

COMMENTARY

The recent case of a 14-year-old Singaporean who was issued an Internal Security Act (ISA) restriction order after recreating ISIS-style executions on the online platform Roblox has once again unsettled the public. However, this is not an isolated incident: In recent years, Singapore has seen several cases of youths becoming self-radicalised after consuming online extremist propaganda expressing intent to commit violence.

That young people can transition from online exposure to simulated executions and attack planning, even without operational capability, raises pressing questions about how digital environments, extremist narratives, and unresolved grievances intersect to create new forms of vulnerability.

Much public discussion has centred on platforms, algorithms, and online content. These factors matter. But focusing on them alone risks obscuring a more uncomfortable question: Why do some young people find extremist narratives emotionally persuasive in the first place?

While youth radicalisation has become a global issue across various ideological spectrums, the social conditions that make individuals vulnerable vary depending on the contexts. In an affluent and relatively stable society like Singapore, where public

education on terrorism and radicalisation is widespread, the continued occurrence of youth cases points to a different form of risk. The problem is not a lack of information, but how young people interpret, internalise, and emotionally respond to what they encounter online.

In many cases, the common thread is not just exposure to extremist material, but also a perception that one's frustrations, fears, or moral outrage are not taken seriously by mainstream institutions. This feeling of being dismissed or misunderstood can be intensified by personalised, always-on digital environments, where extreme narratives often seem more responsive and emotionally tuned than conventional authority figures.

This commentary argues that youth radicalisation should also be viewed through the lens of *epistemic injustice* – a failure to take young people seriously as knowers of their own experiences. Although epistemic injustice does not directly cause radicalisation, it can act as a risk amplifier, lowering resistance to extremist narratives once exposure occurs.

When Being Unheard Becomes a Vulnerability

Philosopher [Miranda Fricker](#) describes epistemic injustice as harm done to individuals in their capacity as knowers. Two forms are particularly relevant to youth.

Testimonial injustice happens when someone's words are given less credibility due to prejudice or assumption. For young people, this often takes familiar forms: experiences of discrimination dismissed as exaggeration, expressions of anger framed as immaturity, or moral concern treated as naïveté. Over time, repeated dismissal communicates a corrosive message that one's understanding of one's own life is unreliable.

Hermeneutical injustice runs deeper. It occurs when individuals lack the shared language or interpretive tools needed to make sense of their experiences. Adolescence and early adulthood are periods of intense identity formation, yet many young people find it hard to articulate feelings of humiliation, moral confusion, or loss in a rapidly changing social environment. When public discourse offers only individualised responses, such as "be resilient" or "focus on yourself", those seeking collective understanding are left without adequate suitable language.

Together, these experiences can produce an epistemic vacuum. Grievances seem real but are either not believed or cannot be properly expressed. This situation does not automatically lead to radicalisation, but it creates a vulnerability that extremist groups are skilled at exploiting.

How Extremist Narratives Fill the Gap

Extremist ideologies often serve more as systems of recognition than as coherent doctrines. Their initial appeal lies not in theology or strategy, but in validation.

For a young person who feels dismissed, the message is deceptively simple: *Your anger makes sense*. What society framed as oversensitivity is recast as insight. What was treated as confusion becomes evidence of awakening. In this way, extremist narratives restore credibility to those who felt stripped of it.

At the same time, these narratives offer ready-made explanations that resolve hermeneutical confusion. Personal frustrations are absorbed into grand stories of betrayal, decline, or existential threat. Feelings of powerlessness become proof of oppression, while identity anxiety is reframed as a moral struggle between "us" and "them". For young people seeking purpose, this narrative clarity can feel stabilising.

This dynamic is not unique to any single ideology. Whether religious, ethno-nationalist, or conspiratorial, the underlying process remains the same: recognition is exchanged for loyalty, and intellectual closure follows.

The Digital Environment as an Accelerator

Online platforms intensify these dynamics by reshaping how credibility is produced and rewarded. For young people already seeking validation, digital spaces provide immediate access to communities that appear to understand them. Emotional resonance often outweighs evidence, while rejection of mainstream authority becomes a marker of authenticity.

Algorithms reinforce this effect by amplifying grievance-based content and narrowing exposure to alternative interpretations. Over time, a parallel system of knowledge can emerge, where parents, teachers, journalists, and institutions are pre-emptively dismissed as biased or corrupt.

In gaming and meme-driven environments, violent symbolism can also become detached from real-world consequences. Transgressions are rewarded with attention or peer validation, while extremist imagery is normalised through repetition and irony. The recent cases reported in Singapore show how such dynamics can reach even younger audiences.

Why Youth Engagement Matters

If extremist movements succeed by providing recognition and clear narratives, prevention cannot depend solely on disruption. Content removal, monitoring, and legal measures are still necessary, but they address symptoms rather than underlying vulnerabilities.

This is where *youth engagement* becomes critical. Initiatives that prioritise mentorship, dialogue, and participation are important not because they directly challenge ideology, but because they rebuild credibility. They create spaces where young people can express grievances without being dismissed, and where difficult conversations can occur without immediate moral or disciplinary closure.

Effective youth engagement does not mean supporting harmful views. It means taking young people seriously enough to listen, question, and guide. Trusted adults

– teachers, community leaders, youth workers – play a key role, as do peer-led initiatives that model disagreement without exclusion. These efforts must also extend into digital spaces, where youth increasingly form identities and communities.

Listening as Prevention

Youth radicalisation is often regarded as a security issue, and in severe cases, it is. But it is also a failure in relationships. When young people repeatedly feel ignored or talked over, some will look for purpose elsewhere. Extremist groups understand this vulnerability well. They do not start by demanding violence; they begin by offering recognition.

Building resilience against radicalisation therefore requires more than just vigilance. It involves listening – early, consistently, and credibly. When young people are acknowledged without appearing being manipulated, the chance of their grievance turning to violence is greatly reduced.

Sabariah Hussin is an Associate Faculty with the Singapore University of Social Sciences and an alumnus of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. She is also a member of the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) Singapore. Syed Huzaifah Bin Othman Alkaff is an Associate Research Fellow of the Indonesia Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at RSIS.

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.