Introduction: Exploring societal resilience to online polarization and extremism

by Amy-Louise Watkin, Vivian Gerrand, and Maura Conway

Abstract
The seven articles in this special issue were selected from those delivered at a series of workshops undertaken by the European Commission H2020-funded Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRaVE) Project in 2020–2021. Understanding polarization and (violent) extremism as distinct, interlinked, phenomena, the collected articles ask how online platforms can be mobilised to disrupt and reframe ideologies underpinning polarising and extremist messaging. To what extent can social media platforms serve as critical resources that contribute to building pro-social resilience? And, how can we build on what has been effective so far in terms of building online resilience, including what else might social media platforms and their users do to enhance what has already been found to be effective?

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Introduction
Internet platforms and their special relationship to polarization and radicalization to (violent) extremism are the subject of a significant growing body of research. While there are now numerous studies on the intersection of social media, polarization and extremist (and even terrorist) recruitment processes, the question of what supports resistance to such processes remains poorly understood. To what extent can online environments enable resilience to polarization and radicalization to (violent) extremism? How might their operations support pro-social resilience; that is, resilience that is in the interests of democracy and the public good?

At a time in which human lives are more than ever lived online, this question has never been more urgent. Human futures are increasingly intertwined with Internet platforms and their governance, especially since the onset of the novel coronavirus pandemic. In addition to ushering in a new era of Internet dominance, COVID-19 has deepened existing inequalities, and with them vulnerabilities to new kinds of social
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This situation of crisis has been exploited by political opportunists, including conspiracists and extremists, who have had access to an unprecedented housebound, traumatized, and possibly newly unemployed, global audience.

This conducive environment of grievances caused by growing inequalities and lack of future orientation (often referred to as ‘push factors’) when combined with the affordances of Internet platforms, has hastened the targeted ‘sale’ of particular brands of social division. The appeal of these (‘pull factors’) may be in their offering of simple explanations or solutions to a highly complex set of problems or of ready-made scapegoats. Due to the intersectional nature of polarization and radicalization processes, building resistance or resilience to them requires an equally intersectional response.

Initiatives undertaken to date under the banner of countering violent extremism (CVE) have often been limited to messaging strategies. When this messaging is government-directed, it may work against resilience by inadvertently entrenching radicalization dynamics through the designation of particular cohorts as being ‘at risk’. As has been emphasized in the BraVE Project (of which this special issue is an output), resilience-building initiatives must take into account the range of micro, meso and macro factors influencing contemporary polarization and extremism, and work both at the level of messaging and the level of structural environment to mitigate them.

Review of the social support and digital life skills literature

Polarization, understood as the divergence of political attitudes to ideological extremes, affects large segments of a community or of a society (Conway, *et al.* 2020). This divergence can become more pronounced in a context of extended time spent in closed groups and exposure to disinformation (Gerrand, 2020). Online, the algorithmic design of social media platforms that aims to keep users engaged for as long as possible through content recommendation may facilitate gravitation towards ideological extremes (O’Callaghan, *et al.* 2014; Gillespie, 2018; Sunstein, 2017; Whitter-Jones, 2021; Zuboff, 2019).

Berger’s conceptualization of extremism is increasingly widespread. He takes the view that all extremists — of whatever variety — structure their beliefs on the basis that the success and survival of the in-group is inseparable from the negative acts of an out-group and the in-group are, in turn, willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the name of their success and survival (Berger, 2018). Violent extremism — defined here as the use or threat of violent action by ‘irregular actors in the pursuit of political aims to erode democratic processes and pluralistic values’ — usually involves a minority of radicalized actors (Conway, *et al.*, 2020; McNeil-Wilson, *et al.*, 2019). We should remember that there is no one typical radicalisation trajectory and avoid conflating polarization and, especially, terrorism. Internet users can become increasingly polarized, but most are not recruited into violent extremist organisations.

Polarization and violent extremism are, in this sense, parallel but interrelated processes. Violent extremists exploit the widening polarisation of societies based on economic and political inequalities. They promote enhanced narratives of felt victimisation and disadvantage while attributing blame for such disadvantages to the very people who actually struggle most with their effects. The “sharp psychological division between ‘us and them’’ manifested within polarised settings may act as an incubator for hate and violent extremism (and, potentially, ultimately terrorism) (Lenos, 2016). Further, the fact that Internet access is often uneven and racialised limits equality of opportunity and potentially reinforces such division (Bucher, 2018; Noble, 2018). Internet platforms’ affordances, both clear and dark (*i.e.*, encrypted), enable particular groups to market platforms’ unique selling points and may enable radicalization trajectories.

In contemporary usage, the term ‘radicalization’ tends to refer to processes causing individuals to adopt extremist views — in whatever political direction — on (socio-)political issues, but may also refer to processes whereby individuals “come to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political
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conflicts” (Bermingham, et al., 2009). Without a particular set of enabling cultural, socio-economic, historical and political conditions, however, extreme ideologies in themselves are unlikely to lead people towards violent action. Coolsaet (2017), for example, points out that, historically, union movements have offered forms of political empowerment and conditions of solidarity that coincided with a decrease in terrorist activity. The kinds of radical action sustained by these movements were of a pro-social nature insofar as they sought to address inequality through actions that promoted the public good and did not resort to violence to achieve their political outcomes. That their actions were radical — even radicalised — is worth repeating. Could we also see the radical potential of the platforms of the Internet to be directed towards non-violent, pro-social action that upholds resilience to polarization and violent extremism?

Social media platforms are sites of bonding (Williams, 2019), bridging and linking capital on which disparately located people can build strong ties with like-minded others in real time. They reinforce connections that may support community and youth resilience (Gerrand, 2020; Grossman, et al., 2020) especially in a pandemic, and this special issue proposes a range of insights into how we might begin to build upon their positive attributes.

Understanding polarization and violent extremism as distinct, interlinked, phenomena, this special issue asks how online platforms can be mobilised to disrupt and reframe ideologies underpinning polarising and extremist messaging. To what extent can social media platforms serve as critical resources that contribute to building pro-social resilience? How can we build on what has been effective so far in terms of building online resilience and what else might social media platforms and their users do to enhance what has already been found to be effective?

Articles in the special issue

The seven articles in this special issue were selected from those delivered at a series of workshops undertaken by the European Commission H2020-funded Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRaVE) Project in 2020–2021. The workshops created a network of scholars from a variety of disciplines across the world to explore societal resilience to online polarization and extremism. The included articles seek to explore the building of resilience against online polarization in the CVE context, investigating the work of grassroot projects, online gaming campaigns and whether memes can be used in counter campaigns. However, it also investigates the efforts of key players in this field, such as tech platforms. Specifically, use of their recommender systems as an intervention to polarization, and tech platform responses to attempts to spread and promote polarization and extremism on their services. Finally, given recent world events, the articles in this special issue aim to investigate timely and topical issues in this field, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of the QAnon movement.

1. Grassroots strategies to educate and support resilience to polarizing or extremist content

This special issue opens with an examination of the ways in which multimodal resources can support alternative narratives to those used by violent extremist organizations. This article, by Vivian Gerrand, draws on three qualitative case studies. Each case study is an award-winning grassroots youth arts project that combines online and off-line multimodal resources with the aim of educating and building societal resilience. The projects won awards in the BRaVE Fair, run by the Berlin-based intercultural organisation Cultures Interactive in September 2021, for their ability to build channels of communication that support prosocial resilience. Through their promotion of complex cultural identity and non-violence, the author argues that these interventions build channels of communication that support prosocial resilience. This study applies critical digital ethnography to examine how these multimodal social media-based communications might be a source of strength that bolsters cultural belonging, agency, purpose and dignity through re-imagining identity.
Next up are two articles investigating the use of online gaming and memes respectively in attempts to build resilience to counter violent extremism. First, Daniela Pisoiu and Felix Lippe investigated the use of online gaming to induce resilience against extremism. As part of the EU’s Internal Security Fund co-founded EU project DECOUNT, the authors undertook research into understanding radicalisation processes, how extremist and terrorist narratives are produced and disseminated, and their target audiences. The findings were used to design an online game that was tested across several social media platforms. Pisoiu and Lippe’s article outlines this preparatory, creative and evaluative work, and contextualizes it within the literature on the role played by online platforms and content both in individual radicalization processes and generating resilience. Second, Inés Bolaños Somoano identified and addressed a research gap regarding the potential use of internet memes in CVE responses to the cultural, social and symbolic dimension of online right-wing milieus. Her article examines different aspects of how internet memes are used by the far-right, in order to devise ways in which they can be incorporated into (online) CVE campaigns.

2. Designing algorithms for depolarization and big tech mobilisations of social capital-based resilience

The focus of this issue then moves to the role of social media platforms. Jonathan Stray investigates social media recommender systems as an intervention for polarization and proposes several methods for building recommender systems that actively reduce polarisation. Stray argues that if it is plausible that recommender systems are drivers of polarisation, then it is also plausible that recommender interventions could have positive effects. Stray examines algorithmic depolarization interventions with the goal of conflict transformation. That is, not suppressing or eliminating conflict but moving towards better conflict. The next paper, by Amy-Louise Watkin and Maura Conway, employs the concept of social capital to examine the efforts that a range of tech companies have claimed to take to build resilience and counter polarization and violent extremism on their platforms. The authors collected the relevant corporate blogposts posted by six platforms. These blogposts contain valuable insights into the platforms efforts to counter bad actions and actors. A corpus analysis toolkit was applied to inductively generate a social capital dictionary that revealed seven themes across the platforms that encapsulate their efforts to create bonding, bridging and linking social capital.

3. Attention towards the conducive environment of grievances and disinformation in the COVID-19 pandemic

Finally, this issue explores societal resilience to online polarization in the context of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of QAnon. Richard McNeil-Wilson examined the possibility for developing online resilience-based approaches as a response to far-right linked COVID-19 misinformation. He studied conspiracy narratives on Twitter related to the pandemic and vaccinations to investigate how far-right users are utilizing conspiracy narratives. McNeil-Wilson’s article discusses how the findings fit within existing resilience-based practices and puts forth suggestions for creating online communities that could be more resilient to misinformation. Finally, the work of James Fitzgerald poses the question, not of how QAnon exists online, but why it exists and how communal identity lies at its core. This article conceptualizes QAnon as arising from deep ontological insecurity and anxiety, arguing that such an understanding may provide the basis for resilience strategies that Fitzgerald argues must ultimately come down to a meaningful development of social empathy.

Conclusions

Each of the articles in this special issue provides insights into how online environments can be used in the service of democracy and pro-social resilience. The special issue opens up the question of how we might build resilience to online polarization and (violent) extremism from three key yet understudied perspectives. First, through attention towards ‘pull factor’ messaging aspects of radicalization, it explores a variety of grassroots strategies that can be mobilised to educate and support critical thinking and resilience to
polarizing or extremist content. Second, it outlines the ways in which the architectures of Internet platforms — the intersection of push and pull factors — can be redesigned to depolarize and examines the extent to which social networking sites have used social capital to mitigate the behaviours of extremist actors. Finally, it addresses the broader conducive environment of ‘push factors’, reminding us to remain alert and empathetic toward the vulnerabilities and legitimate grievances of those who have gravitated towards the appeal of extremist actors in the pandemic.

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