Engaging with Online Extremist Material: Experimental Evidence

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Overview

• Research Questions & Why its important
• Methodology
• Hypotheses & Findings
• Limitations
• Conclusions
Research Question

• How, and to what extent, do people engage with online extremist propaganda?
Why important?
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Research Question

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- Tweets, Facebook, YouTube Comments, Likes, Dislikes....
  - All work on the DV
Methodology

• Experimental Paradigm – Online study with Qualtrics
  – 70 UCL student participants
  – Webpage – Extremist Group (DV)
  – Mortality Salience Prime & other group-based measures (IV)
1. Identity
2. Grievances
3. Innocent & unjustly penalised ingroup
4. Aggressive, dangerous but vague outgroup
5. Extremist group – self-styled defenders
6. Aggression and (implied) violence
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Fictional Extremist Material

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The Webpage

• Themes and tone, images

• Interaction tools:
  – Like/dislike
  – Share/don’t share
  – Follow/don’t follow
  – Save/don’t save
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  – Visit websites
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• Explicit Support:
  – Add material?
  – Add material if got in trouble?
  – Express support for group?
Variables

- **Dependent**
  - Likes/Dislikes
  - Online Engagement
  - Explicit Support

- **Independent**
  - Mortality Salience (MS)
  - Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)
  - Identity Fusion Scale (IDF)
  - Outgroup Hostility – Trolley Dilemma (OGH)
  - Activism & Radicalism Scale (ARIS)
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- Factors
- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)
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Hypothesis 1

Mortality Salience = More Online Engagement & Explicit Support than no Mortality Salience
Hypothesis 2

Likes more than Dislikes associated with higher SDO, IDF, OGH, ARIS
Hypothesis 3

Online Engagement associated with higher SDO, IDF, OGH, ARIS
Hypothesis 4

Explicit Support predicted by Online Engagement, higher SDO, IDF, OGH, and RIS (but not AIS)
Findings: Mortality Salience

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Findings: Mortality Salience

- Open Questions (Qual) – describe:
  - Institution students (Ingroup)
  - Non-institution students (Outgroup)
  - Extremist group

- Positive/Negative/Neutral
Findings: Mortality Salience

• Ingroup – positive
• Outgroup – positive
• Extremist group - negative
Findings: Mortality Salience

- Ingroup & Outgroup = Positive
  - Psychological distance from (UCL) ingroup
  - No MS effect
Findings: Mortality Salience

- Ingroup & Outgroup = Negative
  - Psychological distance from student ingroup
  - No MS effect
Findings: Mortality Salience

Online engagement & Explicit support, and IDF - higher in those who *did not describe the Extremist group in negative terms*
Findings: Mortality Salience

Online engagement & Explicit support, and IDF - higher in those who did not describe the Extremist group in negative terms

The things people don’t say may still be important in relation to what they do....
Findings: Mortality Salience

- Mortality Salience has no effect:
  - Material promotes dis-identification from ingroup
    - Inconsistent/negative ingroup identity
Findings: Mortality Salience

• Terrorist/Extremist Propaganda can inhibit:
  – online engagement with extremist material
  – explicit support for extremist group
    • Via Disidentiﬁcation

.... Depends on stage of radicalisation....?
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

Likes more than Dislikes associated with higher SDO, IDF, OGH, ARIS
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

Likes more than Dislikes associated with higher SDO, ID-, OGH, A-
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

- 74.2% - no interaction
- 16% - Liked
- 53% - Disliked
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

Like

Sex  SDO  OGH
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

Dislike

Ethnicity
Age
OGH*
Findings: Likes/Dislikes

• Likes/Dislikes – useful feature

• Most prefer not to interact at all

• Differences between those who Like & Dislike
Findings: Online Engagement

Online Engagement associated with higher SDO, IDF, OGH, AIS, RIS
Findings: Online Engagement

Online Engagement associated with higher SDO, IDF, OGH, AIS, RIS
Findings: Online Engagement
Findings: Online Engagement

• OE tended to be low overall

• Certain features associated with OE

• Learn about features of those who don’t engage
Explicit Support predicted by Online Engagement, higher SDO, IDF, OGH, and RIS (but not AIS)
Explicit Support predicted by Online Engagement, higher SDO, IDF, OGH, and RIS (but not AIS)
Findings: Explicit Support

Explicit Support

Online Engagement

IDF
OGH
RIS
Findings: Explicit Support

Explicit Support = OE + IDF + OGH + RIS

41% Variance
Findings: Explicit Support

Useful factors for predicting who will (and will not) engage with online propaganda and/or explicitly support extremist groups online
Limitations

• Small & WEIRD sample

• Even smaller N engaging with material = caution

• Believability of material? (generally good)
Conclusion

• How, and to what extent, do people engage with online extremist propaganda?
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• Engagement varies...
Conclusion

• Few actively positively or excessively engage

• Those who do:
  – Young and white
  – Identify with ingroup & prefer hierarchy and dominance
  – Positive view of extremist group
  – Hostility towards Outgroups
  – Radicalism intent
Conclusion

• Most don’t engage at all

• Those who don’t:
  – Older and non-white
  – Lack of identification with ingroup
  – Low Outgroup hostility
  – Lack of Radicalism intent
Conclusion

• Radicalisation can occur online, to some degree, providing certain criteria are met

• Terrorist/Extremist material may inhibit engagement via disidentification with ingroup

• Real world = engagement/support may lead to further exposure/attention of recruiters/mobilisers
Thank you!

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