

Digital radicalization of youth

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Abstract

This article assesses to what extent it can be argued that the Internet has an influence on the radicalization of youth. Although it is commonly assumed that the Internet facilitates exposure to different perspectives, it is also thought to produce homogeneous “echo rooms” in which participants sharing a particular political or civic viewpoint have a greater chance of becoming radicalized. Because participants in homogeneous groups share similar perspectives, opposing views are not expressed and the available arguments are one-sided. On the other hand, the Internet is thought to offer opportunities for adolescents to experiment with identities, which is considered to be important for achieving a mature identity. It is however questionable to what extent the Internet enables youth to experimentally embrace different views, when considering the existence of “echo rooms”. This article also discusses the role of parents in this process. Youth are vulnerable, but also have greater experience with the Internet, which makes it difficult for parents to regulate their children’s online behavior. This review emphasizes the need to promote digital literacy among youth, in order to both protect them, and to enable them to benefit from the Internet.

Keywords: radicalization, internet, youth, parenting, echo rooms, identity.

Introduction

There is a worldwide interest in understanding the process of radicalization, as it is seen as a prelude to terrorism. The process of radicalization is considered to be complex. Multiple factors are involved and several stages of this process can be distinguished, although it is not suggested that these stages follow each other in a linear manner (Konijn, Oegema, Schneider, De Vos, Krijt, & Prins, 2010). In order to better understand the process of radicalization, this article will review some of the literature concerning the influence of the Internet. When the Internet became an important part of people’s daily lives, theories arose regarding its purported influence on the exposure to diverse perspectives (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2011). Some argue that the Internet facilitates encountering different perspectives, whilst others argue that it merely facilitates selectivity and the creation of homogeneous groups. Participation in these homogeneous

groups—according to the argument—would in turn contribute to their members’ radicalization. This article assesses to what extent this argument is valid when it comes to youth. Furthermore, it looks at the influence of parents on this process.

Defining radicalization

When examining the relationship between Internet and radicalization, most theorists do not provide a clear terminology of radicalization (e.g. Kahne et al., 2011; Wojcieszak, 2009). After 9/11, most definitions of radicalization refer to the opinions, views and ideas that have led to a terrorist act (Konijn et al., 2010). However, although radicalization is associated with violence, it does not necessarily lead to violence. In general, most individuals that are said to radicalize do not engage in any violent acts. Radicalization is often seen as closely related to extremism. People who are conceived as being radical hold an opinion that is deviant from the normative opinion. Labeling someone as being

radical is for this reason evaluative, but also relative (Mandell, 2010). In this review, radicalization is seen as a process whereby an individual comes to embrace values and opinions about a certain topic (e.g. animal rights, Nazism or religion) that gradually become more extreme and hence start to deviate more from the normative opinions, while at the same time finding it more difficult to accept opposite opinions. This may lead to ideological violence like terrorism. This process is not one-dimensional. Several factors have an influence on this process, including the Internet.

General influence of Internet on radicalization

Theories that arose regarding the effect of the Internet on radicalization differed as to whether its influence was positive or negative. It is argued by some that the Internet, with its diverse collection of opinions, provides the opportunity to encounter a wide range of opinions and create a heterogeneous network. The exposure to different opinions would in turn improve the amount of democratic participation (Hardy & Scheuffele, 2006).

However, others argue that the Internet merely creates groups with homogeneous beliefs. The Internet is argued to enhance the capacity of selectivity, which means that it enables people to select opinions that align with their own (Kahne et al., 2011). Such a phenomenon would enhance the influence of so-called echo rooms: Internet spaces in which people only listen to like-minded opinions. Within these echo rooms, individuals face both normative and informative influences. When it comes to informative pressure, participants are more likely to accept each other's arguments as valid statements about reality. Because participants in homogeneous groups share similar perspectives, they do not express opposing views. Furthermore, as a normative influence, participants might adjust their opinions to the expectations of

other group members who are more extreme. It was, for instance, found that members of an online neo-Nazi group received punitive and rewarding responses to their discussion board posts, after which some of the expressed opinions were adjusted (Wojcieszak, 2010). Interaction within these homogeneous groups could, in these ways, influence the participants to embrace more extreme views.

Although homogeneous groups can also arise in an offline environment, such a process is facilitated by the Internet. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) argues that accessible individual information can hinder group identification, because it contains possible differences among members. Hence, because Internet creates a more anonymous sphere in which depersonalization of participants occurs, participants are more likely to conform to the group opinion (Lee, 2006). Moreover, the anonymity also accentuates the salient social identity, which implies that people who are involved in those groups come to see themselves and each other as representatives of the group, and less as individuals (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & De Groot, 2001; Lee, 2006).

Empirical evidence is not always available to support these bleak scenarios and, even when it is, it is not always in line with the theoretical assumptions. For instance, Garrett (2009) found no empirical support for assuming that individuals abandon information on the Internet which opposes their own opinion. Although people did search for like-minded opinions, they did not ignore possible counterarguments. Although this should be taken into account, the current answer to the question of whether the Internet exacerbates radicalization is still mostly affirmative, based upon an enhanced capacity of selectivity, the creation of homogeneous groups, and the argument that communication via the Internet can

strengthen the influence of homogeneous groups.

Youth

A considerable number of studies about online radicalization cover adult Internet participation, thus neglecting the particular role that the Internet might play among youth. Youth are seen as being the most competent on the Internet, which might also make them more vulnerable. Being the most heavy and experienced users of the Internet makes it difficult for others, like parents, to monitor their online behavior (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Furthermore, the behavior of youth on the Internet is different when compared to adult behavior, which also has an impact on the effect. Young people visit more non-political websites, but are also more likely to encounter political and civic issues through the Internet. This is noticeable during electoral campaigns, when younger people more often obtain campaign information on the Internet compared to their older counterparts (Kahne et al., 2011). Since the radicalization process mostly involves political and civic opinions and values, the Internet seems to be of great importance for young people.

When considering a specific group among youth, namely adolescents, it is also important to note that one of the major developmental tasks is achieving a stable mature identity. This identity is achieved within the social context of an individual. Two well-known key processes to the formation of an identity are exploration of possible commitments and actual commitment. An achieved identity is the product of these processes (Meeus, 2011). Adolescence is seen as a period in which many individuals go through a moratorium state, in which they are eager to experiment with ideas and identities among different contexts, in order to attain an achieved identity in adulthood. There is a general consensus that the Internet can

facilitate this process among adolescents by offering them the social opportunities to experiment with their identity (e.g. Stern, 2004; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). Until the rise of the Internet, opportunities to develop one's identity mostly occurred at school, within the family and among peers (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). The Internet is considered to be a new instrument for adolescents to experiment with possible identity commitments. However, the environment in which adolescents experiment with identities does need to be a secure place (Schmidt, Jofé & Davar, 2010). Taking virtual echo rooms into account, it might be questionable whether some of these adolescents actually get a chance to explore different perspectives. In an ethnographic study about Muslim identity processes among Dutch-Moroccan youth, De Koning (2008) noticed that answers to questions on discussion boards were often perceived as a *fatwa*, which is a legal dictate based on the Koran that is issued by Islamic religious authorities. Moreover, youth on these forums were perceived as looking for a confirmation of their own opinion. These findings are in agreement with the idea of echo rooms: people tend to look for like-minded discussion partners and see the posts on discussion boards as valid reflections of reality.

On the other hand, there is also empirical evidence that supports the notion that the Internet facilitates a broad range of values and opinions. For instance, Valkenburg and Peter (2008) found that the adolescents who experimented on the Internet more often communicated with people who differed from them in age and cultural background. Furthermore, De Koning (2008) also noticed that forums visited by young Dutch Moroccans offered a wide range of opinions. In this way, the forums offered possibilities for visitors to discuss their thoughts about the Koran, and their implications. It is also important to note that most Dutch-Moroccan youth do

not rely on the Internet when it comes to religious information. Most prefer information from people they trust, like their parents and imam (Konijn et al., 2010). Moreover, Kahne et al. (2011) found that the Internet facilitates exposure to both convergent and divergent opinions. Young people do not only visit political and civic websites. Although they are more likely to visit political websites than adults, young people still generally visit non-political websites. On these websites, people encounter others with a similar interest, but these people may be quite different in other respects. Geographical boundaries are also less defined when compared to offline contacts. As a result, these non-political groups may be even more heterogeneous than face-to-face communities.

The role of parents

The Internet thus can facilitate youth with the exploration of their identity, though it is questionable as to whether the Internet and its discussion rooms actually provides them with a safe environment. Many youth lack the skills needed to handle all situations on the Internet and might need extra regulation (Hargittai, 2010). Research indicates that parents want to monitor and regulate online behavior, although findings are not clear as to whether they actually succeed in doing so (e.g. Livingstone & Bober, 2004; Wojcieszak, 2010). Furthermore, parents are also viewed as one of the determinants of their children's vulnerability on the Internet. Specifically, individuals with a lower socio-economic status (SES) and less parental educational background are found to be more vulnerable to media influences (Konijn et al., 2009).

Wojcieszak (2010) studied the general influence of offline strong ties on radicalization. "Strong ties" are defined as those individuals with whom people have a frequent, intimate and mutually supportive relationship. Parents are for this reason

seen as strong ties vis-à-vis their children. It was found that strong ties can exacerbate extreme opinions of individuals, regardless of whether these offline ties had conflicting or similar opinions. When the opinions of strong ties align with the opinion of a certain individual, this person may not get a chance to encounter different perspectives and might become incapable of forming a balanced view. However, differences in opinions between an individual and its close ties can also facilitate radicalization. This might be the case because people actively start to defend their views when these are challenged. Because people with extreme ideas tend to look up more information, they often express more convincing arguments in discussions. This can make them even more convinced that what they advocate is correct. Furthermore, it was suggested that the expressed challenging views of close offline ties strengthen the connection with discussion partners on the Internet, because individuals look for people to clarify their doubts. However, these conclusions were deduced from a sample with a mean age of 33. It might be that the influences on youth and adults differ. One reason for such a difference might be that younger people are more influenced by their parents. In fact, Livingstone (2006) argues that there is an increasing body of evidence that the regulation of parents influences the effects of media. Next to the Internet and television, parents are still considered to be the most important source of information for politics and religion (Konijn et al., 2010).

Looking specifically at perceptions of the Internet, Livingstone and Helsper (2007) found a twofold attitude among parents: a positive attitude about the educational benefits of the Internet and anxieties about its possible dangers. These findings are consistent with those of an ethnographic study about new media and youth in Los Angeles and San Francisco,

in which parents acknowledged that new media has advantages, but that it also causes them discomfort and anxiety because of its potential dangers. Yet most parents tried to embrace their children's interest in new media (Horst, 2010). The media's influence on values is one of the most important parental concerns, and is related to radicalization (Livingstone, 2006).

The ability to monitor and regulate children's behavior changed with the rise of the Internet. As previously mentioned, parents find it difficult to regulate the online behavior of their children, since they feel less competent in using it. It was shown that 92% of youth feel comfortable using a computer, compared to 69% of their parents (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Parents use strategies to minimize the negative effects and maximize the positive effects of Internet, like monitoring, co-using, banning and restrictions. Livingstone and Helsper (2008) demonstrated that parents use the same strategies for regulating Internet use that they use for other issues like television. However, some of these strategies are not applicable to Internet use. Actively co-using the Internet may for instance not be possible in practice, since youth do not always allow their parents to join them. Discussion about the Internet has been pointed out as one of the best strategies for regulating children's behavior. By supporting children's digital literacy, parents could possibly mitigate media effects that might be harmful for youth. Indeed, in a study about television use, Austin (1993) argues that the most effective regulation is the use of discussion. His study illustrated how talking about the content of a television program helps children to understand it and compare it with their perceptions of the real world. More research is needed to determine whether this also applies to Internet use.

Summary and conclusion

To summarize, although empirical evidence exists for the notion of echo rooms, they mostly account for adult Internet use and political websites. The Internet has a different role in the lives of young people, whose use of the Internet is in many ways not comparable with that of adults. However, examining the possible influence of the Internet on the radicalization of youth is vitally important, considering the profound impact of Internet on their lives. Not only do young people use the Internet more often, they are also able to use it as a possible tool for experimenting with their identity. Echo rooms may not support such experimentation. On the other hand, youth do not only encounter like-minded people on the Internet. This is because, among other reasons, the websites they visit are not political but based on other interests. This makes the range of visitors on a website diverse when it comes to other characteristics, like political views. The influence of the offline environment has been studied with adults, but again these influences might be different for young people. Parents play an important role in the lives of most young people, and for this reason influences may differ. Parents do seem to worry about Internet use, and try to monitor and regulate their children's behavior on the Internet.

The Internet is also just one determinant that may have an influence on radicalization. It is important to note that most youth do not radicalize. Research on the role of the Internet in radicalization amongst youth is characterized by a lack of integrative theories and empirical support. Furthermore, self-reported instruments are often used to measure radicalization, which may result in socially desirable but inaccurate results, like over-reporting exposure to different views. More experimental and longitudinal research is necessary to understand radicalization of youth.

It might be the most beneficial for parents to place emphasis on the development of discriminative skills among their children, since doing so might enable them to regulate their own behavior on the Internet. Since active co-using is not always an option, supporting children's digital literacy is vital, not because of the potential dangers of the Internet, but also in order for youth to be able to optimally make use of this resource.

Reflective paragraph

Because this article has been written by a pedagogical scientist, it is aimed at acquiring information that facilitates education and child rearing. Youth are influenced by factors on all levels of a society. A pedagogical scientist generally seeks to integrate perspectives in order to change the multidimensional context of children. This article, for instance, uses perspectives from communicational sciences, like echo rooms, but also from psychology when describing identity. In this way, pedagogical sciences have an inherently "interdisciplinary" character. Still, pedagogical sciences have distinctive characteristics by which they can be defined and compared with another field that addresses the same topic: developmental psychology. While psychology for the most part emphasizes describing and explaining, pedagogical sciences also address values that are connected with parenting goals (Van Ijzendoorn, 2005). For this reason, pedagogical sciences are inherently more normative. This is something that can be observed in the current article, since it also reflects on parental goals and on the practical implications for child pedagogy. Furthermore, although this article identifies risk factors on several levels, it is applied to individuals and their relationship with individuals defined as "strong ties." Other studies however, try to uncover the effects of the Internet on the radicalization of whole societies (e.g., by

examining its effects on the level of democracy in a society). Furthermore, radicalization is an evaluative phenomenon. This study uses Western data and reflects a Western point of view. Anthropological studies might provide a more relative perspective on whether individuals radicalize. From the outside, a radical is an individual with significantly deviant values and opinions, while people who are defined by others as radical might argue that they simply strive for necessary fundamental changes, and that there is nothing inherently "wrong" with them.

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