

Majority of posts on extremist online forums made by 'hyper-poster' cliques, study shows

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Most posts in extremist online forums are made by a clique of particularly committed members, a major new study shows.

Experts who have spent years analyzing activity on the chatrooms have also discovered they have identical participation structures. Their findings are crucial intelligence for those working to tackle online extremism and radicalization.

A very small elite of "hyper-posters" can be responsible for up to a third of all posts, followed by a slightly bigger class of "super-posters" who are committed but show more restraint. "Normo-posters" contribute occasionally, and the majority of members are "hypo-posters" who have only posted once or a couple of times.

Hyper-posters are not necessarily the most central or connected members of extremist forums, and some less active posters also occupy central influential positions in discussions. Hypo-posters tend to be scattered at the periphery of the network, engaging in one or a handful of threads only.

This pattern holds regardless of the ideology (far-right, Salafi-Jihadist, Incel), language (English, French, Arabic, German), or size of the online forum.

The research, published in the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism*, was carried out by Professor Stephane Baele, Dr. Lewys Brace, Dr. Travis Coan and Dr. Elahe Naserian from the University of Exeter.

Researchers studied 12,569,639 unique posts in eight far-right, seven Salafi-jihadist, and two Incel forums.

Professor Baele said, "Anecdotal evidence from existing case-studies already pointed to similarities in posting structure, so we anticipated to find it. However, what we didn't expect to see was such a low level of diversity—if you put all the graphs and metrics side by side, they are

hardly distinguishable.

"These results not only clarify how influence works in extremist online spaces, they also deliver actionable intelligence for [government agencies](#) tasked with tackling online extremism and radicalization. As the rapid growth and diversification of [extremist](#) online spaces causes serious challenges to security and law-enforcement practitioners, this type of knowledge—which offers both general and granular observations—is directly useful."

The research was conducted as part of "Extreme Identities" (ExID), which is a multidisciplinary collaboration aimed at mapping and understanding the far-right online ecosystem; it involves [experts](#) in extremism and online data based at the University of Exeter, Trinity College Dublin, and the University of Copenhagen.

Dr. Brace said, "We found in all forums there was a small clique of extremely active posters who occupy central roles in discussions. Extremist forums are hierarchical echo-chambers.

"Having this more fine-grained categorical structure of user behavior will allow for more focused intervention measures such as targeted undercover posting strategies or better allocation of scarce resources for investigating specific users."

More information: Stephane J. Baele et al, Super- (and hyper-) posters on extremist forums, *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/18335330.2022.2103386](https://doi.org/10.1080/18335330.2022.2103386)

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