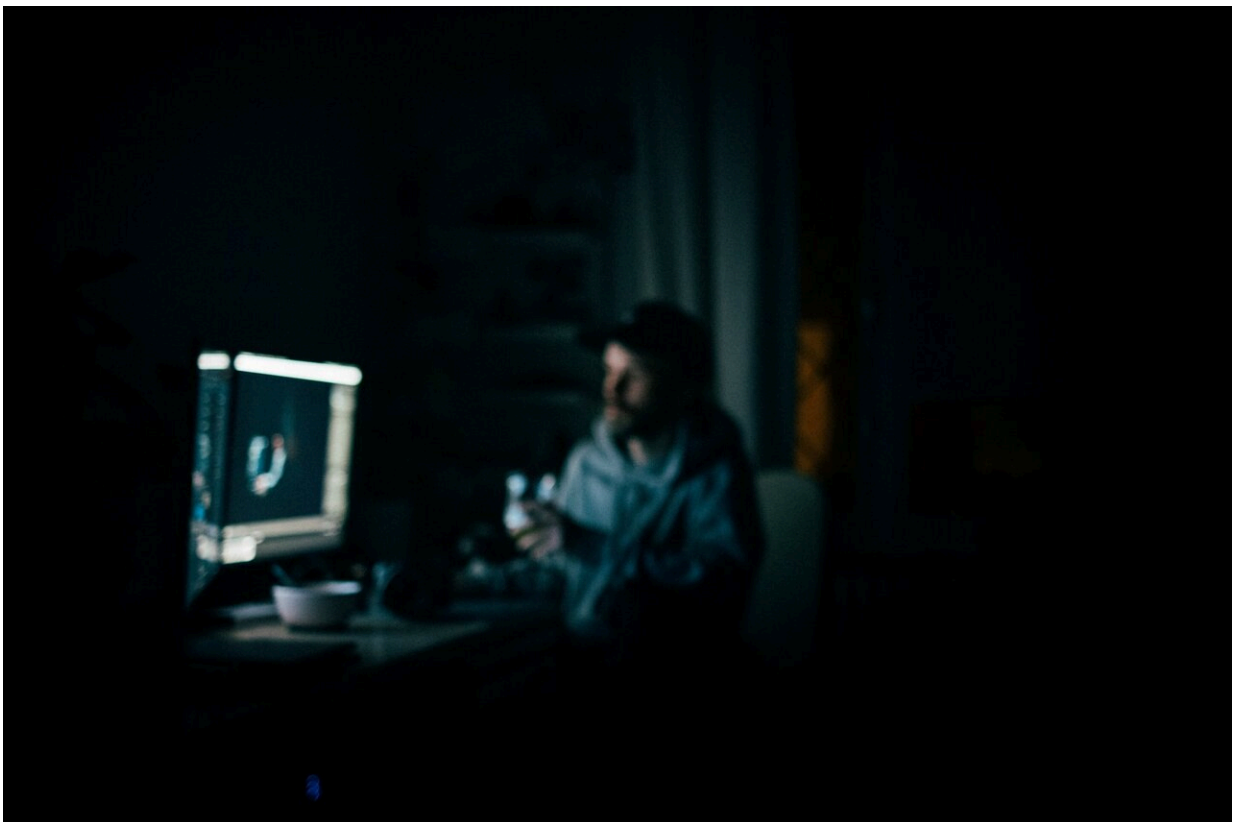# Study shows radicalization is now more likely to take place online, but internet plots are more likely to fail

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Research that analyzed the offending pathways of 437 individuals convicted under the UK Terrorism Act and related offenses in England

and Wales has found that radicalization is now more likely to take place online rather than in person—but is also more likely to result in a conviction for non-violent extremist offenses. Significantly, plots devised via the internet were least likely to have progressed beyond the planning stage and most likely to have been foiled.

An analysis of specialist reports from 2010 to the end of 2021 revealed that the biggest increase in online radicalization over time was among convicted women and those aged above 25. The internet was also increasingly prominent among Islamist extremists, those affiliated with the extreme right wing and other political groups. Animal rights activists were the exception, with in-person contact remaining a key feature of their radicalization over time.

In recent years, radicalization predominantly by online means has started to outnumber not only in-person radicalization, but also mixed forms of online and offline interactions, a mode of radicalization previously thought to be the norm.

The study by Nottingham Trent University (NTU), His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and Bournemouth University has been published in a parliamentary report by the Ministry of Justice. The work provides an update to a previous report produced in 2021, which was the first to use closed source data of this kind for investigating the role of the Internet in radicalization processes.

Analyses focused on those offenders who could be classed as radicalized extremists and on those reports that provided in-depth information on radicalization journeys up to committing the offense.

Professional risk assessments put those who primarily radicalized online at the lowest levels. Specifically, they showed the least engagement with an ideological cause or supportive group, the lowest level of intent for

committing further offenses and the lowest levels of capability for doing so.

They were also most likely to have committed a solely online, non-violent offense. Further, they were unlikely to be socially connected in the context of the offense, in line with their overall lower levels of engagement with an extremist group or cause.

Those attackers who reported they were primarily radicalized online were found to be the least successful in plotting attacks and most likely to see their plots foiled at the planning stage.

The websites used were also seen to have changed over time, moving from specific extremist websites and standard communication applications to an increased use of forums, chatrooms, open social media platforms and encrypted applications.

Dr. Jonathan Kenyon, lead author of the study and working for HMPPS Counter Terrorism—Assessment and Rehabilitation Center, said, "This study provides a contemporary picture of the online activities of convicted extremists in England and Wales sentenced up to the end of 2021. As in our previous study, including convicted extremists sentenced up to 2017, marked differences were found between those who either radicalized online, offline or across both domains in terms of their internet behaviors, profiles and offending patterns. Once again, this highlights the importance of accounting for different pathways in respect of internet use when assessing risk and in the development and implementation of counter terrorism interventions."

Dr. Jens Binder, Associate Professor of Psychology at NTU's School of Social Sciences, said, "The platforms used for online radicalization and extremism are changing and expanding due to technological advances. At the same time, we find that mainstream platforms and apps are

routinely utilized, sometimes to reach out to the many users there and to lead some of them to more secluded online locations.

"This means that multi-platform responses are needed to counter the terrorism threat from online radicalization. This is also likely to require a more pro-active and transparent approach from tech companies such as specific mechanisms and incentives for reporting content of a radical nature."

The report also found that more than a third of the individuals convicted of extremist offenses displayed some type of mental health issue, highlighting the need for better mental health support for this group of offenders.

Dr. Christopher Baker-Beall, Senior Lecturer in Crisis and Disaster Management at the Bournemouth University Disaster Management Center, said, "To be clear, in line with previous academic research, the report is not suggesting that those with mental illness represent a community from which terrorists are more likely to originate. Nor does the report suggest that mental illness be viewed as a predictor of terrorist intent. Instead, it highlights the importance of providing mental health support to those convicted of extremist offenses to ensure they do not go on to reoffend or commit further acts of terrorism."

Due to the low levels of violence and engagement with extremist causes shown among those radicalized online, the report urges caution against automatic jail sentences. It instead recommends consideration of an individual's personal circumstances and suggests that those vulnerable to online radicalization are better supported during transitional periods in their life—such as relocation or change in cultural environment, losses or separation, changes to employment or work life, conflicts with others or traumatic events—to prevent offending.

More information: Internet and radicalisation pathways: technological advances, relevance of mental health and role of attackers. [www.gov.uk/government/publicat … nd-role-of-attackers](http://www.gov.uk/government/publicat)

Provided by Nottingham Trent University

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