

Middle-aged radicalization: Why are so many of Britain's rioters in their 40s and 50s?

August 7 2024, by Sara H Wilford



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Look closely at the pictures of the violent unrest that has spread across

England and Northern Ireland and you will notice something that is not being spoken about. The rioters seen fighting, attacking police and setting fire to buildings are often middle aged—people in their 40s, 50s and 60s, screaming racist abuse and fighting with police.

Of the 11 people [arrested in Sunderland](#) on August 3, four fit this demographic. One of the people arrested and charged was a [69-year-old male pensioner](#).

The radicalization of middle-aged people is an emerging but overlooked phenomenon that has been brought to the fore by these riots, potentially because of the apparent link to the [spread of misinformation](#) online. As my ongoing research is finding, this group is vulnerable to being misled by fake news and conspiracy theories.

Middle-aged people are often bundled in with the "over 50s" as a group, which includes the very old—a demographic with whom they have little in common. The middle aged are not "digital natives" but they are online. And, crucially, they may actually be less informed about the dangers of online misinformation than younger people because they have not been the target of education in the same way. These days, significant effort is put in to educating young people about how to navigate the [online world](#) safely, but [middle-aged people](#) missed the boat.

The middle-aged were introduced to the internet as adults and their understanding of the online sphere is largely self-taught and self-regulated. As a result, they can be poor decision makers when it comes to what to consume and what to believe. This exposure may lead people to make significant decisions, such as heading out to take part in violent unrest or attacking a mosque or a hotel housing asylum seekers, based on flawed or dishonest information that they have gathered on the internet.

When a group attacked a mosque in Southport their actions appeared to

be based on the false idea that three children killed in the area the day previously had been attacked by a Muslim or an immigrant. In truth, the young man in custody over the attack is neither. Online misinformation and even disinformation therefore appear to have played a part.

An overlooked group

Our need to understand this middle-aged group and their vulnerability to extremism through [social media](#) was the [driving force](#) behind an [EU-funded research project](#), currently in its second year. For the first time, researchers from across Europe are looking at people in their 40s to mid-60s to uncover what characteristics of social media and online content encourage them to go down the rabbit hole to extremism.

Older people are more likely to be politically engaged and are [more likely to vote](#). And of this group, the roughly middle-aged portion are the most engaged. They are therefore influential. They also often have strong political views.

But this group is somewhat invisible. People don't tend to think of them first when we talk about the housing crisis, the cost of living or the NHS. Young people have long been the target and focus of much of mainstream media and commerce, which has only accelerated since the advent of the internet. Adverts almost exclusively use young people [to promote goods](#), to take one example. It's rare to see [older people](#) advertising anything that is not directly targeted to them. Despite their financial weight, products are not generally marketed to [middle-aged people](#).

A whole swath of people are therefore being culturally excluded or sidelined. Because of this youth focus across all aspects of society, we don't think of the middle-aged to be first in line to be radicalized online either. We have a tendency to picture young, impressionable people

being led astray. Some were therefore surprised to see so many older people in the marauding crowds that have caused so much damage in England and Northern Ireland.

When groups of any kind are ignored, their feelings of exclusion and isolation make the fringes of the internet more appealing. Here, disgruntlement is fed and encouraged. People are invited to express their anger as they engage with peers of a similar age and socio-economic group.

They may seek recognition and influence by sharing content found in online forums and social media groups, or they may create it themselves. This content highlights their worldview or opinion, but is often backed up with spurious claims and pseudoscience. Despite this, their words are seen as legitimate by others with the same or similar viewpoint (their peers) and by [younger people](#) who respect their life experiences and are swayed by the apparent sincerity of their beliefs.

The middle-aged are generally invisible in the media and wider society, which means that they can encourage others to engage from the sidelines, while staying significantly below the radar of researchers and others who are trying to understand the growth of extremism online. This raises concerns about the absence of targeted strategies and narratives to address the involvement of the middle-aged in extremist activities.

The nature of the internet is that it contains ["greased data"](#)—information that moves quickly and is hard to hold on to, which ends up in all sorts of places, reaching all sorts of people. It is almost impossible to prevent the spread of untruths and misinformation. The viral nature of misinformation and propaganda, which is [emotionally charged](#) and sensationalist, makes it [more likely to be shared](#).

In the hands of a group of people that has influence but may not be

equipped with the skills of a digital native—and that flies under the radar among authorities who are concerned about radicalization—this information can be potentially dangerous, as is being illustrated on Britain's streets.

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