Chapter 20

A Supplementary Intervention to Deradicalisation: CBT-Based Online Forum

Priscilla Shi
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

ABSTRACT

With today’s technological advancements, common online platforms such as Gmail, forum, websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, are used by millions to communicate and share information in the form of text, image or both with varying synchronicity. In a similar way, violent extremists are also bringing their radical agenda online. As more individuals become radicalised by online violent extremist propaganda, the need to counter such propaganda and manage existing threats, such as incarcerated detainees who are more technology-savvy, becomes increasingly urgent. This chapter propounds the idea of online deradicalisation. First, the online milieu and its concomitant social phenomena will be discussed. Second, an overview of existing elements of deradicalisation and its target audience will be covered. Third, the chapter will delve into online psychotherapy and its potential applicability to de-radicalisation. Last, the chapter will conclude with relevant implications and future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

With today’s technological advancements, common online platforms such as Gmail, forum, websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, are used by millions to communicate and share information in the form of text, image or both with varying synchronicity. The term online used in this chapter refers to the whole spectrum of computer-mediated communications, including Internet-related activities. These computer-mediated communications range from “asynchronous e-mail transmissions, browsing the World Wide Web (WWW) to synchronous chat room participation … [which may occur in] a wide assortment of text-based and graphical web-based environments” (King & Moreggi, 2007, p. 223).

In a similar way, violent extremists are also bringing their radical agenda online. As more individuals become radicalised by online violent extremist propaganda, the need to counter such propaganda and...
manage existing threats, such as incarcerated violent extremists (i.e., detainees) who are more technology-
savvy, becomes increasingly urgent. Thus, this chapter propounds the idea of online deradicalisation.

The objective is to propose a supplementary intervention to current deradicalisation efforts for violent
extremist rehabilitation. The author argued for the use of an online forum where detainees can openly
discuss violent extremist related areas of interest with other detainees and helpers (i.e., individuals
such as religious counsellors, therapists, reformed violent extremists who are charged with undertaking
rehabilitation work for this population). This approach uses an online medium as an alternative to face-
to-face intervention for these helpers to engage detainees (especially those who are radicalised online)
to address their radical beliefs and thinking patterns.

The first section will introduce the trends of online usage by mainstream populations and violent
extremists. The second section will define the phenomenon of deradicalisation. Key principles that
guide deradicalisation and rehabilitation efforts will be highlighted before proposing the aforementioned
supplementary intervention. Lastly, limitations and future areas of research will be discussed.

WHEN PEOPLE GO ONLINE

People interacting online do not exist alone. They are driven by similar motivations, such as the need for
affiliation, information, and social support to connect with like-minded others (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).
When interacting online, people gather and form virtual communities, whose functions are characterised
by the interaction between human nature and the online environment (Madara, Kalafat, & Miller, 1988).
According to Shayo, Olfman, Iriberri, and Igbaria (2007), the virtual community consists of

"Various forms of computer-mediated communications, particularly long-term, textually mediated
conversations among large groups … of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and
who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer networks and bulletin boards. (p. 206)

Such online interactions are empowering because it gives people a sense of acceptance and normality
(Madara, 1999; Walter & Boyd, 2002). Furthermore, due to the less conspicuous individual differences
of people interacting in online communications, group membership is enhanced by perceived similarities
(Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). Thus, virtual communities allow diverse, often minority, groups
to be heard and members to find solidarity, “power, authority, and control over their own lives” (Shayo
et al., 2007, p. 207).

Research by King and Moreggi (2007) has found two predictive factors of active participation in
online communication: a lack of real world social support, and one’s coping ability prior to joining
the group. People with less real world social support and those who are coping well prior to joining the
group tend to participate more actively online. Hence, one might infer that people communicate online
to seek support from like-minded others and/or to provide support.

Like in real world interactions, people online will also establish interpersonal ties with others (Baym,
2002; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000). Interacting online, people usually seek
to exchange information with others who are experiencing similar predicaments as themselves (King
& Moreggi, 2007). So, they learn from like-minded others and share resources. Furthermore, research
had found that members of virtual communities tend to develop strong interpersonal connections with
others in their online environment (Haythornthwaite, 2001; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1998; Koku,