



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE & GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS EXPO 2024

Recommendations for Policy, Programs & Research



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This Brief consolidates recommendations derived from the presentations, discussions and debates conducted during the four days of Hedayah's International Research Conference & Global Communications Expo 2024 (RCxEXPO24), which was held from 29th October to 1st November 2024 in London, the United Kingdom.

We extend our sincere gratitude to all those whose contributions made this Brief possible, and the organizers of RCxEXPO24 express their deep appreciation to the speakers, moderators, facilitators, and notetakers who helped to develop this Brief. Finally, we thank RCxEXPO24's hosts, sponsors and strategic partners for their vital contributions to the event.



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INTRODUCTION

In recognition of the fast-paced and constantly evolving nature of extremism and violent extremism and the subsequent need to respond through programming and policies, Hedayah, the International Center of Excellence for Countering Extremism and Violent Extremism, annually convenes leading experts to share new research, methodologies, best practices, and findings for the benefit of the broader community of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in fields related to countering extremism and violent extremism (CEVE).

As a complex and multi-disciplinary field, information and knowledge sharing and the opportunity for diverse actors to connect are vital to ensuring that prevention efforts are evidence-based and contextualized to maximize the potential for impact. In 2024, Hedayah hosted a groundbreaking crossover event, combining its 9th International Research Conference together with its Communications Expo to create the **International Research Conference & Global Communications Expo (RCxEXPO24)**, that brought together this broad community to consider not only the vital contributions to evidence from research, but also cutting-edge approaches from various sectors in countering extremism and violent extremism through strategic communications interventions.



RCxEXPO24 was convened in London, United Kingdom, from 29 October to 1 November 2024. Hedayah hosted this event with kind support from the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) as well as 22 strategic partners. The event adopted a hybrid format accommodating both in-person and online participation and brought together approximately 200 participants from governmental agencies, research institutions and universities, diplomatic missions, international organisations, research and grant foundations, as well as private sector organisations, including technology, communications, and strategic communications stakeholders.

This brief provides an overview of Hedayah's RCxEXPO24 by summarizing thematic panels and demonstration presentations and highlighting recommendations for countering extremism, violent extremism and terrorism aimed at informing researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and any other relevant stakeholders. More detailed content from these discussions and presentations is available through Hedayah's online channels upon request.



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH CONFERENCE

HEDAYAH RCxEXPO24:

Recommendations for Policy, Programs & Research

Thematic Panel 1: Lessons Learned in Education for Preventing Extremism and Violent Extremism

Education plays a dual role in the context of extremism and violent extremism: it can serve as a powerful tool for prevention and resilience-building, or, if neglected, as a potential site for radicalization. Marking a decade since the *Abu Dhabi Memorandum on Good Practices for Education and Countering Violent Extremism*, the first panel of the conference was convened to reflect on emerging insights, challenges, and needs at the intersection of education and the prevention of extremism and violent extremism.

Panelist Insights

The panellists noted with concern that educational institutions and the education sector have not been immune to radicalization and violent extremism. Schools were also recognized by the panel as potential recruitment grounds for violent extremist groups, with school shooters and radicalized youth sometimes sharing overlapping risk factors. **The speakers also discussed how and where radicalization and grooming targeting school children and youth often occurs.** They explained that extremist and violent extremist actors have manipulated children's pursuit of identity and belonging and have used influencers to prey on their desire for approval and identity formation, embedding misogynistic and other extremist content into seemingly innocuous content. The panel also pointed out that extremist and violent extremist actors particularly exploit existential questions and perceived global injustices, simplifying complex issues to construct a clear enemy for violent action. The panel also noted that online gaming environments may serve as emerging spaces where school children are exposed to extremist ideologies.

Despite the risks children and youth can face in educational settings, **the panel underscored the unique positive role schools can play in prevention efforts**, and how offer daily reach and contact with young people and are often a primary point of access to resources and services like mental health support. As one speaker put it, consistent engagement with children and youth also gives education systems a "first mover advantage" in addressing difficult life questions before extremist ideologies take hold. **The panel also acknowledged existing challenges in this field, as well as the need for future actions.** For example, the panel pointed out that many educators and parents lack the digital literacy needed to shield children from harmful content online. At the same time, schools often do not address deeper philosophical or existential issues, leaving young people vulnerable to violent and extremist narratives.



Recommendations

For Policymakers:

- Proactively include schools and educational centers in violent extremism prevention efforts.
- Train school staff to understand risk factors and help them receive clear definitions and explanations of the problem, including providing step-by-step guidance on how to identify and refer at-risk individuals.
- Implement targeted awareness programs for families to equip parents with tools and resources to recognize signs of exposure and radicalization.
- Design and embed continuous and age-appropriate curricula on critical thinking and existential questions from primary to tertiary education.
- Ensure new curriculum and intervention designs do not overburden already strained education systems.

For Educational Institutions & Schools:

- Focus not only on identifying students at risk but on building resilience to reduce vulnerability.
- Integrate media literacy and multicultural education and ensure the availability of digital media pedagogies in both pre-service and in-service teacher training.
- Reinforce the use of mental health services and trauma-informed pedagogy.

For Education & Counter Extremism Practitioners:

- Identify schools' existing resources, gaps, and the roles of various staff in prevention and intervention.
- Involve social workers, local leaders, educators, and early childhood providers to strengthen the community's capacity in efforts to prevent extremism and violent extremism through education.
- Ensure youth are actively involved in the development of research, tools, programs, and policies meant to address extremism and violent extremism.
- Engage tech companies, educators, child development experts, and policymakers to develop age-appropriate online safety solutions.

For Researchers:

- Strengthen collaborative research that bridges education, psychology, sociology, technology, and other disciplines to better understand and prevent extremism and violent extremism through education.



RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Under the **GCTF's Initiative on Education for the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism Conducive to Terrorism**, Hedayah has developed a Research Brief, Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Toolkit, and a Training-of-Trainers Curriculum, which can be accessed at:

<https://www.thegctf.org/Initiatives/Education-for-the-Prevention-and-Countering-of-Violent-Extremism-Conducive-to-Terrorism>

Thematic Panel 2: Children and Terrorism – Needs, Trends and Responses from Prevention to Rehabilitation and Reintegration

Rehabilitation and reintegration (R&R) poses an incredibly complex challenge, particularly for children. Similarly, with growing concerns around the exposure of children to extreme or terrorist content, and the reality of children being engaged in terrorist activity, it is vital to understand current trends. The second panel of the conference was convened to highlight recent research related to children and to explore challenges and good practices when it comes to rehabilitation and reintegration considerations for children.

Panelist Insights

The panelists discussed findings from a recent study mapping trends among teenage terrorist offenders in the UK, based on 51 cases since 2016, noting that the most common offences among these children were the collection of information, dissemination of terrorist publications, and preparation of terrorist acts. The speaker also observed that sentencing patterns revealed a disparity, with many right wing extremist offenders receiving non-custodial or suspended sentences, while offenders associated with religiously inspired extremism and violent extremism were likely to be sentenced to prison. Importantly, the panel pointed out that children can demonstrate innovation in terrorist-related activities and that social media platforms have created opportunities for heightened exploitation of young people's vulnerabilities.



Panelists also noted the significant challenges faced by professionals working with families with links to extremism, violent extremism or terrorism. The panel revealed that many professionals and family courts lack prior experience and clear guidance when dealing with cases linked to violent extremism or terrorism. The panel also mentioned that practitioners often feel unequipped in terms of how to protect family members fleeing from relatives who may be associated with extremist, violent extremist or terrorist groups or activities, and that different ideological backgrounds often require different engagement approaches. The panel further noted that practitioners' fears as well as difficulties in building trust often complicate effective engagement with these families.

The panel then discussed the concerning situation in Al-Hol camp, where children face the prospect of becoming long-term residents without access to quality education or pathways to release. The speaker pointed out that many children are likely to become adults within the camp environment, facing mental health challenges and educational deprivation. Barriers to education include cognitive obstacles such as mistrust of teachers and NGOs, material limitations such as the lack of learning resources and the link between economic deprivation and dropout, as well as physical issues including overcrowded classrooms, access difficulty, and physical threats from Daesh and criminal actors. Suggested solutions could include supplementing formal education with homeschooling and religious instruction to offer more adaptable, personalized, and culturally relevant education. Moreover, the panel discussed good practices for the rehabilitation and reintegration of minors returning from Syria and Iraq. These include overarching principles such as child protection approaches, individualized and contextual approaches, and strong family and community involvement.

Recommendations

For Policymakers:

- Treat children involved in terrorism not solely as perpetrators or victims, avoid applying adult-centric counterterrorism approaches to children, and uphold child protection principles in law enforcement and criminal justice responses.
- Ground rehabilitation and reintegration policies in a clear understanding of the nature and limitations of available evidence.
- Invest in and build upstream prevention and safeguarding efforts that address children's emerging pathways into violent extremism - such as social isolation, poor mental health, and identity-seeking - rather than augmenting securitization.
- Promote a multi-stakeholder response for R&R for children, and equip professionals - including social workers, educators, community leaders, mental health practitioners, and security personnel - with training for trauma-informed care, case management, parenting support, etc.



For Practitioners:

- Design programs that enable data collection, individual assessments, and tailored interventions based on age, gender, and individual needs.
- Develop contextual, individualized, case-by-case R&R responses that consider each child's pre-return background and experiences, including exposure to compounded adversities (e.g. family drug use, gang violence or cult involvement).
- Apply a rights-centred, "do no harm" approach, incorporating age- and gender-sensitive vulnerability assessments.
- Facilitate international knowledge-sharing platforms for practitioners to exchange lessons learned, good practices, and context-specific challenges in R&R for children.

For Researchers:

- Generate more generalizable evidence on what works in R&R for children, using mixed methods and longitudinal research designs to strengthen the evidence base.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Hedayah's **Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Minors Toolkit** outlines provides guidance for practitioners and policymakers addressing the context of returnee children from Iraq and Syria, which can be accessed at:

<https://hedayah.com/resources/rehabilitation-reintegration-of-minors/>

Thematic Panel 3: Gender, Misogyny & Violence - The Gender Dimensions of Modern Extremism

In some contexts, there is growing recognition of extreme misogyny as a form of extremism or violent extremism. This also reflects a persistent trend in the narratives and ideologies of extremist, violent extremist, and terrorist groups that exploit gender-related issues to further their agenda. The third panel was convened to examine the gender dimensions of extremist and violent extremist movements, focusing on how these actors have weaponized gendered narratives as tools for recruitment and radicalization.



Panelist Insights

In terms of the severity and scope of the issue, the panelists pointed out that **gender plays a significant role across different extremist ideologies, with extremist actors exploiting gendered narratives to further their agendas**, including using a multi-layered framework - ranging from individual identity to collective ideology and broader power structures - to weaponize gender dynamics.

The panel also noted the severe and multifaceted harms caused by gender-based violence (GBV) and misogynist extremism, which include physical threats, the spread of harmful misinformation, and psychological trauma. Moreover, the silencing effect of such violence can erode democratic participation and civic engagement. While still a small number, the panelists also warned that there is a growing number of terrorist acts rooted in misogynistic extremism, indicating an emerging and deeply concerning trend.

When it comes to investigating key actors that promote misogynist extremism, **the panel noted that understanding the ‘incel’ community requires examining the psychological, ideological, and social networking dimensions that contribute to radicalization**. In particular, traits such as hostile sexism and revenge-oriented thinking often coexist with mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation within this group. The panelists observed that incel ideology is often marked by deeply entrenched misogyny, and wherein feminists, women, and the political left are viewed as adversaries, and a notable fraction justify violence as a legitimate response. The panel also noted that incel networks thrive in anonymous online spaces and encrypted messaging apps, though some level of in-person networking also exists.

In terms of actors, **the speakers pointed out that women can also be active promoters of extremist ideologies, including within extreme right wing terrorist movements**. For example, some female influencers propagate narratives such as the “war on men”, “white lives matter”, and conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement, and frequently present themselves in traditional roles that align them with norms propagated by these movements. However, they are also very adaptive and modernize their messaging by embedding extremist views into seemingly apolitical lifestyle content, often using coded language to broaden their appeal. The panelists emphasized the negative influence these influencers can have, especially in radicalizing young men, as evidenced by their disproportionately male audiences.



Panellists recognized a range of methods and tactics used in online gender-based violence and misogynist extremism, including direct threats of violence, sexualized disinformation, persistent harassment, online impersonation, surveillance, doxxing, and using AI-generated deepfakes. It was noted that algorithmic amplification can result in promoting harmful content for engagement, and that structural flaws in platform and interface design, such as difficult-to-use reporting mechanisms, can leave harmful gender-related content intact online.

Recommendations

For Policymakers:

- Enact or strengthen legislation on violence against women to address both online and offline forms of abuse.
- Revise definitions of extremism to explicitly include misogynistic extremism, and incorporate misogyny and gender-based violence (GBV) into hate crime-related policies.
- Consider a comprehensive intervention strategy to tackle misogynist extremism that spans four key areas: counterterrorism (CT), countering extremism and violent extremism (CEVE), criminal justice, and social care.
- Apply a combination of hard and soft approaches targeting digital GBV, including content moderation strategies such as deplatforming, demonetization, de-ranking, and detection, as well as support for counter-narratives, counter-influencers, and community-driven interventions.

For Practitioners (including Tech / Digital Platforms):

- Strengthen capacity and training for practitioners on mental health and neurodiversity to better support individuals at risk of radicalization to misogynist extremism.
- Regularly review and update content moderation policies to ensure they are responsive to emerging gender-related threats and changing platform dynamics.
- Recognize that content removal alone is insufficient and must be complemented by broader strategies, such as education and support mechanisms.
- Introduce gender-sensitive transparency reporting to evaluate the effectiveness of platform moderation policies.
- Audit AI-based content moderation systems for misogynistic bias and ensure human oversight is in place to prevent both over-removal of legitimate content and under-enforcement of harmful material



For Researchers:

- Conduct in-depth research into the many forms of misogyny to support the development of a typology or taxonomy-based approach. This research should be enabled by meaningful data access (e.g., API access from digital platforms).
- Further examine the role of gender in extremism to support the design of targeted, evidence-based strategies for prevention and intervention.

Thematic Panel 4: From Evidence to Action – How Program Learning Can Create Impact

Understanding the outcomes and impact of efforts to prevent and counter extremism and violent extremism is vital but can present a variety of challenges. The fourth panel of the conference was convened to showcase programs that have taken innovative approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), and to explore ways to navigate the complexities and obstacles associated with MEL in the CEVE context.

Panelist Insights

The panel noted that MEL plays a crucial role in the effectiveness and sustainability of CEVE initiatives. They emphasized that outputs alone - such as delivering training - do not necessarily guarantee meaningful outcomes like learning, behaviour change, or broader organizational transformation, thus MEL provides the tools to distinguish between these layers and to understand what works, for whom, under which conditions, and why. The panel also underlined that MEL could help strengthen evidence-informed policymaking and support the design and sustainability of effective and efficient CEVE initiatives.

Panelists highlighted that conducting MEL in contexts of fragility presents unique challenges. These include the complexity and unpredictability of fragile environments, unreliable data, and limited local capacity for data collection. In addition, MEL practitioners sometimes face suspicion and fear among target population surrounding data use, making honest feedback challenging to obtain. The panel also identified that there is a need for discretion in how interventions are described and evaluated, often requiring the use of bland or non-sensitive language to avoid politicization or backlash.



The panel emphasized that while awareness of the importance of MEL in CEVE is increasing, its application often remains limited compared to other fields. A key barrier is inadequate funding, with dedicated financial support for evaluation being rare. Under budget constraints, MEL is often deprioritized, if not abandoned. The panel noted that even when evaluations are conducted, their findings are not always systematically published or used to inform future CEVE strategies. Furthermore, there is also a need to build methodological and practical evaluation skills among practitioners.

The panel pointed out that several assumptions continue to limit the effectiveness of CEVE MEL among some practitioners - such as the beliefs that prevention cannot be measured, that CEVE concepts are too abstract, that evaluations are too politically sensitive, or that there is insufficient time for MEL. The panel noted that these challenges can be mitigated through strategies such as using Theories of Change (ToC), focusing on contribution rather than attribution, developing clear indicators, fostering shared definitions, engaging external M&E experts, and adopting proactive communication and planning to embed evaluation more fully into CEVE work. More recommendations coming out of this panel are listed below.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Donors & Practitioners:

- Promote MEL as a standard practice in CEVE funding environments.
- Donors should identify capacity gaps and adapt existing tools to support MEL in initiatives to prevent and counter extremism and violent extremism.
- Recognize that behavioural change in CEVE often stems from multiple factors, and thus MEL in this field may be better to aim to show contribution, rather than attribution.
- Develop creative ways to assess behavioural change, e.g. reflective exercises, youth-created indicators, peer reviews, and participatory methods.
- Tailor MEL design to local contexts, as successful approaches in one setting may not work elsewhere, especially in different conflict environments.
- Involve target audience early and actively engage them throughout MEL, including testing draft designs and indicators with end users to assess their relevance.
- Consider the background (pre-experience), prior knowledge, and attitudes that target audience (participants) bring to CEVE programs
- Recognize that the outcomes of short-term training may fade without follow-up – therefore, MEL should be conducted and tracked over-time.



For Policymakers, Donors & Practitioners (Continued):

- Provide training in practical evaluation techniques - such as in quantitative data analysis - to civil society organizations.
- Encourage sharing of anonymized evaluation data and lessons learned through accessible databases or platforms to showcase needs, challenges, and good practices.
- Go beyond surface-level outcome data and actively investigate what is missing or unsaid in the data to further improve CEVE initiatives and their MEL.

Thematic Panel 5: Generative Artificial Intelligence and its Potential for Countering and Preventing Extremism

The advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI) poses a variety of threats and opportunities for CEVE. The fifth thematic panel of the conference was convened to explore how AI may be used by malicious actors, but also to consider how the power of AI may be harnessed for prevention efforts, to counter extremism, and to build resilience.

Panelist Insights

The panel noted that terrorist and extremist groups are increasingly leveraging AI in combination with other emerging technologies for radicalization and recruitment purposes. While certain barriers remain - such as the need for programming expertise in some cases and the ideological discomfort of relying on AI-generated religious content - extremist actors are finding ways to adapt and exploit these tools.

The panel confirmed that terrorists and extremists had already adopted AI for several concrete purposes, which include adapting and re-producing visual and audio propaganda (for example, memes, or remixed *nasheeds*), acquiring sensitive knowledge and producing weapon-making manuals and attack instructions, as well as creating simulations of real-world attacks on gaming platforms. Panelists also warned that future uses could include generating large volumes of written propaganda, creating original videos and music for recruitment, designing malware, tailoring effective extremist narratives, gathering intelligence on potential targets, and even building attack tools such as autonomous drones. AI may enable terrorists to amplify their messaging across languages, evade detection through automated image obscuration, and glamorize extremist ideologies, potentially fuelling lone-actor terrorism. The decentralization and scalability of AI also pose challenges for timely detection and response.



Panelists also underlined that, despite challenges, AI can and should be employed for CEVE purposes. The panel noted that this is feasible, as machine learning and AI have already been used for over a decade to detect and remove harmful content online. Moreover, AI's capacity to manage vast volumes of data makes it indispensable for content moderation, considering the substantial amount of (potentially harmful) information shared and encountered online.

Considering AI's positive potential, the panel pointed out that AI is powerful for content moderation, helping with the detection and removal of terrorist and extremist content and the downranking of borderline content, including through automated threat modelling and the evaluation of large language models (LLMs).

The panellists also noted AI's promise in proactive prevention efforts, for example, integrating AI with augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) technologies or chatbots could support the development of AI-powered disengagement and deradicalization, while predictive analytics could also be used to assess behavioural patterns and intervene before violence occurs.

Finally, the panel noted systemic and structural challenges that may hinder the use of AI in CEVE. For example, AI safety teams may face competing priorities, and the risk exists that the issue of terrorist use of AI may be neglected until a major incident occurs. Further, the panel noted that AI safety teams sometimes operate in silos, disconnected from prior research and experience developed in trust and safety on traditional platforms. Moreover, the panel noted that legislative gaps also persist in some contexts.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Practitioners, Tech Companies & Researchers:

- Provide national and local-level training programs to improve media and digital literacy (including AI literacy) and build capacity and resilience at the community level, such as teaching users how to recognize manipulative, deceptive, or misleading information online.
- Private sector, particularly social media and technology companies, should develop dedicated resources to educating the public on digital and media literacy skills.
- Establish comprehensive threat modelling and evaluation standards for LLMs, combining automated and human-led approaches, diverse and interdisciplinary teams, third-party audits, safety-by-design principles, ongoing threat scanning, and strong support for employee well-being and ethical oversight.



For Policymakers, Practitioners, Tech Companies & Researchers (Continued):

- Encourage the development of clear, standardized terminology and a consolidated analytical framework to guide future research on AI and violent extremism.
- Strengthen partnerships between governments, academia, civil society, and private sector (e.g. tech companies) to build a shared knowledge base and coordinated responses in using AI for CEVE.
- Ensure the CT & CEVE application of AI are designed with privacy, ethics, and human rights at its core. In the meantime, identify and mitigate biases embedded in AI technologies, particularly when applied in sensitive security and social contexts.
- Fund interdisciplinary studies that address the intersection of AI, security, ethics, and society.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

Hedayah's Research Brief on *Artificial Intelligence for Counter Extremism*, which discusses many of these concerns, can be accessed at:

<https://www.hedayah.com/resources/ai-for-counter-extremism/>

Thematic Panel 6: Game On: Tackling Extremist Use of Gaming & Gaming-Adjacent Platforms, and Potential Responses

While gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms can be positive spaces for entertainment and social engagement, their exploitation for extremist, violent extremist and terrorist recruitment, propaganda and communications is increasingly recognized. In this context, the sixth panel of the conference was convened to explore the linkage between gaming and extremism and how we can counter the associated risks.

Panelist Insights

The panel noted the dual role of gaming and gaming-adjacent platforms in digital society. These platforms serve as pro-social environments that underpin gaming culture and foster a sense of community; however, they are also vulnerable digital spaces exploited by extremists to radicalize and recruit. As such, studying these platforms offers a crucial window into understanding how extremist and violent extremist actors engage with gaming communities and how content moderation strategies might be improved.



The panellists pointed out that existing research on extremism in gaming has largely focused on themes such as the presence of gamers within extremist communities, the gamification of extremist ideologies, the adoption of gaming aesthetics by extremist groups, and the susceptibility of certain gaming demographics to radicalization. The panel also noted gaps in existing research, such as the insufficient focus on response (i.e., how extremist content is moderated or challenged on gaming platforms) as well as the lack of consensus on what constitutes a “gaming-adjacent platform”. Moreover, most studies used observational methods like surveys and ethnography, rather than methods such as in-depth or semi-structured interviews to understand this issue.

The panel noted that a wide range of ideologies and narratives are active, including extreme right wing terrorist, religiously inspired, and hybrid forms of extremist, violent extremist and terrorist content. The panel also identified that extremist and violent extremist actors employ both organic and strategic pathways to radicalization, including idolizing violent figures, using team-based dynamics to foster loyalty, and migrating interactions from gaming communities to less regulated platforms (“content funnelling”).

Extremist content exists on various gaming (and gaming-adjacent) platforms and may repeat or vary across platforms. On video and streaming platforms such as Twitch, YouTube, DLive, and TikTok, researchers have observed content stemming from various groups and ideologies. Extremist influencers have also been found to circumvent bans by cross-promoting content or appearing on one another’s live streams. Communication platforms such as Discord, Reddit, and Gamer Uprising Forums also host various forms of extremist content, including AI-generated hate imagery. Notably, platforms like Discord with self-managed servers can allow for concentrated extremist networking.

The panel noted that gaming and mod platforms - such as Steam, Roblox, and ModDB – currently pose particular concern due to their limited moderation and very young audiences. Roblox, for example, with a user base heavily under 16, has been identified as hosting content glorifying Nazism and religiously inspired violent extremism. **Modding sites like ModDB also enable users to design and embed extremist or terrorist symbolism directly into games and are a largely overlooked yet potent space for radicalization,** featuring posts with extreme right wing terrorist content (including “white genocide” theory and holocaust denial), religiously inspired extremism and violent extremism (including Daesh propaganda), as well as mixed extremist ideologies.



However, panelists emphasized that healthy gaming platforms are possible, and must include robust moderation systems, rapid removal of harmful content, and pre-screening mechanisms before user content goes live. **However, the panel also emphasized the challenges to achieving this**, as moderation can be hindered by user anonymity, the young age of many gamers, and the often-hidden nature of extremist content. In particular, on gaming-adjacent platforms, extremist symbols and messages are often embedded in images, audio, sarcasm, or jokes, making detection difficult. Further, platforms have broad discretion over enforcement and must continuously balance the protection of free speech with the removal of borderline or harmful content.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Regulators & Practitioners:

- Ensure transparency in content moderation policies on gaming (-adjacent) platforms to build public understanding of behind-the-scenes processes.
- Raise awareness of harmful content or behaviours on gaming (-adjacent) platforms through education, and train law enforcement on gaming environments and subcultures.
- Promote a bottom-up approach by empowering gamers to act as active messengers.
- Shift from reactive to proactive strategies (e.g., safety-by-design) and construct more nuanced threat escalation protocols.
- Establish clear protocols to hold gaming platforms accountable for enforcing their terms of service and ensure users face legal consequences for violations.
- Leverage video games as outreach tools to engage individuals at risk of radicalization.
- Provide psychological support for content moderators due to the emotional toll of exposure to harmful material.

For Researchers:

- Examine the dynamic interplay between gaming content, radicalization, and recruitment.
- Work toward a shared definition of "gaming-adjacent" spaces.
- Move toward more engaged and participatory research approaches (e.g. interviews) to further investigate the link between gaming and extremism.
- Adopt an ecosystem-based perspective (rather than a platform-specific focus) when studying the intersection of gaming and extremism.



Discussion Panel 7: Using AI-Powered Tools for Research, Prevention and Moderation

The seventh panel of the conference brought together experts from the private sector (tech industry), academia, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to share insights on AI-powered tools used to track and moderate online harms, including terrorist and extremist content. Speakers explored broader applications, challenges, and lessons learned regarding ethical considerations in countering extremism and terrorism using AI-powered tools.

Panelist Insights

The panel began with a brief introduction about the organizations each panellist represented and how these entities are leveraging AI-powered tools to prevent and counter online harms, spanning from hashing terrorist and violent extremist content, identifying human rights risks in opaque commodity supply chains, collecting geopolitical intelligence, to analysing human trafficking routes.

Panelists discussed some of the challenges they face in building and utilizing AI tools to track and moderate online harms, including terrorist and violent extremist content. It was noted that acquiring the necessary data and training robust models is often expensive. The panel also pointed out the challenges faced in gaining the trust of individuals to share lived experiences, especially when such narratives are vital for training AI systems. Issues of data bias, security, and privacy were also highlighted as obstacles in this domain. The panel also explored the need to have different engagement strategies with large and small tech companies and how this may be challenging - smaller companies may lack the capacity to adopt or integrate new AI tooling, while larger companies may be better resourced to expand taxonomies beyond static, list-based approaches towards behaviour-based detection systems.

The panel further noted the technical and definitional hurdles in developing algorithms capable of hashing a broader range of content formats, such as URLs and PDFs, beyond traditional media like videos and images. These challenges complicate efforts to comprehensively detect and address extremist content online.



Turning to ethical concerns, the panel discussed the ethical responsibility that comes with developing and using AI tools in this sensitive context. The panellists pointed out that exposure to harmful content and rapid content analysis through AI places a mental burden on moderators and researchers, necessitating support mechanisms. They highlighted various measures to safeguard staff wellbeing, including pixelating violent imagery, converting visuals to grayscale, and muting audio. The panel also stressed the importance of establishing internal policies to encourage mental health conversations and involving external psychologists to support those struggling with harmful content and making sure that necessary support is in place whenever needed. They also underlined the importance of having control processes and frameworks, such as limiting the daily exposure time of analysts working with traumatic content.

Looking to the future, the panel discussed potential new opportunities for the development and use of AI tools in the fight against terrorism and extremism. They noted the importance of exploring less visible online spaces, including the dark web, and addressing organized crime as a thematic priority. The panel also stressed the value of expanding existing networks and diversifying data sources, by engaging open-source platforms, NGOs, frontline workers, individuals with lived experiences, and subject matter experts. They also discussed the necessity to build these tools with a diverse team covering various thematic expertise and linguistic backgrounds, to ensure contextuality. Moreover, the panellists pointed out the potential for AI to aid in strategic network disruption to map digital ecosystems and remove clusters of harmful actors and content simultaneously, alongside logo detection and counternarrative strategies. Overall, the panel noted that AI offers significant efficiency gains, particularly in reducing the time required for conducting online investigations and moderation.

Thematic Panel 8: From Changing Minds to Changing Behaviours – Lessons from Cognitive and Behavioural Sciences

How processes of radicalization unfold, and how our attitudes and behaviours make us vulnerable – or resilient – to various forms of extremist or terrorist content and recruitment efforts are vital to informing effective countering and prevention efforts.

The eighth thematic panel of the conference was convened to explore recent research from neuroscience, cognitive and behavioural science and psychology that can further advance our understandings in this space.



Panelist Insights

The panellists noted that disrupting radicalization pathways requires multiple steps, which include the identification of key risk factors for extremism and violent extremism, analyzing how these risk factors manifest across different countries, and comparing them between the general population and individuals identified as violent extremists or terrorists. In particular, the panel emphasized the importance of identifying psychological vulnerabilities, such as understanding cognitive and emotional risk factors, susceptibility to group influence, and personal grievances or perceptions of injustice. **The panel noted that previous studies have identified several strong predictors of radicalization and violent extremism, such as perceived discrimination, collective relative deprivation, and identity fusion** (the visceral feeling of oneness within a group).

However, the panel also highlighted several limitations in the existing literature where these factors were often studied in isolation and within single-country or single-ideology contexts, limiting the generalizability and the ability to understand how these factors interact in real-world scenarios. New research presented in this panel seeks to address these gaps, and examined multiple risk factors simultaneously across forty countries and ideological contexts – this **showed that “obsessive passion” emerged as one of the most robust predictors of violent extremism**, which held across both the general population and radicalized individuals, with no significant regional variation. Obsessive passion was described as an ideological addiction that overshadows other life domains and consumes one’s identity, which fuels dehumanization of out-groups, fosters radical networking, while undermining intellectual humility. The panel suggested that CEVE programs could target obsessive passion as a key psychological vulnerability.

The panel also encouraged understanding terrorists and extremists more as “devoted actors” rather than “rational actors” and argued that standard rational-choice or “carrot and stick” models may fall short in explaining or influencing such individuals. The panel noted that this is because many extremist or violent extremist individuals are motivated by “sacred values” – principles that are regarded by them as worth making extreme sacrifices for. In this context, material incentives can be ineffective or even counterproductive.

Furthermore, drawing from neuroimaging research, **the panel showed that social exclusion can intensify this process and, in turn, increase a person’s willingness to fight and die for a cause.** The panel also shared that messaging of devoted actors often leverages sacred values, amplifies perceived threats, and underscores social exclusion to mobilize followers.



Exploring potential pathways for prevention in light of these findings, the panel discussed a study based on neuroimaging (i.e., brain scanning) of previous terrorist fighters, which showed that when individuals focused solely on sacred values, the emotional integration areas of the brain remained active while cognitive control areas became deactivated. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of traditional messaging and strategic communication approaches in CEVE efforts, as areas of the brain responsible for processing reasoned arguments may be neurologically offline. **In terms of practical interventions, the panel highlighted strategies such as “social norm interventions,”** which aim to reshape extremists’ perception of their in-groups and weaken their sense of belonging to extremist or violent extremist groups.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Practitioners & Researchers:

- Refrain from using material incentives or similar approaches such as "carrots and sticks" when addressing sacred values or extremist ideologies.
- Do not attempt to forcibly alter sacred beliefs or ideologies. Instead, focus on shifting radicalized individuals’ perceptions of social norms around ideologies or in-groups.
- Promote social inclusion to counter the development of antagonistic sacred values resulting from social exclusion but refrain from forcibly imposing one’s own model of inclusion onto other cultural contexts.
- Offer symbolic concessions to reduce support for violence and foster willingness to compromise.
- Encourage the pursuit of diverse personal goals - such as family, career, and social aspirations - alongside ideological commitments, to foster a more balanced identity among target audience.
- Promote respect for pluralism by nurturing openness and appreciation for a variety of perspectives and worldviews.
- Strengthen personal confidence and resilience among target audiences through self-affirmation and reinforcement of positive identities beyond ideological beliefs.



Breakout Sessions

In addition to the eight thematic and discussion panels, the Research Conference section of RCxEXPO24 also featured two practical breakout sessions designed to help practitioners explore ways to translate research findings into actionable practice.

The first breakout session, convened by Hedayah and the Marshall Center, focused on **the potential practical application of the “Caliphate Complaint Box” project**, which analyzed primary documents from Daesh governance, and the grievances voiced by those living under their rule. Participants working in rehabilitation and reintegration, as well as strategic communications and beyond, proposed ways to apply the research findings in practice and offered feedback to help guide this ongoing work.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

This CTC West Point publication, **“The Caliphate Complaint Box: Stories of Islamic State Governance in the Words of Those Who Lived It”**, can be accessed at:

<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-caliphate-complaint-box-stories-of-islamic-state-governance-in-the-words-of-those-who-lived-it/>

The second breakout session centered on good practices for **gender mainstreaming in countering extremism and violent extremism**, including those outlined in the Global Counterterrorism Forum’s (GCTF) Gender and P/CVE Toolkit. Through an interactive discussion, participants examined how gender norms shape CEVE efforts and explored strategies for employing intersectional, multi-stakeholder approaches to address a range of gender-related factors that may influence women's involvement in violent extremism.

RESOURCE SPOTLIGHT

The **Gender and Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) Policy Toolkit** provides guidance to support the practical use of the Good Practices on Women and Countering Violent Extremism and its Addendum, and can be accessed at:

<https://www.thegctf.org/Resources/Framework-Documents/Policy-Toolkits/Gender-and-Preventing-and-Countering-Violent-Extremism>





HEDAYAH RCxEXPO24:
Recommendations for Policy, Programs & Research

Panel Discussion 1: How Communication Can Influence Behaviour Change and Address Drivers of Radicalization

The first panel of the Communications Expo focused on underlying concepts and insights into how communication strategies can influence behavioural change. The panel explored how strategic communications and language can be crafted to engage vulnerable individuals and to encourage prosocial behaviour, facilitating a deeper understanding of the psychological, linguistic, discursive, and social factors involved in radicalization and resilience building.

Panelist Insights

Panelists discussed the concern of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV), underlining how TF-GBV often leads to the further “othering” of victims, where survivors - predominantly women – are often blamed for the violence they experience. To counter TF-GBV and to drive positive behaviour change, the panel noted several strategic communications interventions, including using strategic communications within communities and families to encourage reflection on how they can better support and welcome survivors of violence. Another strategy focuses on engaging men directly through communications efforts that challenge stereotypes and harmful norms and prompt them to reflect on the consequences of GBV. The panellists also underlined the importance of social and behavioural change (SBC) interventions that provide men with safe spaces to express their emotions and collaborate in creating campaigns that promote positive masculinities.

The panelists then discussed the concept of emotional governance as a powerful, emotionally driven approach to strategic communications in CEVE. They noted that emotions can help override rigid identity-based concerns, enabling individuals to consider information more deeply, rather than only through political or ideological lenses. The panel also underlined that emotional governance is crucial in informing, persuading, and motivating behavioural shifts, and has the potential to transform conflicts, challenge violent extremist narratives, counter disinformation, and support processes of social and political change. **The panel further highlighted practical principles for implementing emotionally grounded strategic communications,** such as the need to identify and map public emotions, understand their dynamics, and identify emotional contexts and various spheres of emotional influence. The panellists underlined the importance of integrating the diverse emotional experiences of men and women into strategic messaging, while cautioning against emotional fallacies, and encouraging balancing emotional appeals with factual reasoning.



Furthermore, the panel discussed the powerful role language plays in the process of “othering” and dehumanization. The panellist elaborated on the phenomenon of “dehumanized perception,” where certain regions of the brain - essential for empathy and social connection - fail to engage, resulting in a lack of prosocial behaviour. The panel noted that we should critically examine the language used in discourse and propaganda, especially linguistic patterns that subtly or overtly dehumanize others. The panellist emphasized that seemingly subtle uses of personality or trait-based language can also contribute to a climate of dehumanization, which in turn may drive harmful or violent behaviours.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Practitioners & Researchers:

- Develop a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of behavioural responses to certain emotions to better align interventions with desired policy outcomes.
- Leverage strategic communications to reflect on and challenge harmful social norms and stereotypes, integrating social and behavioural change (SBC) interventions.
- Employ emotive storytelling to bridge the gap between institutions and the public, fostering greater connection and empathy.
- Incorporate insights on cognitive dissonance into awareness-raising campaigns to more effectively influence attitudes and behaviour.
- Investigate the role of language in processes of othering and dehumanization and explore strategies for using language as a tool for “re-humanization” and social inclusion.

Panel Discussion 2: Implementing Communication Strategies for Behaviour Change – Real-World Examples

The second discussion panel of the Expo focused on the concepts behind strategic communications and how communication strategies can influence behaviour change, particularly in the context of radicalization and community resilience. The discussion highlighted the need for deeper psychological and social understanding to inform more effective interventions.



Panelist Insights

The panel noted a significant challenge in strategic communications - the lack of a common understanding or definition of strategic communications. The panellists pointed out that this definitional gap affects the architecture of communication efforts - making it difficult to identify appropriate interlocutors - and undermines the development of expertise, often leading to homogeneous teams lacking specialization in fields like neuroscience or behavioural science. Further, this definitional gap could impact policy coherence, with limited horizontal coordination across government services, and hampers cooperation, resulting in stagnant and repetitive programming.

The panel discussed applied communication strategies to mitigate interfaith hate in the community in the context of rising incidences of antisemitic and Islamophobic content. They pointed out the need to engage community and religious leaders on issues pertaining to hate crime, in addition to countering narratives from violent extremist organizations.

The panel also argued for a shift toward promoting a human-centered understanding of communities, grounded in proximity and shared values between communities. **The panel also discussed workplace tensions and hate exacerbated by geopolitical events**, emphasizing the importance of building empathy through both online and offline engagement, and calling for greater awareness-raising, trauma support, and both rehabilitative and punitive responses to hate incidents within organizational settings.

Finally, **panelists highlighted that social and behavior change (SBC) approaches should underpin strategic communications.** The panel argued that while counter-narratives are necessary, they are insufficient alone for behavioural change. In other words, focusing solely on disseminating better facts, rather than influencing behaviours, attitudes, and sentiments, is a strategic mis-step. In this context, effective behavioural change requires identifying and addressing the capability, opportunity, and motivation barriers within target audiences, using psychosocial tools to drive lasting impact.



Recommendations

For Policymakers, Practitioners & Researchers:

- Facilitate a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of strategic communications, with a stronger emphasis on influencing behaviours, attitudes, and sentiments, not just disseminating information.
- Integrate both online and offline strategic communications efforts. While online campaigns offer broader reach, offline engagement plays a critical role in fostering empathy and connection, particularly through face-to-face interactions.
- **At the community level**, encourage leaders to broaden their understanding of “community” from strictly religious or identity-based definitions to more human-centered ones, emphasizing proximity, shared values, and mutual understanding.
- **Within organizations**, strengthen awareness of hate-related issues among leadership and employees, provide adequate support for those affected by trauma, and implement both rehabilitative and disciplinary measures to address incidents of hate.
- Ensure messages resonate by applying local cultural lenses and promoting localized storytelling. Engage local voices to craft and deliver narratives that reflect the realities and values of the communities they aim to influence.
- Prioritize research that goes beyond measuring attitudes to generate actionable insights into behavioural drivers and barriers, enabling more effective strategies.

Panel Discussion 3: Emerging Possibilities from Technology in Addressing Radicalization Drivers

The third panel of the Expo was convened to seek ideas for whether and how technology can be better deployed to overcome drivers of radicalization and foster communities more resilient against extremism and hate, including exploring future challenges and opportunities.

Panelist Insights

The panellists discussed the challenges of online radicalization, emphasizing that certain forms of extremism, such as incel and misogynist ideologies, are not merely amplified by digital platforms but are often shaped within them.



Online spaces can serve not just as enablers but as creators and incubators of radical ideologies. A key concern raised was the lack of a coherent network of bystanders on digital platforms to intervene in signs of radicalization at scale.

Against this backdrop, the panel highlighted the importance and potential of tech-enabled solutions in violence and extremism prevention efforts. While technology is not a silver bullet, the panel agreed that it should be treated as a core component of the prevention infrastructure rather than an optional add-on. They pointed out the specific benefits of tech solutions, such as enabling self-referral, reducing barriers to access target audience, lowering risks for service providers, and increasing cost-efficiency and sustainability.

Looking at existing content moderation efforts, the panelists talked about the unintended consequences of content removal on radicalized individuals. They noted that removing content or deplatforming users can create a sense of "martyrdom", as these actions may be viewed as further attacks on their freedom of speech. This, in turn, may lead to a backfire effect, exacerbating radicalization and driving more harmful behaviour underground or into alternative platforms.

In exploring ways to improve current responses, including content moderation, the panel noted the need for more robust, platform-agnostic referral pathways that connect online interventions with offline support. They suggested that tech companies adopt a greater "duty of care" towards users whose content is moderated. Building on their data and moderation infrastructure, the panel suggested that platforms introduce an additional step: when content is removed, users should receive transparency notifications and be offered support options, such as referrals to relevant organizations.

Looking into the future, the panelists pointed out emerging concerns about the future drivers of radicalization. They highlighted the erosion of public trust in media, especially with the rise of synthetic media and mis/disinformation, as a growing vulnerability. As technology continues to evolve alongside global geopolitical shifts, they underlined that these new dynamics must be closely monitored.

The panel also noted that there is sometimes an over-expectation of what technology can do to prevent extremism. They stressed the importance of understanding the real-world context in which radicalization occurs, much of which happens in low-tech or offline environments. A more effective approach would be to understand the tactics of malicious actors and use technology (including well-established "low technology") in targeted, strategic ways rather than assuming new tech will always be able to provide quick solutions.



Finally, the panelists highlighted emerging possibilities over the next decade. They discussed how prevention-focused organizations are beginning to build their own tech tools, including the use of generative AI to produce positive narratives. A panellist further called for a shift from simple content moderation to user-centred prevention systems that are fully integrated into technology. Moreover, the potential for micro-targeting using AI, and the potential implications of quantum computing on security, were also noted as areas to watch.

Recommendations

For Policymakers, Practitioners & Tech Companies:

- Use technology based on a clear understanding of the methodologies and tactics employed by malicious actors. Countermeasures should be designed for scale and effectiveness, including the strategic use of both advanced and lower-tech tools.
- Develop multidisciplinary approaches to create counter/alternative/positive narratives that effectively address both the need for personalization and the challenge of reaching broader audiences online.
- Combine digital law enforcement with strategic communication efforts online to mitigate the risk of further radicalization due to content removal.
- Introduce critical thinking education on AI and digital technologies at an early stage in the school curriculum, equipping students to navigate and question the digital content and tools they encounter.
- Partner with tech companies to introduce an additional step following content removal: offering transparency notification and referral to support services, thus forming an online-to-offline referral pathway.
- Establish a global community of practice to share insights and build capacity among CEVE professionals on AI and emerging technologies, fostering deeper, up-to-date knowledge across all relevant sectors.

Keynote Lectures & Demonstration Sessions

In addition to the three panel discussions, the Communications Expo of RCxEXPO24 also brought speakers from different sectors, such as national police force, as well as technology and communication firms, to introduce and present the tools and methodologies developed by their respective organisations to counter online harm and extremism.



Keynote Lecture

The first speaker, drawing from experience in marketing, advertising, and sustainability, gave the audience a keynote speech to explore **how to inspire positive behavioural change through advertising and online campaigns, with potential lessons for CEVE communications**. The speaker warned that many advertising messages actually play a role in alienating certain audiences and in triggering their negative reactions, as seen in campaigns on smoking, climate, and diversity and inclusion. The speaker noted that the failure of these campaigns in driving positive behaviours stems from traditional approaches that preach values. Instead, he recommended avoiding “value-driven crusades” and focusing on helping people emotionally connect and transform - like using beautiful imagery of nature to inspire environmental protection. The speaker also emphasized that principles that work in commerce - quality, price, and convenience - could also be effective in behavioural change efforts. Lastly, he underlined that campaigns should offer people a sense of positive alternatives, support their journeys of change, and motivate self-reflection to foster positive transformation.

Demonstration Sessions

The first demonstration presentation introduced a technology platform prototype designed to surface human rights risks within supply chains. The speaker highlighted key challenges organisations face in ensuring human rights compliance, including supply chain and risk complexity, regulations, limited funding, data reliability, and brand reputation concerns. The platform uses graph databases to build complex knowledge models and an AI inferencing engine to apply data-driven risk identification rules, identifying both primary risks (direct supply chain links) and secondary risks (indirect links) – this was then demonstrated through a live demo, showing the risks identified by supplier country, risk type, exposure level, and location at risk. The presenter also highlighted the prototype’s strengths, including its ability to detect risks from foreign news sources, provide valuable insights beyond the immediate supply network, and maintain transparency regarding data sources, while also noting how certain constraints of the prototype were overcome over time.

The second demonstration presentation explored how to stop malign actors from using disinformation and online manipulation to threaten lives and safety. The presenter highlighted the gaps in current social media listening tools that fail to detect bots. To understand how so many online audiences are exposed to harmful content and disinformation, the presenter and his team analysed disinformation campaigns surrounding events in Syria, Sudan, and Iraq.



They found that there were often networks of account flooding individuals' online information space with disinformation, in the meantime triggering the algorithms of social media platforms. While tech companies are sometimes hesitant to remove hate speech content due to its subjectivity, the evidence shows that these companies are willing to take down content when they know that fake accounts are manipulated by malicious actors to distort algorithms and advertising mechanisms. The presenter also noted that existing software tools often struggle to detect bots, understand manipulation tactics, or extract meaningful narratives, and fact-checkers are less effective for commercial use. This approach recognizes that diminishing the influence of malicious actors not only lies in how often harmful content appears but also in monitoring and decreasing the genuine engagement it generates.

The third demonstration presentation introduced how police can more actively engage with young people online, highlighting gaming as a tool for community policing. Speaking from the experience of the Danish police, the presenter outlined three key focus areas of policing in digital spaces: prevention through visible, safety-enhancing efforts; disruption via targeted patrols; and investigations based on inquiries and tip-offs. The Danish police maintain an active presence on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Snapchat, and Roblox; this demonstration showcased TikTok videos created to connect with younger audiences. The presenter also explained the rationale behind police gaming with children and youth: to understand the gaming community and the target audience, stay visible and accessible when needed, and to build trust. In particular, officers play games in uniforms with cameras on, helping foster positive relationships so that young people feel comfortable reaching out when needed.

The fourth demonstration presentation highlighted how AI can help unlock critical operational insights from extremist propaganda. The web-based tool demonstrated leverages generative AI to analyze propaganda from Daesh and Al-Qaeda, designed to address key challenges faced by CT analysts, including limited access to propaganda materials, delays in translation, and difficulty in understanding contextual nuances. Key features of the tool include a searchable repository of translated propaganda, Boolean search functionality, thematic analysis, document summaries, and an interactive chat box that allows users to ask questions directly about the content. During a live demo, the speaker illustrated how the platform enables analysts to access propaganda documents in their original languages and interact with the AI chat box to explore underlying themes and narratives. Looking ahead, the speaker noted plans to expand the tool's data sources to include propaganda from other violent extremist organizations, academic literature, social media content, and potentially closed-source material, further broadening its scope and utility for CT and CEVE professionals.





Hedayah

Countering Extremism
& Violent Extremism