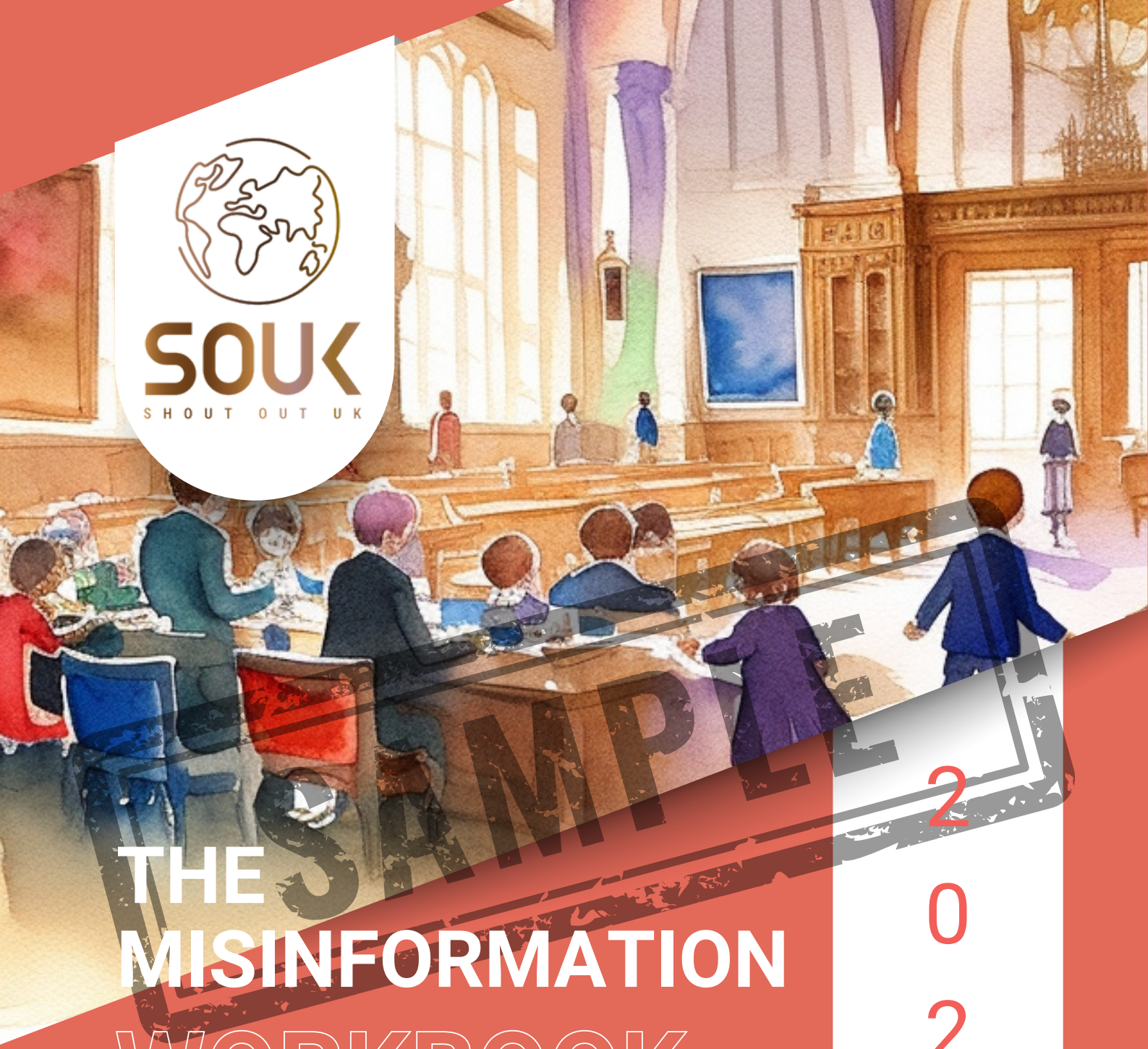

SOUK
SHOUT OUT UK

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THE MISINFORMATION WORKBOOK

2023

Shout Out UK (SOUK) is a multi-award winning education platform and creative social enterprise. Fusing education and tech with film production and animation ensures we create world-class programmes on Media & Political Literacy and high impact Democratic Engagement campaigns.

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Intro

Who are SOUK?

Shout Out UK (SOUK) *is a multi-award winning education platform and creative social enterprise. Fusing education and tech with film production and animation ensures we create world-class programmes on Media & Political Literacy and high impact Democratic Engagement campaigns.*

What is Media Literacy?

Media Literacy is the framework we use to analyse messages that we find online and offline. We can build this framework by nourishing our critical thinking skills and emotional resilience to question sources and resist the emotive messaging that is used to spread mis and disinformation.

Why is Media Literacy important?

Having a strong understanding of Media Literacy can help you understand fact from fiction.

This book will cover a wide range of topics to explain issues across Media Literacy and how to develop your own skills.

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Guide to
Referencing

Referencing is how we source our verifiable claims in a text. There are multiple systems that you can use to reference, we have chosen a style called “Harvard”. This means you’ll see something like this:

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This Latin term means "and others" in English. We put this into references with more than one author. If you would like to see who else wrote our source, they are all listed in our bibliography.

(REFERENCE et al, 2023).

This is where we put the author of the source to help readers understand the context of the source and identify biases.

This is the date that the source was published. This also allows readers to work out the context and get an idea of what information could have been available at the time.

If you would like to fact-check our sources, we have attached a bibliography so that you can read what we have based our work on (It might help for some of the questions at the end).

Definitions: Verifiable - a fact that can be either proven or disproven.

1. Mis, Dis and Mal-information, Who's Telling the Truth and How to Tell Them Apart

KEY TERMS

- *Misinformation:* Information that is false and is spread by mistake without the intention of causing harm.
- *Disinformation:* Creating false information and sharing it to deliberately cause harm to a person, group, or organisation.
- *Malinformation:* Information that is true but missing key context, to present facts in a way that makes it misleading.

Intent

Distinguishing between unintentional misinformation and intentional disinformation is a challenge. Intent is often hard to infer, especially in online spaces where the original source of information can be obscured.

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TOP TIP

If you find this tricky to remember, think of these phrases:
"I've made a terrible MIStake" and "You did DIS on purpose"

Misinformation and Memes

Very often we find that people share information which isn't true. This can be done for a variety of reasons. One of the most common ways that people spread misinformation is through memes. By making you laugh, angry or sad, you will be more likely to share it (Basch, et al 2021).

Memes are often used to spread disinformation and misinformation. Furthermore, memes are often difficult to analyse, as much of the information can be sarcastic or require contextual understanding (Naseem, et al 2023).

This is where working out the intent is important. Sometimes people spread misinformation through memes simply because they think it's funny and haven't fact-checked. Whereas extremist groups will sometimes use memes as a means to spread harmful disinformation (Smith, 2019), some extreme groups such as the far right, incels and the far left have been using memes

strategically to spread their ideology on mainstream platforms. These groups take complex and radical ideologies and condense them into memes, making them more appealing and easy to share online. They use humour and irony to hide their extreme views and make them seem more acceptable. By doing this, they hope to reach a larger audience, including younger people (Basch, et al 2021).

Trustworthy Facsimile

Sometimes, unreliable sources try to look and sound like trustworthy ones. They copy the style, tone, and even the name of a credible source to make people believe them. We tend to trust things easily without checking, based on how someone looks, talks, or presents information. Unreliable sources can pretend to be credible by copying these things. It's important to be careful and verify information, even if it seems trustworthy at first.

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What makes for a trustworthy source?

Fact-checking is a really important part of being able to tell what's true and what isn't. Whilst it can seem like a daunting process, we have copied an acronym below that can help you identify the steps you need to take to fact-check.

F - Find the claim or information you want to check.
A - Analyse the source and look for credibility.
C - Cross-check the information with multiple reliable sources.
T - Take note of any biases or misleading elements.
S - Seek expert opinions or verified sources to validate the information.

Quick Cases

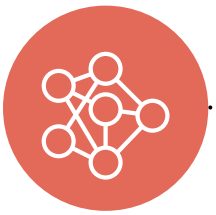
Disinformation (Sandy Hook)

In 2012, a mass shooting happened in Sandy Hook, Connecticut. A conspiracy soon emerged, claiming that the Elementary school shooting was a staged event. The theory was spread across social media. One of the most prominent personalities to spread the conspiracy theory was Alex Jones (The Guardian, 2021). The families of the victims then sued Alex Jones saying that Jones had spread false and hurtful information that caused emotional distress and harassment (The Guardian, 2021).

2. Social Media & Online Safety

How do they link into each other?

Echo Chambers can lead to misinformation and make it hard for people to consider different viewpoints or discuss complex topics. In these chambers, people often share information that agrees with their opinion, and they are less likely to fact-check (Confirmation Bias). The algorithm promotes these posts because they get more attention with sensational claims (Clickbait).



1. ALGORITHM

Pushes a post you will react to, generally on a For You Page.

2. ECHO CHAMBERS

Will promote the post and work to reaffirm your own world view.

3. CONFIRMATION BIAS

Causes you to be less likely to accept information that disagrees with your worldview, making you vulnerable to misinformation on social media.

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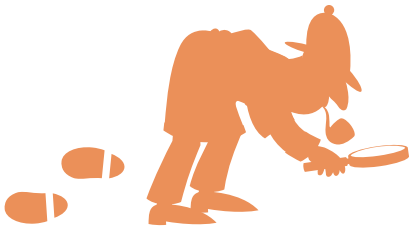
KEY TERMS

- ***Echo Chamber*** *- When information, ideas, or beliefs are repeatedly promoted in an enclosed system like your mind, your newsfeed, or your social circle, while other views are prohibited (Oxford Learning Dictionary, 2023).*
- ***Algorithm*** *- A process or set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations, especially by a computer (Oxford Learning Dictionary, 2023). On a social media platform an algorithm will automatically rank content based on how likely each individual social media user is to like it and interact with it (Gillis, 2023).*
- ***Confirmation Bias*** *- The tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories (Oxford Learning Dictionary, 2023). This effectively means if you agree with an opinion you are less likely to question the facts.*
- ***Hate speech*** *- A form of expression that can occur in various ways, both online and offline. Online hate speech can take the form of images, cartoons, memes, objects, gestures, and symbols to spread discriminatory or prejudiced messages about certain individuals or groups (UN, 2023). Hate speech is illegal in the UK.*

Case Study: Reddit Investigates the Boston Marathon Bombing

Controversial topics attract misinformation that spreads rapidly, aiming to evoke emotions and can be easily shared across platforms.



In 2013 there was a terrorist attack during the Boston Marathon. This prompted an online investigation on Reddit's banned subreddit, "r/findbostonbombers."

Users sought to identify the culprits, by examining photos and videos (Evans, 2015). These subreddits are moderated by volunteers who are generally also users. As a result, various theories, rumours, and speculations emerged. Users examined photos, pointed out individuals they found suspicious and tried to connect them to the bombings (Shontell, 2013).

A user claimed to have found a potential suspect by analysing images. The person identified was Sunil Tripathi, a college student who had gone missing and had been open about having depression (Shontell, 2013). This information quickly spread on social media, leading to widespread speculation about Tripathi's involvement (Lee, 2015).

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However, it was later confirmed that Tripathi had no connection to the bombing. The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigations) in the United States announced they had identified the two suspects who had committed the attack. The subreddit was quickly banned and the subreddit moderators released an apology to Tripathi and his family (BBC, 2013).

However, shortly afterwards, Tripathi was found dead after committing suicide (The Guardian, 2013). This incident highlights the risks of spreading unverified information and the importance of being cautious when discussing such sensitive topics.

It is crucial to remember that the actual suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing were identified by law enforcement agencies through their own investigations. While online communities may have wanted to help and had good intentions, the lack of proper verification and moderation led to misinformation spreading and soon after, the targeting of innocent individuals.

You won't BELIEVE the 10 ways Clickbait MASSIVELY spreads MISINFORMATION

Clickbait is when websites or articles use catchy and attention grabbing headlines to get people to increase their readership or get people to share their article without reading it. Titles are often laid out and use language like the one for this text box. They are designed to be sensational and over the top.

Clickbait can be dangerous for a few other reasons listed ahead.

3. Conspiracy Theories

KEY TERMS

- **Pre-bunk** - To preempt disinformation and utilise critical thinking skills to disprove claims when they are first seen. This works in practice very similar to vaccines (European Commission, 2023) as they both will expose you to the harmful element in small doses, so you can properly fight off the larger threats.
- **De-bunk** - Exposing the falseness in a belief or theory.
- **Circular Reasoning** - A circular reasoning fallacy occurs when the evidence offered to support a claim is just a repetition of the claim itself.
- **Falsification** - The action of falsifying information or a theory.

How to Identify and Debunk Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories tend to have much in common, despite being about wildly different things. Whether it's about Moon Landings, Flat Earth, or the Royals, we tend to see similar tropes across them all.

Very often a conspiracy will put itself forward as the "real truth" and claim that it is what "the mainstream media are afraid to tell you". To help you identify some of the other signs we have created the **SCAM acronym** below, to help you be smart when identifying misinformation.

- **S**(Simplistic reasoning): Conspiracy theories often rely on oversimplified or overly complex explanations to support their claims. They may offer simple solutions to complex problems or propose intricate webs of conspirators without sufficient evidence or logical coherence.
- **C**(Confirmation bias): Conspiracy theories often rely on your own biases to sell the theory. This is because everyone is less likely to question sources that fit into our pre existing beliefs.
- **A**(Adaptation): Conspiracy theories will often adapt to evidence designed to debunk the theory. For instance, some Flat Earthers claim that Mars is round as it has been observed to be but will still claim that the earth is flat (Matyszczyk, 2017).
- **M**(mistrust): Being overly sceptical of institutions, and public figures that are perceived to be powerful. We can often identify conspiracies through overly sceptical rhetoric.

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How to Pre and Debunk Conspiracy Theories

Very often a conspiracy will present disinformation as truthful, this is to try and trick people into believing them. Everyone comes into contact with these theories offline and especially online. Conspiracy theories will often also present themselves as the truth. A good way to identify if the claim is conspiratorial can be to look at the language used to support their claim. A study showed that the language used by conspiracy theorists tended to be associated with negative emotions such as anger (Fong et al, 2021). They also tended to use language associated with power and death far more than scientists. Finally, they also looked for more certainty, and 'outgroup' language, fuelling an 'us versus them' mentality (Fong et al, 2021).

Conventional vs. Conspiratorial Thinking

Actual conspiracies do exist but they are rarely discovered through the methods of conspiracy theorists. Rather, real conspiracies get discovered through conventional thinking, healthy scepticism of official accounts, careful consideration of the available evidence and a commitment to internal consistency.

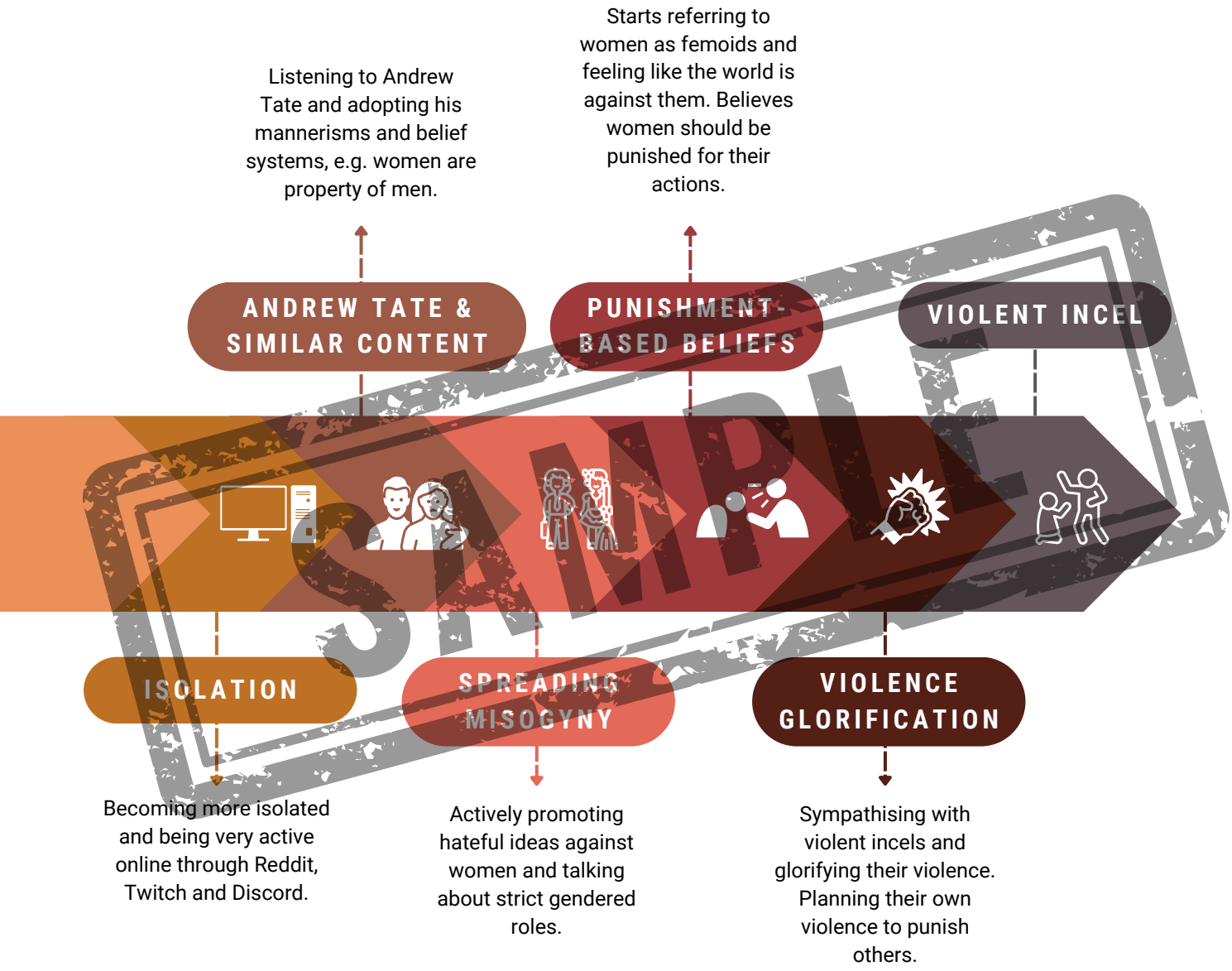
Conventional Thinking and Scandal

Sometimes people in power do end up caught in scandals. This can often lead to consequences and in some cases break down trust between public figures and the people. In these cases, it is important to be mindful of evidence and coherence, with a healthy level of scepticism.

Definitions: Outgroup - the out group refers to people who might disagree with a theory. (e.g. Flat Earthers would see those that believe the earth is flat as the in group and those who know it to be round as the "out group.")

How Does Someone Become Radicalised?

Earlier we went through all the reasons that someone may spread misinformation, but very often the danger that comes from spreading it is falling victim to an extremist ideology. Anyone could be at risk from radicalisation, below is a list of steps a young person might take and eventually become radicalised.



The process of radicalisation is unique to each individual. Often groups will prey on those they believe to be vulnerable. As a result, we could reasonably expect similar steps with different details depending on the ideology. This example does show how becoming more isolated and accessing dangerous content can act as a gateway to extremism.

The process of radicalisation is different for everyone, the image above is a good point of reference for how someone could eventually become a violent incel from a seemingly safe place.

It's also important to note "red flags", for instance, in the first step, there is nothing wrong with using social media, and normal for everyone in the modern world. But in this case, the student has isolated himself and therefore from alternate points of view possibly leading to radicalisation.

Similarly in the second step, we often see this occur because the student simply doesn't immediately understand the implications of what is being said and simply repeats what they hear from people they like or respect, without understanding the harmful implications of what they are saying.

- **R - Recruitment:** The process of identifying and attracting individuals to join an extremist movement.
- **A - Alienation:** Feelings of isolation or exclusion from mainstream society, which can make individuals more vulnerable to extremist ideologies.
- **D - Disaffection:** Dissatisfaction or disillusionment with social, political, or economic conditions, leading individuals to seek alternative solutions or ideologies.
- **I - Ideological Indoctrination:** The systematic exposure to and acceptance of extremist beliefs and ideologies through propaganda, socialisation, or online platforms.
- **C - Community Reinforcement:** The reinforcement and validation of extremist beliefs within a like-minded community, which can further entrench radical ideologies.
- **A - Action & Engagement:** The active involvement in extremist activities, such as participating in protests, acts of violence, or supporting terrorist acts.
- **L - Loss of Identity:** The adoption of a new identity or group affiliation that supersedes previous identities, contributing to a sense of belonging and purpose.
- **I - Intensified Beliefs:** The deepening commitment to extremist ideologies through continued exposure and reinforcement within an echo chamber.
- **S - Social Networks:** The development of networks and connections with other individuals or groups who share similar extremist views, amplifying radicalisation processes.
- **A - Amplification of Grievances:** The perception that personal or collective grievances can only be addressed through extreme actions or ideologies.
- **T - Targeted Propaganda:** The strategic dissemination of propaganda and misinformation to exploit vulnerabilities and manipulate individuals toward extremist beliefs.
- **I - Isolation from Counter-Narratives:** The deliberate avoidance or dismissal of alternative perspectives or narratives that challenge extremist ideologies.
- **O - Overcoming Inhibitions:** The gradual erosion of moral and ethical inhibitions that may have initially prevented engagement in violent or extremist behaviour.
- **N - Narrow Worldview:** The adoption of a narrow and rigid worldview that dismisses or demonises opposing views, leading to increased polarisation.

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Hate Speech

Hate speech is often used by extremists to illustrate their point or dehumanise their opposition. The United Nations (UN) describes hate speech as "In common language, "hate speech" refers to offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion or gender) and that may threaten social peace" (UN, 2023).

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