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# Fundamentalism and the search for meaning in digital media among Gen Y and Gen Z

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***Abstract***
Religious fundamentalists have a common fear that modernity, digital mass media, and popular culture may corrupt young adults and undermine sacred values and moral codes. However, some young adults do not abandon their religion; conversely, they submit to fundamentalist religious authority and are willing to become martyrs. This paper seeks to provide a theoretical understanding of the relationship between religious fundamentalism and Gen Y and Gen Z's search for meaning in the digital media ecology. The purpose of this article is to synthesize the theoretical perspectives of religious fundamentalism, imagined communities, sacred values, terror-management-theory and digital media theories to generate new insights on countering online radicalization. However rather than recommending more online counterpropaganda dampening violent extremism targeting communities, this article builds on the view that an integrated approach on digital citizenship, off-line interfaith communication, and religious face-to-face encounters with 'the other' to share sacred and secular values in the pedagogical environment will help understand the social reality of 'the other' and can offer effective insights to prevent home-grown extremism, social insularity and reduce in-group biases at an early age.

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## Introduction

Young adults[2] belonging to a similar generational cohort have always been key to triggering political change and social unrest. In some cases, these social movements are able to challenge ruling elites and disturb the existing system. This is not a new phenomenon: young, radicalized people have been supporting or carrying out terrorist attacks, since long before 9/11 and the domination of social media networks and digital mass communication. For example, at the beginning of the last century, across former Yugoslavia, young adults opposed

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[2] I use the term 'young adults' interchangeably when specifically referring to both Gen Y (millennials) and Gen Z (Zoomers). These generational cohorts are explained in paragraph 2.

Austro-Hungarian rule, turned to ideological violence, and demanded self-governance for a united Yugoslavia. In June 1914, the 19-year-old Bosnian-Serb Gavrilo Princip and other radicalized young students, supported by the secret Serbian military organization Black Hand, were willing to become martyrs for the palingenetic ideology of the Young Bosnia movement (Jackson, 2006; Donia, 2014). Princip's assassination of Habsburg Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo changed the course of history.

However, it would not be the last time that young terrorists sought a heroic moment of fame from their acts of terror; open, crowded public spaces have frequently been targeted to guarantee a deep global media impact and trigger fear and chaos. Among prominent recent examples, suicide bombers attacked the popular Parisian music venue Le Bataclan, which was packed with young adults, including Muslims; right-wing extremist livestreamed the killing of 55 people at two mosques in New Zealand; the young Salman Abedi blew himself up in the foyer of the Manchester Arena in the UK, killing 22 people; and young armed men attacked the prestigious Taj Mahal Palace hotel in Mumbai. It has also been ten years since the Norwegian far-right extremist and Islamophobe Anders Behring Breivik, radicalized at a young age, massacred 77 teenagers at a socialist youth camp on Utoeya island. More recently, the UK government banned the international online neo-Nazi group Feuerkrieg Division (FKD), which it labelled as a terrorist organization. The group was founded by a 13-year-old Estonian boy.

In Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, Muslim fundamentalists have mobilized young adults from Europe, Asia, and North America to join the jihad and rebuild an Islamic state based on the "true" sacred values of Islam. In Afghanistan, decades of political insurgencies and instability created the Jihadi-terrorist youth movement known as the Taliban. In the 1990s, young Afghan refugee students called Talib[3] were trained in Pakistan as genuine believers and radicalized in conservative Islamic schools to combat the Soviet army and the communist Afghan regime (Bubalo et al., 2011). As the last US soldier was airlifted out of Kabul in August 2021, the sudden collapse of the beleaguered Western-supported Afghan government precipitated reprisals against Afghans under a reborn Taliban rule. However, despite the Taliban's oppressiveness, their religious commitment and narratives remain stimulating and

[3] Talib is the Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto word for student (Bubalo, 2011).

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interesting for millions of culturally diverse Afghans. Taliban fundamentalism addresses a sense of meaning and belonging, as well as core human concerns such as the fear of ongoing foreign domination. The urgency to deal with this threat is articulated by Brooks et al. (2022, p. 127) that a disrupted ISIS and its ideology remain a high threat for young adults and developing prevention programs remains topical. The urgency to deal with this threat is articulated by Brooks et al. (2022, 127) that a disrupted ISIS and its ideology remain a high threat for young adults and developing prevention programs should have priority. Added to this threat, is the burden of the tragic loss of young lives and the much needed evidence-based deradicalization support in virtually all Western countries (Koehler & Fiebig, 2019, p. 57). Thus, the following two research questions are defined:

RQ1: What theoretical mechanisms could explain how young adults (Gen Y and Gen Z) are attracted to fundamentalist discourses on digital media platforms?

RQ2: What alternative perspectives can be used to prevent the effects of online and offline extremism on Gen Y and Gen Z?

*Methodology*

This interdisciplinary study explores theoretical perspectives derived from religious studies and communication studies, in an effort to understand how narratives around the highly publicized global phenomenon of religious fundamentalism affect the behavior of young adults using digital media. Although the main focus of this article is on religious fundamentalism and young adults, I also use examples of young right-wing extremists because of the similarities in their social realities. While the causes and processes of embracing online extremism among these various groups may differ according to their ethnography, this inquiry is focused on the question of why these young adults search for belonging in the digital media space, and how we possibly can prevent this generational cohort from becoming radicalized.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, I review empirical studies on Gen Y and Gen Z, and question whether they should be understood as a heterogenous

group. Then I discuss academic definitions of religious fundamentalism and sacred values. I examine several essential ideas of media ecology thinkers and shed light on mass media theories that can be used to understand the relationship between religion, fundamentalism, and digitalized global media. I subsequently offer a framework that gives insight into the effects and influence of counterpropaganda in the public sphere, and consider a pedagogical approach to early prevention of radicalization in primary and secondary schools. I conclude by discussing the relationship between digital media and contemporary religious fundamentalism, as well as further implications for empirical research.

## Media Ecology and Gen Y (millennials) and Gen Z (Zoomers)

Let us start by defining the terms Gen Y and Gen Z and their intense relationship with digital media. These generations are considered the true digital natives, i.e., the first tech-savvy Internet generations. The PEW Research Center has studied various generational cohorts for many years and defines them by birth year. People born between 1981 and 1996 are considered to belong to Gen Y (popularly known as millennials); those born from 1997 onward are part of Gen Z (increasingly known as zoomers; Table 1). In this inquiry Gen Z and Gen Y are together referred to as young adults.

Table1. Generations defined. PEW Research Center (2019)

| Generation | Age in 2021 | Date of Birth |
|---|---|---|
| Silent | 76-93 | 1928-45 |
| Baby Boomers | 57-75 | 1946-64 |
| Gen X | 41-56 | 1965-80 |
| Gen Y (millennials) | 25-40 | 1981-96 |
| Gen Z (zoomers) | 9-24 | 1997-2012 |

We recently commemorated the 21th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy that marked the start of the US Global War on Terrorism (war on terror) as well as the relentless manhunt for former Al Qaida leader Osama bin Laden. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Gen Y was aged

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between 5 and 20 years; the majority of Gen Z were yet to be born. It is fair to assume that many members of both generations were too young to comprehend the historical significance of 9/11. This is not the only significant difference separating Gen Y and Gen Z from preceding generations. In *Generational IQ*, Taylor (2015) explains the current clash of generations, stating that, for the first time in history, five generations are competing for attention "and pushing to be heard and understood" (p. 47). This occurs across digital and social media, with each generation tending to blame the others for many of today's pressing societal challenges.

To provide an answer to the main research questions, we also need to address the relationship between religious fundamentalism and digital media. As we will see, mass media have a key role in the process of the social construction of reality (SCR; Berger & Luckmann, 1991), particularly when it comes to constructing symbolic social realities such as media content.[4] Extreme beliefs, behavior, and radicalization are continuously mediated as media content in what Neil Postman (1973) and Christine Nystrom (2006) referred to as the media ecology: the comprehensive framework in which media, as technology, are used and impact our daily perception, our senses, nervous system, understanding, feeling, and sacred values. In fact it (re)constructs our knowledge and realities.

Digital mass media in our contemporary society are global networks that maintain our sense of community. Governments, industries, and commerce all depend on digital media networks for their overall enhancement, cultivation of target groups, and communication with the public. Open and direct access to digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and YouTube has become essential for open democratic societies. Thus, whilst innovative digital networks contribute to maintaining our sense of living within a society, they also risk being hijacked by governments and extremists who may want to obstruct the availability of these powerful direct access media or manipulate public opinion with trolls and online hate speech, as in right-wing extremist communities.

Social media are considered the playground of Gen Y and Gen Z. Contrary to previous generations, and against the background of globalization, their behavior is less influenced by

[4] SCR encompasses three processes: 1. objective social reality—the objective world of facts; 2. symbolic reality— reality filtered through, e.g., media content and arts; and 3. subjective social reality—the amalgamation of the first two realities in the consciousness of a person (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

their geographical location and more guided by the content they consume on social media (Seel Jr., 2018, p. 20). They were the first generations to embody the "technological consciousness" that coexists with phenomena such as hacking, cybersecurity, online hate speech, anonymous online identities, and so on. Thus, they have experienced both mainstream and extreme worldviews, and have absorbed the idea that digital media comprise a disharmonious, polarized, and fragmented space. Their natural desire for truth, self-esteem, values, and trust is continually challenged, and the resulting cognitive dissonance pushes them towards attempts at self-protection in digital spaces (Robinson, 2020, pp. 107–122). Robinson proposed that since millennial culture and technology are interconnected, the optimistic tech-savvy generations should be guided toward a "neo-technoethics" in order to rethink their existence in the "digital ether." While struggling with the new complications of digital media life, they need to reincarnate their human nature by reconnecting to the real world through ancient tragic arts, finding their own version of Greek tragedy. It will help their optimistic minds to deal with suffering, and through aesthetic encounters they will gain a better understanding of life and technoethics (Robinson, 2020, pp. 106–122).

Digital media, and particularly social media, have contributed significantly to our societies; as Milosevic (2018) and Cristiano (2020) have acknowledged, the digital context brings an array of new cultural traits and lifestyles that have disrupted traditional family patterns and reshaped young adults' need for meaning and belonging. They are continually exposed to an excess of information, which has not made these generations wiser with respect to media usage or improved their general critical thinking skills. On the contrary, they are deceived to believe that their digital devices and networks will bring them new insights. This deceit stems from the fact that digital media networks are framed as truly global, encyclopedic knowledge hubs aimed at creating neologism and understanding (Cristiano, 2020, pp. 44–49).

Milosevic (2018, pp. 195–196) argued that we need an ethical framework to protect children from this intricate web of deceit and support young adults' critical thinking skills in the age of digital media. Resonating with Milosevic's concerns about the mental health of young adults, the Wall Street Journal (2021) recently revealed data, based on internal Facebook leaks, showing the harmful effects of Instagram on children's mental and physical health. In a robust response, Vaidhyanathan (2018, pp. 177–195) declared Facebook to be a

perverse "disinformation machine" facilitating atrocities and extremism around the globe. However, in a longitudinal study on social media and adolescents' empathy, Vossen and Valkenburg (2016, p. 123) showed that adolescents who regularly use social media "improved their ability to share and understand the feeling of others over time".

In light of the aforementioned damaging effects, Mergler (2020) concluded in her review of academic literature on millennials that—despite ongoing claims in the US media—they are not a homogenous generational cohort in the US, but rather a diverse group of young adults. Furthermore, Mergler argued that the American generational cohort cannot always be juxtaposed with their European counterparts, though this comparison can be more accurately made according to sociodemographic classifications. For instance, upper-class Polish millennials have a lot of commonalities with their American counterparts. Even so, they should not be considered egoistic, spoiled, and narcissistic, as the majority of this generation in Europe suffered as a result of the 2008 financial crisis and the social setbacks of neoliberal policies in many European countries (Mergler, 2020, p. 168). Mergler (2020, pp. 167–179) also suggested that many Polish millennials sympathize with far-right movements on social media and seek for career opportunities outside their homeland, particularly in other EU countries and the UK. In a representative sample of German millennials, Kramp and Weichert (2020) also recognized a diversity of sentiments, attitudes, and sociodemographic variables. The German scholars stressed that understanding and interpreting their behavior in social life requires examining both their digital engagement and their reliance on the digital media environment and social media networks (Kramp & Weichert, 2020, pp. 148–163).

Atay (2020) suggested that the engagement of young adults in the digital realm stems from the fact that they were born into a "convergence culture, where old and new media collide." Their identities are constructed and mediated in a society overloaded with media; they are engulfed by a wide range of digital technologies from early childhood. This convergence culture gives millennials the opportunity to seek and construct meaning in cyberspace and address their material and spiritual needs by, for example, articulating societal issues or pursuing social digital activism (Atay, 2020, pp. 21–33). This notion of a conflicting convergence culture is supported by Ayad at the UK Institute for Strategic Dialogue, who

concluded in a study that Gen-Z Salafi[5] activists are increasingly building a digital media network. This network has the objective of starting a "culture war" and attacking out-groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community, the global "Jewish Cabal," and secularists. Gen-Z Salafists were born during the toxic war on terror, and gradually felt that their identity was under pressure from both outside and within the Muslim community. Hence, they developed a subculture defined by video gaming skills, encrypted messages, hyperactive social media presences, and conspiracy theories; they replicated the digital visual language, imagery, and aesthetics used by White far-right extremists (Ayad 2021, p. 34-37).

## The Need for Meaning & Religious fundamentalism

Now that we have mapped Gen Y, Gen Z and conceptualized the media ecology, let us turn to Gen Y and Gen Z's need for meaning and them being the intended addressees of fundamentalist belief. So, what do young adults need? Abraham Maslow's theory/pyramid of needs starts with basic needs (food, water), safety needs (security and safety), psychological needs (belongingness, love, esteem) and finishes with self-fulfillment needs (self-actualization) to achieve full potential in life (Maslow, 1987). Roy Baumeister (1991) stated in the *Meaning of Life* an overlapping concept that humans need purpose, values, efficacy and self-worth to give meaning to their lives. However, though recent research supports the view that "universal human needs appear to exist regardless of cultural differences", the ordering (pyramid) of human needs within the hierarchy was inexact, as an individual can be motivated by higher growth needs despite lower-level deficiency in other needs (McLeod, 2018). So, how may religious fundamentalists address these needs of young adults?

In his global analysis of fundamentalism, Ruthven (2004) stated that throughout history people have searched for and constructed meaning and sacred values in religious systems. He argued that religious fundamentalist ideologies are not confined to one belief system and may inhabit contradictory worldviews. Similarly, Marty and Appleby (2002)

[5] Salafism is a denomination of Sunni Islam based on the desire to live according to the Islam practiced by the prophet Mohammed and his followers. Salafism's strict value system and strong in-group identity is particularly popular with Muslim youth cultures in Europe and North America; it has a strong presence on social media networks (ISD, 2021).

defined fundamentalism in their comprehensive *Fundamentalism Project* in a manner that is not confined to one particular religious or secular worldview. Currently, the term "fundamentalism" is applied to various groups including far-right and nationalistic movements, but it originated among early 20th century American Protestant groups, for whom it was a "nom de guerre" in their fight against modernity (secularization, urbanization, and industrialization). They used it to distinguish themselves from other mainstream Christian movements; it emphasized their belief in sacred texts as the main source of knowledge and meaning (Almond et al., 2003, pp. 1–21).

Current scholarly discourse defines religious fundamentalism based on characteristics and family resemblances: a contemporary movement, against modernity, containing religious dogmas and sacred values, believing in sole accountability to God, based on a grand historical narrative, and functioning as an anxiety-buffer against the terror of human existence (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Marty & Appleby, 2002; Taylor, 2004; Ruthven, 2007; Salzman, 2008; Peels, 2022). Researchers have pointed out that the circumstances and situations of religious fundamentalism are often manifested in cultures of violence (Clarke, 2016; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Berger, 2018). Other scholars have argued that the term is also used as a negative frame for particular religious groups. For example, the term fundamentalism was applied by media pundits in Canada as a moniker to frame conservative Christians' beliefs (Stiller, 2007, cited in Haskell, 2009). Similarly, Kundnani (2014) explained how since 9/11 politicians in Western countries have applied the term fundamentalism as a stereotypical representation to frame and diminish minority Muslim communities. Discussing the framing of fundamentalism in the media, Missier (2021, pp. 29–30) suggested the following definition of religious fundamentalism:

> *Fundamentalism should not be considered a nuclear cohesive family of beliefs, ideas and practices disseminated by religious leaders and scholars, but as a family with a rather diffused social construction of reality, different sets of modern social imaginaries[6] and epistemic authority.[7]*

[6] See Taylor (2007, pp. 171–172): "How ordinary people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations."

The emphasis of "diffused social constructs," with different "social imaginaries" and "epistemic authority" encompasses the whole way of life of fundamentalists in what Anderson (1991) called *imagined communities*. Anderson argued that our social existence in national communities emerged several hundred years ago, and that nations and communities were fabricated and imagined in order to construct the perception that individuals' lives had value in a particular community. Similarly, fundamentalists construct social and cultural religious communities and seek sacred values in these imagined "nationalistic" in-groups while criticizing out-groups. They also frequently pursue the solace of an imagined glorious past such as a strong Islamic caliphate; belief in higher beings, spirits and the Kingdom of God; a pre-Darwinian understanding of world; the historic great Bharat Hindu community; a promised holy land; or an all-white society.

It is important to understand why religious fundamentalists seek an imagined religious community in digital media with people they have only met online. In this regard, Salzman (2008) and Bouzar (2018) asserted that fundamentalism is an alternative dogma and "anxiety driven response" based on the search for meaning and sacred values in a religion or worldview; it is hoped this will provide "an anxiety buffer" against the daily threats of human existence and modernity. His assumptions are based on Solomon et al.'s (2004) well-grounded terror management theory (TMT). This existential theory states that generally humans, in order to see themselves as valuable and increase their self-esteem, first create a defense system of sacred values which provides a sense of meaning and then pursue protection within communities to establish a specific culture and religious worldview; subsequently, they can construct psychological anxiety-buffers against possible threats and danger (Salzman, 2008, p. 326; Friedman & Rholes, 2008, pp. 24–25). Salzman argued that religious fundamentalists develop psychological constructs which protect them against anxiety. By continuously enhancing these constructs, they reduce anxiety in response to subsequent sacred value and sociocultural threats against their faith and community stemming from concepts such as globalization, racial purity, secularism, and modernity. For Atran and

[7] See Zagzebski (2012, p. 201) for a justification of the religious authority thesis: "The authority of my religious community is justified for me by my conscientious judgement that if I engage in the community, following its practical directives and believing its teachings, the results will survive my conscientious self-reflection upon my total set of psychic states better than if I try to figure out what to do and believe in the relevant domain in a way that is independent of Us."

Axelrod (2008), the drive to defend religious/non-religious and "non-negotiable sacred values" is part of people's identities. This defense is often the cause of conflicts:

> *Sacred values are moral imperatives that seem to drive behavior independently of any concrete material goal. They often have their basis in religion, but such transcendent core secular values as a belief in the importance of individual morality, fairness, reciprocity, and collective identity (i.e., "justice or my people") can also be sacred values.*

According to this view, secular and worldly objects, people, places and so on can be constructed by believers into religious rites and sacred values. Ginges and Atran (2013, 275-276) pointed out that the love for sacred values that can lead to extreme human behavior, e.g. radical sacrifice, can be motivated by moral commitment if an imagined social order is being threatened.

Similarly, Tietjen (2022, 122) explains that extremists' hostility against out-groups is intertwined with the love for their sacred values, ingroup identity and joint suffering. They are resentful about the violation of their sacred values, but also feel distressed and resentful toward people or organizations who speak on behalf of the ruling class who they consider corrupt and immoral. In an earlier study Becker called this duty in religion to implement God's will: "The Quest for ideal Heroism". For religious fundamentalists this ideal unlocks a great deal of power, purpose and meaning in life (Becker, 1971, p. 180).

## Religious fundamentalism and digital media

There has been a significant amount of research on the impact of religious fundamentalism in digital media on young adults. Various authors (Bjola & Pamment, 2019, p. 2-6; Koehler, 2015, p. 131; Von Behr, 2013, p. 16-17) have indicated that the Internet has become a digital space in which extremists look for like-minded people with similar ideological positions and opinions, possibly leading to individual radical behavior. For example, Islamic religious leaders in Saudi Arabia are using digital communication, e.g., websites, to convince young

Muslims to adhere to Islamic tradition and reject modernity and Western values (Ruthven, 2004, pp. 198–199). Equally, in studies on Hindu nationalism, scholars concluded that the right-wing Indian Hindutva (Hindu Nationhood) movement actively uses websites and social media networks to target the Hindu diaspora in Western countries, promoting their interpretation of the Hindu faith and identity (Therwath, 2012; Robinson, 2004). In many Western European countries, a large number of second- and third-generation immigrants (Gens Y and Z) grow up in such a polarized and partisan environment.

Von Behr found, in case studies on the Internet, evidence that it generally plays an important role in the radicalization of violent extremists and terrorists. In fact, it has become a key source for mediating extremist propaganda. The extremists create digital "echo chambers"[8] with like-minded individuals to mutually enhance their beliefs. In a study on right-wing lone wolf terrorists Nordtorp Mølmen & Aasland Ravndal (2021) supported the notion that digital media facilitate hate content, legitimize extreme worldviews and violence to insular communities through echo chamber environments. Researchers indicate "isolation, facilitation and echoing" as the main contemporary components for online radicalization and that the virtual experience can radicalize these isolated individuals without any face-to-face interaction. However, Van Behr's findings also suggest that the Internet is not a substitute for in-person interaction and offline radicalization events. Thus, digital communication should be regarded as a powerful complementary technology with an instrumental purpose in radicalization (Von Behr et al., 2013). On this point, Gaudette et al. (2020) also conclude in their study on former right-wing extremists in Canada that the online engagement and offline connectivity of extremists are mutually entangled as they embody their identities in both spheres often through online propaganda and offline community building and gatherings (Gaudette, Scrivens & Venkatesh, 2020, 1351-1352).

Similarly, Dubois & Blank (2018, pp. 729-745) challenge the impact of echo chamber theory claiming that it is not tested in the larger media ecology and most likely only a small number of the public are engulfed in an insular echo chamber. In a survey of adult internet

[8] See Nguyen (2018, pp. 145-150) An echo chamber is a social epistemic structure in the digital social media ecology in which other opposing voices of the society are excluded and ridiculed. The algorithms of digital social media networks are designed to keep like-minded users in closed ideological circles (chambers) of information and opinion. As a result a person only resonate the biased attitude of the group.

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users (n= 2000) in the UK, the researchers also concluded that most respondents who showed interest in the political sphere have a diverse media consumption in the media environment and are most likely to bypass the insular echo chambers. The notion of echo chambers can particularly be contested for the younger generation of digital media users. Dubois & Blank concluded that in this study particularly respondents aged 18-34, were not part of an insular digital community, had multiple social media accounts, and verified content on various digital sources in the larger media ecology. More evidence to challenge the echo chamber hypothesis is provided by Törnberg (2022, pp. 8-11) in an agent-based computational modelling study on *how digital media drive affective polarization through partisan sorting*. He suggests that digital media networks are not only spaces to exchange ideas and engage in political controversy, but are hotspots “for social identity formation and for symbolic displays of solidarity with allies and difference from outgroups”. Törnberg identified “conflict” as the main driver for polarization on digital media network, rather than an isolated local bubble of like-minded groups in echo chambers. Thus, digital media does not cut us off from conflicting ideas, but the networks catapults us into political controversy and encourages us to identify with partisan groups or movements.

However, the aforementioned studies may not capture the voice of young adults from marginalized communities with controversial views and attitudes in insular digital communities as explained in Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence theory (1974, pp. 43-51; 1993, pp.194-182). Noelle-Neumann’s findings stress that people who consider themselves part of the majority *vox populi* in society are more likely to articulate their opinions and feelings on media platforms in the public sphere than those marginalized and having a “minority opinion”.

Also noteworthy is a global study on “Youth and Violent Extremism on Social Media” (UNESCO, 2017). Researchers concluded after reviewing 500 empirical studies around the globe that though the Internet plays a facilitating role in spreading hate speech, right-wing rhetoric, and religious fundamentalism, no tangible (causal) relation was found between violent radicalization of youth and the Internet and social media. The study suggested this may be due to insufficient empirical research that precisely defines and studies the real effects of social media strategies on youth. For this reason Valentini et al. (2020) analyzed

conversations in chatrooms of message app Telegram used by ISIS like-minded individuals and videos with radical content published by ISIS on https://jihadology.net/. The study concluded that the radicalization of young adults joining ISIS to fight in Syria materialized in both an online and offline sphere, which they named the *onlife* echo systems. This is a hybrid environment where users' online conversations and activities are to some extent influenced by their day-to-day behavior in real life and vice versa (Valentini, et al. 2020, p. 12).

On a critical note Whittaker (2022) points out that when studying radicalization, researchers should focus more on the role of the media ecology in the radicalization process and consider "holistic theories" which transcend the digital communication technologies. Mining the social norms, values, and identifying the individuals internal and external stress susceptibility can help us in better understanding the bigger picture of online and offline radicalization (Whittaker, 2022, pp. 27-35).

In summary, the answer to the question what role digital media play in the radicalization of young adults is not easy. Various studies have highlighted that Gen Y and Gen Z are increasingly interacting digitally and have similarities and differences in their socioeconomic development, education, and mindset. Furthermore, digital mass media have manipulative power, influence the social attitudes of young adults, and determine the perception of social constructs in society. However, the impact of echo chambers on young adults can be challenged, as they have a high degree of agency to exercise regarding their digital media diet and digital behavior. Indeed, studies have revealed a high impact of communication technology in the lives of young adults, albeit inconclusive on the specific role and influence of the digital media sphere on hate content in the radicalization of Gen Y and Gen Z. Thus, radicalization should be considered a hybrid process with an amalgamated online and offline reality encompassing the whole of modern social imaginaries of young adults.

## Countering the impact of online and offline extremism on Gen Y and Z

Based on the analysis above, this section addresses the following questions: what do we know about the relationships among Gen Y and Gen Z, religious fundamentalism, and digital

media? What are the implications if propaganda in digital media are challenged as most important aspect of radicalization? What counterstrategies are there to prevent the impact of online and offline extremism on Gen Y and Gen Z? Finally, given the empirical evidence in Sections 2 and 3 that extreme content and rhetoric in digital media seems to impact Gen Y and Gen Z when they search for a sense of meaning and belonging, it is important to ask if the influence is licit/illicit or legitimate/illegitimate. These are urgent issues; as Northalft et al. (2019) concluded in a study on the influence of extreme digital content in Western democracies, disinformation is thriving on digital media, and secular Western societies are not equipped to curb its influence and discuss what is legitimate and what is not.

Manor and Crilley (2019) asserted that countering violent extremist (CVE) activities on social media by governments and organizations should involve dialogue with the target audience rather than simply publishing counternarratives. Starting strategic in-person dialogues with youth and community leaders is part of the so-called *civil society approach* in CVE (Pamment & Bjola, 2018), which aims to empower young adults who are susceptible to (online) radicalization. In a study on countering extremists on social media networks, Ganesh and Bright (2020) emphasized the need to involve all stakeholders (government, private sector, and civil society) to develop strategic communication and increase the role of "informal actors" to contest the social norms of extremist milieus. However, a recent web-based survey among 156 young Muslims in British universities showed that UK counterterrorism policy (which includes the use of higher education institutions as surveillance agencies to prevent student radicalization) is ineffective and discriminatory, and that "damage is done to the staff-student relationship and [students'] mental health" (Abbas et al., 2021). The findings of this study confirmed previous findings on priming individuals' in-group bias for CVE purposes. Willems' (2016, pp. 2-36) concluded that 'priming immortality' did not appear effective on molding virtues such as respect and forgiveness in order to reduce out-group member biases significantly. On a more practical level, Koehler & Fiebig (2019, pp. 56-57) concluded after an analysis of a sample of 12 international deradicalization training courses (on Salafi-Jihadism and extremism) that most often the modules lacked the practical outcomes of recommended content in academic literature, adding that the CVE programs also

should include more evidence-based content and competences to meet the requirements used in the field of deradicalization.

Thus, evidence for the impact of counter-discourses is also inconclusive, and we know that children and young adults enjoy watching violent and extreme media content as it satisfies their need for sensation (i.e., sensation seeking theory; Zuckerman, 1996, pp. 147–160). This raises the question of how we can protect Gen Y and Gen Z from hate speech and violence when they seek meaning on social media networks. Ghosh et al. (2016) suggested that, to counter misinformation, the role of education incorporating "critical pedagogy" should be enhanced as a "soft" policy. This approach aims to empower pupils at a young age to become critical citizens and help them to cope with aggression triggered by emotions, anxiety, perceptions, and interpretations of social circumstances. It is also assumed that the social and family structures of children and young adults, particularly parents and educators, can prevent negative media effects by providing counternarratives, explanations, and interpretations of media content (Aly et al., 2014). In view of this, global digital literacy education in schools aimed at helping young people evaluate and query digital concepts and media content, based on discussions with teachers, parents, and peer groups, is particularly valuable when countering (online) extremism that could possibly lead to radicalization.

Given the rise of religious fundamentalism at national and global levels, I will consider how civil society insights from education and intercultural communication can provide some guidance to prevent radicalization at the local level. So far, globalization has not resulted in a homogenous world culture; the various cultures and faiths often collide when they meet, but at the same time we learn about the many similarities. Against this background, and also with the aim to prevent "us-and-them" biases among religious communities and their cultures, a civil society collaborative project in the Netherlands invited theologians, priests, imams, pandits, and educators to empower primary school children by sharing religious themes, sacred values, and feasts e.g. Ramadan, Christmas, Diwali. This series was in line with an existing series of "encounters" developed by the Dutch Christian Educational Study Center (CPS), in which themes such as birth, growth, marriage, and death are discussed in an interreligious manner in a religiously pluralistic society (Roegholt, 1993).

This intercultural civil society communication program, called *Ontmoetingsonderwijs* (OO; "Encounters in Education"), is anchored in sharing the sacred values of world religions and aimed to help pupils experience the cultures of other religions and support educators in understanding the various cultural implications of a multireligious society. This strategy has also been implemented in secondary education with a focus on peaceful and tolerant coexistence in accordance with the secular, multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nature of Dutch society (Gerritsen, 2005). The "OO" pedagogical environment also tackles ongoing concerns about possible ethnic segregation resulting from religious education in mosques (Boterman, 2019). Additionally, in a recent study on education in mosques and the integration of Turkish–Dutch youth, researchers concluded that half of the 49 Turkish parents interviewed did not agree "that mosque education can play a role in children's integration". Parents felt that the younger generation has fewer integration challenges and relies more on the importance of mainstream Dutch schools, educators, and parents (Sözeri et al., 2022, p. 138).

Despite the strengths of the civil society collaborative approach, the "OO" program was not introduced nationwide and received scant attention from policy makers. Nonetheless, similar initiatives would be most welcome in secular and religiously pluralistic societies. This is particularly true in Europe, where discourse on religious fundamentalism and intergroup conflicts appears to be embedded in present and future social and cultural challenges such as secularization, migration, refugees, and responses to pluralism and diversity with religious and secular communities.

In summary, the main features of religious fundamentalism and digital media that are relevant to countering extreme media content have been highlighted in the "framework of influence and counterpropaganda/discourse" in the public sphere (Figure 1). This gives an overview of information flows, actors, and counterpropaganda measures. The variable *extremist groups* includes both religious fundamentalists and right-wing extremists, as there are many resemblances between the ideas and thoughts of these groups, such as preoccupation with purity and virtue, apocalyptic thinking, and feelings of victimhood and marginalization in society (Cassam, 2021, pp. 141–142).

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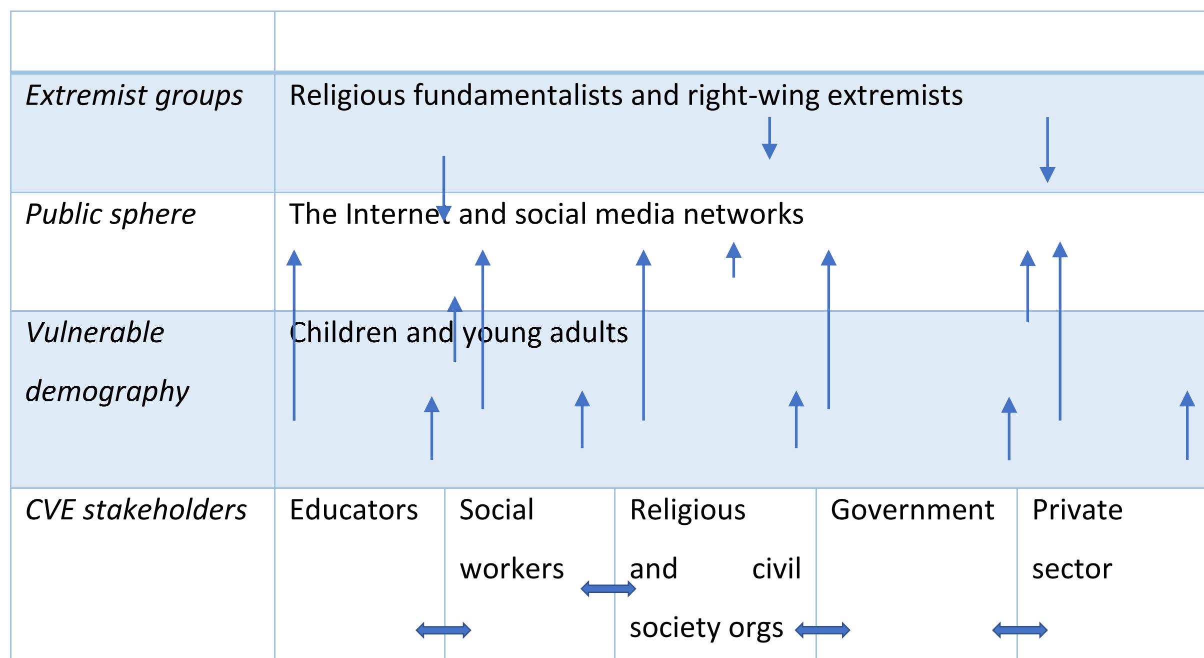


Figure 1. Framework of influence and counterpropaganda/discourse in the public sphere.

= Direction of influence; = Stakeholder cooperation; CVE[9]. countering violent extremism.

Source: Own creation (Clyde A. Missier)

## Conclusion

In this paper, I aspired to answer the questions: What theoretical mechanisms could explain how young adults (Gen Y and Gen Z) are attracted to fundamentalist discourses on digital media platforms?; What alternative perspectives can be used to prevent the effects of online and offline extremism on Gen Y and Gen Z?

Scholars disagree on the impact of digital media on people and society. Some argue that it brings more harm than good, while others embrace online freedoms as a benefit of technology and an asset for democratic values. In any case, this paper confirms the social media networks as a double-edged sword, its influence does not work like a devastating tsunami; their harmful content and images of violence are more like toxic elements in the air

[9] CVE = countering violent extremism.

we breathe, which gradually instill ideas and fundamentalist dogmas, cognitive virtues/vices, thinking styles, distrust and so on, in our minds and change the landscape in society. At the same time, the internet remains a socially constructed space for young individuals, which we could call their digital neighborhood, where they make choices, study, connect, play, and search for meaning in life, and even enhance their competence to share and recognize the feelings of others.

This article has identified that ideologies, cultures, and faiths are relentlessly mediated via digital media. As such, digital communication and direct access to search engines, websites, and social media networks have developed an assertive tech-savvy generation of young adults, who grew up in a totally different digital media sphere compared with Gen X and the post-war baby boomer generation. Online, this group is targeted with content backed by sponsors, influencers, aggressive consumer marketeers, as well as antagonistic political movements and extreme religious groups from home and abroad, looking for their attention in an ocean of data and information overload. However, in this digital media ecology, not all of them seek for the abundance of material possessions in life promised by globalization but search instead for meaning in life and a buffered identity.

In Shumpe et al.'s (2020) empirical study titled "Sensation seeking in political violence," the authors suggested that radicalization leading to violence is not a static, but a dynamic process. They mentioned how sensation seeking and the search for meaning are possible mechanisms by which young adults become susceptible to extreme beliefs and even inclined to support political violence. This inquiry also suggested that we must recognize that social media may empower young adults who were already vulnerable to and open for fundamentalist visions in their quest for meaning in daily life to connect with religious communities. The radicalized state-of-mind seems to offer "an anxiety buffer" against their human existence and daily struggle for acceptance in societies. Recent studies show that particularly young-adult minorities, just like young right-wing extremists, are frequently radicalized as adolescents; they seek meaning in imagined communities and use digital media and social media networks to connect and construct stories in digital social and cultural (religious and secular) communities. Young adults feel pressure from both their religious sacred values and the secularism in which they are raised. Some become estranged from their

parents, experience socioeconomic marginalization, and feel rejected. As a result, they can become susceptible to the narratives of fundamentalism in digital media, popular culture, modern music, state-of-the-art videos, and other forms of media content.

In Western countries young adults grow up in an environment with freedom and abundant choice. Indeed, this inquiry confirms young adults have the potential to be transformed from good Samaritans to martyrs aspiring noble sacrifice. The cause-and-effect relationship between radicalization and extreme digital media content appears to be fluid; as various inquiries illustrate, we still lack sufficient data covering an adequate period of time. Nonetheless, this paper's analysis allows us to say something about the effects of malicious online content on Gen Y and Gen Z. Specifically, it has identified anxiety, the search for meaning, and sensation seeking as possible mechanisms by which young adults become susceptible to the effects of malicious content. It seems reasonable to assume that, in addition to religion, direct access to digital media and other social drivers, threats, and grievances, as identified by Bouzar and Martin (2016), are at the root of radicalization.

In this context, identifying ways to prevent social insularity and young adults from being turned into violent fundamentalists is crucial. Given the earlier notion that the social impact of the various social media networks on young adults takes effect over a long period of time, we ought to begin by finding more evidence about its positive and negative effects on young adults. Meanwhile, we must continually develop practical and professional evidence-based deradicalization programs. Furthermore, it will be more fruitful to recognize the religious sacred values and norms of minorities while educating young adults on the values of Western secularism and religious pluralism. In this way, it may be possible to seek common grounds, shared sacred values and religious duties such as compassion and kindness, and make a significant difference in the hearts and minds to reduce the in-group bias phenomenon during adolescence. The suggested educational encounter perspective with focus on creating shared sacred values and cohesion between believers and non-believers to reverse intolerance and violence is in line with Barrelle's (2015, 228) and Whittaker's (2022, 35) argument to coin more "holistic theoretical" research to counter (online) radicalization. Finally, digital media can be considered a modern phenomenon, however the influence of media on the social imaginaries of Gen Y and Gen Z fits in Erik Erikson's (1963, p. 245) arguments made six

decades ago which are still relevant: The "mind or moratorium is the psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood" during which young adults search for the self, identity, values and beliefs.

More interdisciplinary qualitative research and quantitative social media analysis is necessary to shed further light on the fundamentalism phenomenon. This will enable us to review fundamentalist narratives, group communication norms, polarized views, misinformation, and other content in smaller digital media platforms to understand how these influence religion acquisition and maintenance, social imaginaries and epistemic authority, and trust among young adults in multiple cultures and religions.

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