How extremists are using COVID-19 to promote disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories

Briefing note for schools and further education providers

This briefing note is aimed at senior leaders, teachers, and safeguarding leads. It provides a short summary of the ways in which extremists have responded to COVID-19, highlighting the additional radicalisation risks for children and young people and recommended actions that settings can consider.

During the pandemic, we have seen a significant decline in Prevent referrals, raising concerns about the welfare of vulnerable children and young people. It is important that settings consider the radicalisation concerns, particularly as children and young people may have been exposed to disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories, sometimes called 'fake news', as extremists seek to exploit COVID-19 to spread hateful narratives and increase mistrust and division.

What do the terms 'disinformation', 'misinformation', and 'conspiracy theories' mean?

- '**Disinformation**' – This describes fake or misleading stories created and shared deliberately, often by a writer who might have a financial or political motive.

- '**Misinformation**' – This also describes fake or misleading stories, but in this case, the stories may not have been deliberately created or shared with the intention to mislead.

- '**Conspiracy theories**' – These offer a simplifying model for things that cannot be explained or easily understood. They typically involve an 'alternative' explanation for an event or situation to those provided by governments and official international bodies, sometimes suggesting a group, individual or organisation is responsible or hiding information from the public.

What are the radicalisation risks related to the impact of COVID-19?

- ***Exposure to misleading and hateful content***: Young people may have been exposed to fake stories or conspiracy theories about COVID-19, which attribute blame on minority groups.

- *Engagement with extremist individuals*: Young people may have become exposed to or engaged with extremist organisations or individuals, especially online.

- *Increased vulnerability to radicalisation*: COVID-19 may have increased vulnerability to radicalisation as children and young people may feel isolated, anxious, frustrated, and angry. This could increase the resonance of intolerant messaging and appeal of extremist groups or individuals offering explanations for the crisis.

What have been the extremist themes during the pandemic?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, false and misleading narratives about the virus have been spread, particularly online, often to place blame on 'out-groups' and minorities. This can further incite hatred, justify violence and divide communities. While some of this occurs on popular social media platforms, it can also be found on lesser-known, unregulated platforms. These sites can include easily available extreme and conspiratorial content.

The Commission for Countering-Extremism (CCE) have highlighted numerous examples of prominent extremist narratives relating to the pandemic. For example:

- Anti-Semitic conspiracies blaming the Jewish community for spreading the virus or suggesting that COVID-19 is a 'Jewish plot';
- Claims that British Muslims have flouted social distancing rules and spread COVID-19;
- Narratives promoting Anti-Chinese hatred;
- Daesh-inspired narratives claiming that the pandemic is divine punishment for the West's 'sinful' behaviours and using this to promote the need for a Caliphate in the West;
- Extreme right-wing conspiracies claiming that society is collapsing and that right-wing terrorism can accelerate its end through inciting social conflict, violence and ultimately a race war;
- Wider conspiracy theories relating to 5G, test and protect and anti-vax, which can be detrimental to public health messaging.

What actions can educators/school leaders take to prevent children and young people being radicalised during this time?

The education sector is best placed to understand the needs of their learners and will be familiar with support mechanisms already in place.

The following are measures that the sector should consider when assessing the radicalisation risk to children and young people:

1. Review your school or setting's safeguarding/risk assessment processes or procedures to ensure that they include the risks of radicalisation, and consider the impact of COVID-19 and the information in this briefing, as well as any local changes in risk or community tensions;

2. Ensure staff are familiar with the issues raised in this briefing to increase their confidence in recognising concerns;

3. Ensure both staff and learners are clear on the reporting procedures to raise concerns;

4. Dedicate time to rebuilding relationships between children and young people and trusted adults and positive role models, which may have been absent during the pandemic. This absence may have led to extremist narratives and individuals who are offering an explanation for the pandemic increasing in appeal and going unchallenged. Have 'safe space' discussions with learners and encourage staff to adopt 'active listening' approaches and to seek advice if they are concerned about a child or young person;

5. Review curriculum opportunities for critical thinking, online safety, and media literacy (further support and guidance can be found below).

What should staff do if they have specific concerns?
If you are concerned about a learner who may be vulnerable to radicalisation, your first course of action should be to follow your school or setting's safeguarding procedures.

What can I do to support the young people I work with?
Further support and guidance on extremism, radicalisation and the Prevent Duty can be found on the National Improvement Hub. Additional information can also be found at Educate Against Hate, Let's Talk About It, the Education Training Foundation and the London Grid for Learning (though note that these are not Scottish specific resources).

National organisations such as the NSPCC and the UK Safer Internet Centre offer information and guidance on how to use different social media platforms safely.

Here is a list of useful resources that can help students identify misleading content:

*   The SHARE Checklist – a Government website, offering five easy steps to follow to identify whether information might be false.

*   The BBC – this site offers a range of resources on understanding and responding to fake news. These include:
    *   BBC Real News – videos and lesson plans related to digital literacy
    *   BBC iReporter game – an interactive game that puts students in the shoes of a journalist, tasking them with working out what is real and accurate, whilst avoiding fake and false information.

*   National Literacy Trust – offers fake news and critical literacy resources, including lesson plans for different subject areas.

*   The News Literacy Project – offers resources to support pupils to understand what to trust in the digital age.

- [ShoutOut UK](#) – provides free weekly resources on online harms, conspiracy theories, how to spot fake news, and deal with online 'trolls'.

- [Civic Online Reasoning: How to evaluate online information](#) – provides classroom ready materials and complete curriculum on media literacy.

- [UN: Pause Before Sharing](#) – a campaign to help stop the spread of COVID-19 misinformation.