

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 extremist response to COVID-19, highlighting the additional radicalisation risks for children and young people and suggested actions for settings to take.

During the pandemic, local authorities have seen a significant decline in Prevent referrals, raising concerns about the welfare of vulnerable children and young people. As schools return **it is important that settings are extra-vigilant to radicalisation concerns, particularly as children and young people may have been exposed to disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories**, sometimes called ‘fake news’, due to extremists exploiting COVID-19 to spread hateful narratives and increase division.

How do we define disinformation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories?

- **‘Disinformation’** – ‘Fake or misleading stories created and shared deliberately, often by a writer who might have a financial or political motive’.ⁱ
- **‘Misinformation’** – This also means 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’** – Conspiracy theories offer a simplifying model for all 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?

- ***Exposed 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.
- ***Engaged 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, to force change or 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, less moderated platforms. These sites can include easily available extreme and conspiratorial content.

The Commission for Countering-Extremism (CCE)ⁱⁱ have highlighted the following prominent extremist narratives:

- **Antisemitism:** Several conspiracies blame the Jewish community for spreading the virus, including claims that COVID-19 is a Jewish plot, either as a hoax or a deliberate creation, to remove civil liberties and impose totalitarian rule.
- **Anti-Muslim hatred:** Claims that British Muslims have flouted social distancing rules and spread the virus have been promoted, particularly on social media. Whilst these have been disproven, high profile extreme right-wing influencers have blamed Muslims for the spread of the virus.
- **Anti-Chinese hatred:** Hate crime and hate incidents towards Chinese people have risen. Reports have found a 300% increase in the use of 'hashtags' that encourage or incite violence against China and Chinese people online.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Islamist:** Islamist extremists have used COVID-19 to support existing narratives to promote the need for a Caliphate over democratic society, claiming the pandemic is a divine punishment for the West's 'sinful' behaviours.
- **Right-wing:** Right-wing extremists have similarly exploited the pandemic to amplify the weakness and hypocrisy of democratic values like tolerance and freedom.
- **Accelerationism:** Extreme right-wing individuals have promoted the idea that society is inevitably collapsing, and that right-wing terrorism can accelerate its end through inciting social conflict, violence and ultimately a race war.
- **Wider conspiracy theories:** Extremist individuals have exploited a number of prevalent non-extremist conspiracy theories, related to 5G, track and trace and anti-vax, which can be detrimental to public health messaging. In some cases, these have been linked to antisemitic or other hateful narratives. Although Left-Wing, Anarchist and Single-Issue (LASI) extremism is low, a minority of individuals

have supported the targeting of 5G masts. This was based on the perception that masts allowed the government to control people.

What actions do settings need to take to protect students from radicalisation?

The education sector is **best placed to understand the needs of their learners** and will be familiar with supporting vulnerable children and young people. The following are suggestions the sector should consider when assessing the changes in the radicalisation risk to children and young people.

1. Review your setting's Prevent risk assessment, considering 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. During the pandemic, children and young people may have experienced the absence of trusted adults and positive role models. As such, extremist narratives and individuals offering an explanation for the pandemic may have had an increased appeal, and may have gone unchallenged. Dedicate time to rebuild these valuable relationships and have 'safe space' discussions with learners.
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 setting's safeguarding procedures. You can also visit [Educate Against Hate](#) to learn about additional support available outside of an education setting.

What can I do to support the young people I work with?

The Government has provided [advice](#) on how to keep young people safe online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations such as the [NSPCC](#) (including [NetAware](#)) and the [UK Safer Internet Centre](#) offer information and guidance on how to use different social media platforms safely.

Further support and guidance **on extremism, radicalisation and the Prevent Duty** can be found at [Educate Against Hate](#), [Let's Talk About It](#), the [Education Training Foundation](#) and the [London Grid for Learning](#).

Resources to support media literacy:

Media literacy enables young people to have the skills, knowledge and understanding to make full use of the opportunities of online content, including being able to better identify false and misleading content.

[The SHARE Checklist](#) – This is a Government website, offering five easy steps to follow to identify whether information might be false.

The BBC – The BBC offer a range of resources on understanding and responding to fake news. This includes:

- [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](#) – offer 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](#) – classroom ready materials and complete curriculum on media literacy.

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

Further resources on fact-checking can be found through [Ofcom](#).

Resources to facilitate sensitive discussions on extremism:

The Prevent duty states that settings “should be safe spaces in which children and young people can understand and discuss sensitive topics”. This is encouraged to

provide opportunities for young people to clarify their thinking, feel listened to and ask questions.

[Be Internet Citizens](#) – offers lesson resources on fake news, hate speech, emotional manipulation.

[OSCE: Addressing Antisemitism through Education](#) – a teaching aid for challenging antisemitic conspiracy theories.

[Generation Global](#) – provides resources to support teachers to explore, develop, and practice dialogue with learners, including guidance and activities to give teachers the skills to manage difficult conversations.

ⁱ BBC Bitesize, 'What's so bad about fake news?', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zjykkmn>

ⁱⁱ Commission for Countering Extremism, 'COVID-19: How hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic', (09/07/2020) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-how-hateful-extremists-are-exploiting-the-pandemic>

ⁱⁱⁱ Moonshot CVE, 'From #CoronaVirusCoverUp to #NukeChina: An analysis of conspiracy theories, hate speech and incitements to violence across Twitter related to Covid-19', (29/04/2020) <http://moonshotcve.com/covid-19-conspiracy-theories-hate-speech-twitter/>