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Abstract	This document presents the proceedings of the SMIDGE Final Conference, held in Brussels on 29 January 2026, which marked the culmination of the project's research, dissemination and stakeholder engagement activities. It summarises key presentations, panel discussions and stakeholder contributions, highlighting how SMIDGE findings and tools were shared with policymakers, researchers, media professionals and civil society actors.
Key Words	SMIDGE, online extremism, middle-aged adults, disinformation, media literacy, conference, proceedings, dissemination, exploitation, policy engagement, digital governance, counter-narratives, training resources

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0.3				
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Executive Summary

The SMIDGE Final Conference marked the culmination of the project's three years of research, dissemination and stakeholder engagement activities. Held in Brussels on 29 January 2026, the one-day in-person event brought together 53 participants from European institutions, public authorities, academia, civil society, media and practitioner communities to present consolidated findings and promote the uptake of SMIDGE tools and resources.

The programme combined a keynote and four thematic panels covering research evidence, media and cultural responses, cross-project learning and policy translation. Project outputs, including learning materials, counter-narrative videos, the documentary, database and MOOC, were showcased and discussed with stakeholders.

All sessions were recorded and have been made publicly available, and project materials will remain accessible for at least eight years after completion to support continued dissemination and exploitation. Overall, the conference successfully strengthened networks, increased visibility of SMIDGE results, and facilitated evidence-based dialogue between researchers and practitioners.

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List of Acronyms/abbreviations

Abbreviation	Explanation
SMIDGE	Social Media Narratives: Addressing Extremism in Middle-Age
DSA	Digital Services Act
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
DG CONNECT	Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology
AI	Artificial Intelligence
ENCODE	Emotions in EU Politics & Democratic Resilience (EU Project)
ARENAS	Analysis of and Responses to Extremist Narratives (EU project)
OppAttune	Countering Oppositional Political Extremism Through Attuned Dialogue: Track, Attune, Limit (EU Project)

Table 1: List of acronyms/abbreviations

Glossary of Terms

Term	Explanation
Counter-narratives	Communication materials designed to challenge, reframe or weaken extremist or misleading narratives by promoting alternative perspectives and critical reflection
Hybridised extremism	A form of extremism characterised by fluid ideological boundaries, mixing elements of different belief systems, conspiracy theories and cultural practices
Hype spaces	Online environments where emotionally charged, ambiguous or ironic content contributes to the gradual normalisation of extremist or polarising ideas
Risk-based governance	Regulatory approach focusing on systemic platform risks and harms rather than solely on individual pieces of illegal content
Pre-bunking	Preventive communication strategy that anticipates misinformation tactics and equips audiences to recognise manipulation before exposure
Media literacy	Skills enabling individuals to critically assess, verify and responsibly engage with information and digital media content

Table 2: Glossary of terms

1. Conference Overview

The International Conference titled ‘The Invisible Middle: Understanding Online Extremism in Middle-Aged Adults in Europe’ took place on 29 January 2026 between 09:00 – 17:00 CET at NH Brussels EU Berlaymont. The event represented the principal dissemination and stakeholder engagement milestone of the SMIDGE project. Conceived as both a knowledge-transfer and exploitation event, it provided a structured platform to consolidate and present the project’s research outcomes to relevant professional communities working on extremism prevention, media literacy, digital governance and democratic resilience.

Organised as an in-person, one-day international conference in Brussels, the event convened representatives from European institutions, national authorities, law enforcement bodies, universities, civil society organisations, journalists, fact-checkers and sister research initiatives. This

diverse composition ensured that discussions combined academic evidence with operational and policy perspectives.

The conference was designed not only to disseminate findings but also to encourage practical uptake of project outputs. Participants engaged directly with SMIDGE resources, including training materials, counter-narrative videos, documentary content, the database platform and the MOOC, and exchanged experiences on how these tools could be integrated into their professional contexts. Through moderated panels, interactive exchanges and informal networking, the event facilitated dialogue between researchers and practitioners and supported the translation of research insights into actionable strategies.

1.1 Methodological Note

This proceedings document is based on a combination of sources including the official conference agenda, speaker materials, full session recordings, verbatim transcripts, participant registration data, evaluation forms and internal monitoring notes. Panel reports were prepared through a systematic review of transcripts and recordings to ensure accurate and comprehensive coverage of presentations, discussions and audience interventions. Quantitative indicators derive from registration statistics, website and social media analytics, and dissemination monitoring records maintained throughout the project.

2. Objectives and Rationale

The organisation of a final conference was embedded within the project's dissemination and exploitation strategy as the main mechanism for synthesising three years of research into actionable knowledge for stakeholders. While the project had previously engaged audiences through webinars, seminars and targeted roundtables, the final conference aimed to consolidate these interactions into a single high-level event capable of convening multiple sectors simultaneously.

The central objective was to increase understanding of the often-overlooked role of middle-aged adults in the spread and normalisation of extremist, polarising and misleading narratives online. Existing research and policy interventions frequently prioritise youth audiences; however, SMIDGE research demonstrated that middle-aged adults are highly active online, occupy influential social and professional positions, and frequently act as nodes through which harmful narratives circulate within families, workplaces and communities. Addressing this demographic therefore represents an important gap in current prevention strategies.

The conference further sought to translate research into practice by demonstrating how SMIDGE tools can be adopted in professional settings. Particular emphasis was placed on educational and training resources, counter-narrative approaches and policy guidelines that could be directly integrated into institutional workflows.

Finally, the event aimed to create durable connections between EU-funded initiatives and stakeholder organisations to ensure that exploitation of results continues beyond the funding period.

3. Event Organisation and Logistics

The conference was organised by Inclusive Europe and hosted at the NH Brussels EU Berlaymont, located in the European quarter of Brussels. The format was exclusively in person to maximise networking opportunities and facilitate in-depth discussion. The programme spanned a full working day, including registration, keynote remarks, four thematic panels, a documentary screening and closing reflections.

A dedicated “[Final Conference](#)” page was created on the project website to centralise all relevant information. This page provided the conference rationale, detailed agenda, speaker biographies, registration procedures and logistical guidance. Registration was managed through a structured online Microsoft form collecting participant profiles, affiliations and consent for recording. Confirmation emails were sent automatically, and reminders were circulated in advance of the event.



Promotion relied on a combination of targeted and open dissemination. Invitations were distributed to approximately 1,075 contacts drawn from EU institutions, research networks, law enforcement bodies, media organisations, fact-checking initiatives, think tanks and civil society groups. Additionally, a total of 457 Members of the European Parliament were invited to the event through personalised email invitations. Consortium partners further circulated the invitation through their own mailing lists and professional networks. The event was also promoted through

project social media channels. The sister projects, ARENAS and OppAttune, also helped disseminate the event through their own social media channels.

Although unforeseen transport disruptions reduced attendance, recordings and materials were shared with registered participants who could not attend, ensuring that engagement was not lost.

During registration, participants received a structured conference pack designed to support both engagement during the event and continued use of project resources afterwards. Each attendee was provided with a branded SMIDGE folder containing the printed conference agenda and a personalised participant badge displaying their name and organisation. The badge also incorporated QR codes linking directly to the conference webpage and to the post-event evaluation form, facilitating easy digital access to materials and feedback tools. A printed media kit was additionally distributed, including a concise overview of the project, key findings, consortium information and direct links and QR codes to the project website and core outputs such as the MOOC, database and audiovisual resources.

To systematically capture participant feedback, an evaluation form was prepared in advance of the event, collecting structured input on the quality and relevance of each panel, overall content, organisation and participant expectations. In parallel, interactive engagement was encouraged during coffee breaks through the display of a QR code linking to a Mentimeter platform, where attendees were invited to share testimonials, reflections and short responses in real time. These combined measures enabled both formal evaluation and informal participant interaction.

4. Participant Profile and Stakeholder Representation

The final audience reflected the project's intention to engage a broad cross-sector community. Participants represented academia, European institutions, law enforcement agencies, international organisations, NGOs and the media. This diversity supported the conference's aim of fostering dialogue between research, policy and practice.

Participant affiliation overview

Category	Organisations represented	Number
Universities & research	KU Leuven, VUB, Ghent University, CNRS, University of Coimbra, others	18
EU institutions	European Parliament, European Commission, Europol, CEPOL	12
Law enforcement	Police Brussels West, Federal Police Liège, Counter Terrorism Policing UK	5
Civil society & NGOs	Transparency International EU, Alliance4Europe, CDT Europe, Unia	5
Media & journalism	Freelance journalists, Agenda	13

Category	Organisations represented	Number
Total		53

Table 3 Participant Affiliation Overview

5. Programme Structure

The programme combined presentations, moderated discussions and interactive exchanges. It opened with a welcome and keynote contextualising the origins of SMIDGE and the rationale for focusing on the “invisible middle”, followed by four thematic panels addressing complementary perspectives. Each panel was moderated to ensure structured dialogue and audience participation. Panel II also accommodated a documentary screening.

6. Detailed Panel Proceedings

6.1 Opening Remarks and Keynote Address

The conference opened with welcome remarks from Inclusive Europe, which situated the event within the broader trajectory of the SMIDGE project and emphasised the significance of the final conference as both a moment of reflection and a transition toward sustained exploitation of results. The opening statements underscored that after three years of research and collaboration across multiple countries and disciplines, the consortium had generated a substantial body of empirical evidence and practical tools that now required translation into policy and practice communities. The final conference was therefore framed not as a closing ceremony, but as a mechanism for ensuring continuity and long-term impact.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr Sara Wilford, Scientific Coordinator of the project and associate professor from De Montfort University, who presented a retrospective narrative on the origins, motivations and evolution of SMIDGE. Her intervention provided both conceptual grounding and strategic orientation for the day’s discussions. She described how much of the public and academic debate around online extremism has traditionally concentrated on younger populations, particularly adolescents and students, based on assumptions that radicalisation primarily affects youth. However, she noted that emerging evidence increasingly contradicts this view. Middle-aged adults, she argued, are among the most active and influential users of digital platforms. They participate intensively in social media discussions, share political content within family and professional networks, and often act as trusted intermediaries in their communities. Despite this, their digital behaviours and vulnerabilities remain comparatively under-researched.

Drawing directly on the project’s rationale, she referred to this group as “in many ways an invisible middle”. She explained that the SMIDGE project was initiated specifically to address this gap by examining how extremist narratives, misinformation and polarising content intersect with everyday digital practices of adults who are neither digital natives nor digitally excluded, but who nonetheless occupy central positions in information ecosystems.

The keynote highlighted that this demographic's influence extends beyond individual online consumption. Middle-aged adults frequently shape offline attitudes within families, workplaces and local communities, meaning that online narratives they engage with often translate into broader societal consequences. For this reason, Dr Wilford stressed that prevention strategies focusing exclusively on youth risk overlooking a major vector of influence. She argued that “if we want to understand how narratives travel and take root, we must look at the networks where trust already exists, and very often those networks are maintained by adults in midlife.”



She also reflected on the interdisciplinary nature of the project, emphasising the combination of legal analysis, social network modelling, qualitative interviews, surveys and educational design. This integration of methods allowed SMIDGE not only to describe the problem but also to develop practical responses. The keynote concluded with a call to the audience to view the day as a shared learning space where research findings could be interrogated, refined and connected to real-world action. She encouraged active participation and collaboration beyond the life of the project, noting that “research has value only if it moves beyond reports and into the hands of the people who need it.”

This framing effectively established the intellectual foundation for the subsequent panels by articulating both the problem definition and the project's applied orientation.

6.2 Panel I – Presentation of SMIDGE Findings

Panel I formed the analytical backbone of the conference and was devoted to presenting the project's empirical findings in detail. Moderated by Dr Wilford, the session moved progressively from regulatory considerations to behavioural insights and finally to exploitation pathways.

The first presentation was delivered by Professor Giovanni Ziccardi from the University of Milan, representing the legal research strand of the consortium. He introduced the work of his team by clarifying that their task had been divided into two complementary components: first, an examination of the legal challenges posed by conspiracy theories and disinformation within existing European frameworks, and second, the formulation of policy recommendations for platforms, regulators and other stakeholders. He stressed that the increasing exposure of ordinary, socially integrated adults to conspiracy narratives creates a fundamentally different regulatory problem from earlier models of extremism, which tended to focus either on organised extremist groups or on vulnerable youth populations.

Prof. Ziccardi explained that from a legal standpoint, conspiracy theories present what he described as a “structural challenge.” Most such narratives are not illegal in themselves. They are framed as opinions, speculations or interpretations and are therefore protected under freedom of expression, including Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. As a result, law “cannot and should not aim to suppress beliefs as such.” The issue, he argued, lies not in the existence of false beliefs but in their systemic effects. He enumerated these effects as erosion of trust in institutions, delegitimisation of democratic processes, polarisation of public discourse, and in some cases the facilitation of hate crimes or violence. This distinction marked a shift away from criminalisation towards governance.

He described a broader transformation in European regulatory philosophy, highlighting the move from content-based repression to what he termed risk-based governance. Instead of asking whether individual statements are illegal, policymakers now focus on how information circulates, how it is amplified, and how platform design contributes to harm. In his words, the law should act “not as a censor but more as an architect of the informational environment.” He cited the Digital Services Act as an example of this approach, which recognises “systemic risks” emerging from recommendation systems, monetisation models and attention economies.

Particular relevance to middle-aged adults was emphasised. Unlike younger digital natives, many in this demographic enter online spaces with relatively high trust in institutional authority but limited understanding of algorithmic amplification. Conspiracy content often mimics journalistic or academic forms and thereby exploits this gap. According to Ziccardi, this creates a form of structural vulnerability that is not rooted in individual failure but in platform architecture. He therefore argued that responsibility must extend beyond users to those who design and profit from these systems. Platforms, he said, can no longer be treated as neutral intermediaries. Even if they do not create harmful content, they decisively shape its visibility, reach and persistence.

He concluded by emphasising that law alone is insufficient and must be complemented by shared governance, media literacy and stakeholder cooperation. Addressing extremism among middle-aged adults requires what he called a “paradigm shift” from repression to resilience and from youth-centric approaches to lifelong epistemic support.

Following this legal perspective, Dr Line Nybro Petersen from the University of Copenhagen, who is also the coordinator of the project, presented the theoretical framework developed within SMIDGE to understand evolving online extremism dynamics. She began by noting that while many studies

acknowledge a “social media dimension,” they often fail to explain how the specific affordances of platforms create conditions in which extremism mutates and spreads. Her team therefore sought to conceptualise these conditions more systematically.

She introduced the concept of “hype spaces,” alternatively described as hybridised preparatory extremism. Drawing on recent intelligence assessments and extremism research, she explained that contemporary radicalisation increasingly involves blurred ideological boundaries. Individuals mix elements from different extremist traditions, conspiracy theories and cultural references, creating unstable and personalised belief systems. She referenced terms used by security agencies such as “hybridised extremism,” “salad bar extremism,” and “mixed or unclear motivations” to illustrate this phenomenon.



Dr. Petersen argued that hybridisation occurs not only at the level of ideology but also through aesthetics, practices and technologies. To illustrate this, she presented examples where violent actors were celebrated through meme culture, fandom practices and humour typically associated with entertainment communities. In one cited case, users treated a violent attacker as if he were a celebrity or fictional character, creating memes and affectionate commentary. Such practices, she suggested, normalise or trivialise violence and blur moral boundaries.

She further explained that conspiracy theories frequently function as bridges between mainstream discourse and extremist legitimisation. Individuals who adopt conspiratorial explanations are statistically more likely to view violence as justified. However, rather than labelling entire communities as extremist, the SMIDGE framework describes these environments as “preparatory,” meaning they create conditions that may facilitate radicalisation. This distinction was intended to avoid overgeneralisation while still recognising risk.

Petersen identified three domains in which hype spaces operate: actors, practices and content. Actors include influencers, celebrities or alternative media figures who amplify narratives. Practices include collaborative “online sleuthing” or collective reinterpretation of events into conspiratorial stories. Content tends to be ambiguous, ironic and easily shareable, allowing plausible deniability. She demonstrated how even humorous or poetic memes can transmit conspiratorial ideas, making them socially acceptable and emotionally engaging. Her presentation highlighted how such dynamics infiltrate mainstream feeds, meaning users encounter them passively rather than actively seeking them out.

The panel then moved from theory to empirical evidence. Professor Kalypso Iordanou from UCLan Cyprus presented results from surveys conducted with middle-aged adults recruited across several European countries. The survey of 635 middle-aged adults across several EU countries examined the ability to discern misinformation on topics of immigration, vaccines and climate change. Participants completed tasks measuring misinformation discernment, reasoning complexity and conspiratorial thinking. She described the experimental design in detail, explaining that respondents were shown realistic headlines containing both accurate and misleading information and asked to judge credibility.

The findings indicated that time spent on social media negatively correlated with the ability to distinguish accurate from inaccurate content. Immigration-related misinformation proved particularly difficult for participants to assess correctly compared with topics such as vaccination or climate change. Political orientation also influenced discernment, with more left-leaning respondents showing somewhat higher accuracy. Interestingly, traditional demographic variables such as gender, education level or income did not significantly predict performance, suggesting that formal education alone does not equip individuals to navigate contemporary information environments.

Professor Iordanou emphasised the importance of epistemic beliefs. Participants who prioritised emotional reactions when evaluating claims were less successful at identifying misinformation, whereas those emphasising evidence-based reasoning performed better. She concluded that training should focus not only on facts but on reasoning processes, encouraging perspective-taking and critical evaluation skills.

Dr. Vasiliki Christodoulou from UCLan Cyprus presented the qualitative strand of the SMIDGE research, reporting on the findings from two complementary series of focus groups designed to explore how middle-aged adults encounter, interpret and respond to misinformation, conspiracy narratives and extremist content in their everyday digital practices.

She began by outlining the methodological structure of the study. Two sets of focus groups had been conducted. The first set was exploratory and involved middle-aged citizens, with the objective of understanding how they engage with social media, how frequently they encounter questionable or conspiratorial content, and what strategies they employ when assessing credibility. These sessions were conducted across six countries and involved 46 participants. The second set targeted professionals, including journalists, influencers and media practitioners, and involved 19

participants. A thematic analysis approach was subsequently applied to both datasets in order to identify recurrent patterns, perceptions and coping strategies.

Turning to the citizen discussions, Dr Christodoulou reported that one of the most dominant themes concerned the practical difficulty of verifying information. Participants consistently described cross-checking as effortful, time-consuming and cognitively demanding. While many recognised the importance of verification, they explained that in everyday life they often lacked the time or knowledge required to do so systematically. As she summarised, participants were “really concerned with the effort required in cross-checking information and looking out for evidence,” describing the process as “hard and tedious and challenging.”

A second theme concerned proposed solutions to misinformation. Rather than calling primarily for censorship or removal of content, citizens emphasised education. Many expressed the view that people require more training in how to discern misinformation and understand digital environments. They advocated greater access to scientific or expert knowledge presented in accessible formats, as well as opportunities for constructive dialogue with individuals holding conspiratorial or extreme views. This emphasis on dialogue suggested that participants did not see polarisation as solvable through exclusion alone but through communication and understanding.

A third recurring issue related to capacity and confidence. Participants frequently stated that they did not possess sufficient knowledge to evaluate complex topics, especially those involving specialised scientific or political information. Combined with limited time, this created a sense of fatigue and helplessness. Several reported that constant exposure to conflicting claims produced frustration rather than empowerment.

DrChristodoulou then addressed a broader emotional dimension that emerged from the discussions, namely declining trust. Many participants reported growing mistrust not only towards social media content but also towards traditional media. They expressed awareness of manipulation, the influence of algorithms and artificial intelligence, and perceived attempts by various actors to shape or control public opinion.



She then presented the professional focus group findings. Journalists in particular described significant structural pressures. Due to shrinking newsroom resources and accelerated publication cycles, they reported limited capacity for thorough fact-checking. Stories often had to be produced within hours, leaving little time for verification. This professional reality, she explained, directly affects content quality and contributes to public mistrust.

During the discussion, a journalist in the audience reinforced this point by explaining that contemporary revenue models rely heavily on clicks rather than subscriptions, forcing media organisations to prioritise speed and engagement over depth. In response, Dr Christodoulou confirmed that similar concerns had been voiced by journalists in the focus groups: “there aren’t enough journalists to fact check everything because they need to turn around the stories quite quickly,” adding that this situation “has an effect on how people view traditional media”.

A further exchange addressed the use of audiovisual counter-narratives. When asked why the SMIDGE video appeared to encourage more open discussion of fears about migration compared to a UN video, Dr Christodoulou explained that the SMIDGE video addressed contentious issues directly rather than indirectly. Whereas the UN video focused primarily on emotional migrant stories, the SMIDGE video explicitly voiced local concerns and prejudices. By “raising the issues directly,” it created space for participants to reflect on their own feelings. This design choice, she suggested, facilitated honest dialogue rather than defensive reactions.

Overall, her presentation emphasised that misinformation resilience cannot be achieved through individual responsibility alone. Structural conditions, cognitive load, media economics and trust

dynamics must all be addressed simultaneously. Education, accessibility and realistic expectations of user behaviour were identified as key components of effective intervention.

Christian Gulas from FAS Research presented the computational and network analysis strand of SMIDGE, focusing on how harmful or polarising content becomes emotionally engaging and therefore highly shareable within online ecosystems. His contribution sought to move beyond descriptive accounts of extremism by identifying measurable mechanisms that explain virality.

He began by situating the research within what he described as a “challenging environment.” Contemporary societies face geopolitical conflicts, declining trust in political institutions, economic stress linked to digital and climate transitions, the proliferation of parallel media ecosystems, and the scaling effects of artificial intelligence that enable rapid mass production of content. These developments collectively create fertile conditions for harmful narratives to flourish.

Against this backdrop, his team formulated three central research questions: what makes harmful content emotionally attractive, what role emotions play in its spread, and how appeals to violations of moral values contribute to its effectiveness. These questions guided a series of large-scale text and network analyses.

The first key insight he described was what he termed a “surplus of meaning.” Digital and global media environments generate far more interpretations and narratives than necessary to explain events. This proliferation of competing explanations, amplified further by AI-generated content, increases fragmentation and creates opportunities for polarisation. In practical terms, individuals are confronted with multiple incompatible storylines about the same issue, making it easier for emotionally compelling but misleading interpretations to gain traction.

The second and central concept was moral framing. Gulas explained that emotionally charged content spreads more effectively online. One of the most efficient ways to generate emotional intensity is to present issues as violations of core moral values. When a narrative frames an event as unjust, harmful, disloyal or corrupt, it triggers strong affective responses that motivate sharing. He emphasised that moral framing is not restricted to any particular political group; rather, it is a universal communicative strategy.

To operationalise this concept analytically, his team employed the Moral Foundations framework, which identifies several widely shared moral dimensions including care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. These categories were used to classify online comments and measure how different moral appeals correlated with emotional expression.

Methodologically, the team analysed a large corpus of user comments, including a random sample of 150,000 Daily Mail comments drawn from a dataset of more than 40 million entries. A supervised large language model trained on a moral foundations corpus was used for multi-label moral classification. Emotional expression was measured using established lexicons and context-sensitive sentiment models.

The results showed clear patterns. Comments containing moral framing exhibited significantly higher emotional intensity than non-moral comments. Furthermore, different moral frames were associated with distinct emotional profiles. For example, care/harm frames correlated with fear and sadness, while purity/degradation frames were strongly linked to disgust. These findings demonstrated that emotional activation is structured rather than random.

Network analysis further revealed brokerage zones connecting different language communities and channels, showing how narratives travel between clusters. This illustrated that polarised communities are not entirely isolated but linked through specific actors who act as bridges.

The practical implication, as he emphasised in conclusion, is that responses to polarisation must address the underlying moral concerns that drive engagement rather than simply presenting factual corrections. Counter-messaging that ignores moral dimensions risks failing to resonate. However, he cautioned that interventions should avoid reinforcing “us-versus-them” dynamics.

Overall, his presentation provided an empirical and computational explanation for why harmful narratives are so sticky and how their emotional architecture can be mapped and addressed.

Fabrizio Boldrini from Fondazione Villa Montesca concluded Panel I by presenting the exploitation and capacity-building strategy of the project. His intervention shifted the focus from diagnosis to practical application, outlining how SMIDGE research has been translated into sustainable training tools.

He introduced the SMIDGE MOOC Platform as an advanced online learning environment designed to provide structured training on media literacy, disinformation, extremism narratives and the social impact of digital storytelling. The platform was conceived not as a one-off dissemination output but as a durable educational resource that remains accessible beyond the project lifetime.

Boldrini explained that the target audiences were carefully selected to maximise multiplier effects. Primary users include journalists, security analysts, fact-checkers, media organisations and journalism students. Secondary audiences include policymakers, NGOs, researchers and the broader public interested in media literacy. The rationale is that training intermediaries such as journalists and educators produces wider societal impact than focusing solely on individuals.

The platform structure was described in detail. Each unit addresses a specific topic related to misinformation or extremism and is designed according to three core principles: progressiveness, flexibility and customisation. Units typically include several short video lessons introducing key concepts, accompanied by in-depth materials such as research papers, case studies and extended readings. Self-assessment quizzes allow users to test their understanding, while feedback questionnaires collect user evaluations. This modular format allows learners to proceed at their own pace and select relevant topics.

Content areas include news manipulation techniques, platform dynamics, fact-checking practices, ethical considerations and strategies for countering extremist narratives. The emphasis is on critical thinking skills and evidence-based reasoning rather than prescriptive instruction.

Boldrini stressed that the platform is openly accessible through a dedicated website and designed for long-term use by institutions. In this sense, it represents a core exploitation pathway, enabling sustained uptake of SMIDGE knowledge within professional training contexts. By embedding research outputs into everyday educational practice, the project ensures continued impact beyond the funding period.

He concluded by reiterating that scaling impact requires moving beyond reports toward tools that practitioners can directly use. The MOOC was presented as the principal mechanism through which SMIDGE findings become operational.

Following the formal presentations, the moderator invited questions and discussion. Audience members sought clarification on how legal reforms could realistically keep pace with platform developments, how educational interventions might reach disengaged adults, and whether regulation or literacy should take priority. Panellists generally agreed that no single solution is sufficient. Structural platform accountability, professional standards and individual skills must operate in tandem. The exchange reinforced a central message of the panel: that addressing extremism among middle-aged adults requires multi-level coordination rather than isolated actions.

6.3 Panel II – Media and Cultural Perspectives on Online Extremism

Panel II was dedicated to the role of media, visual storytelling and cultural framing in shaping public understandings of online extremism. The session combined an opening intervention, the screening of the SMIDGE documentary, and an extended discussion with the filmmakers. The discussion that followed explored both the opportunities and the risks of communicating about extremism through audiovisual formats, including questions of audience reception, trust in expertise, definitional boundaries around “extremism,” and the relationship between narrative framing, regulation and democratic legitimacy.

The panel opened with introductory remarks by Professor Jason Lee from De Montfort University, who positioned the documentary screening as an integral part of the project’s dissemination and engagement approach rather than a supplementary output. He explicitly framed the documentary within a media and cultural perspective, drawing attention to the ways in which audiovisual storytelling can support public engagement with complex societal problems.

In his introduction, Professor Lee emphasised the role of “culture leading politics,” suggesting that cultural narratives, media forms and symbolic representation often shape political understandings and public sensibilities ahead of formal policy change. He also acknowledged the personal and generational dimension of social media engagement, noting his own experience of having stepped away from platform use after having previously felt strongly attached to it. He connected this personal reflection to the broader project theme of middle-aged digital practices and invited the audience to consider how patterns of disengagement, fatigue or distrust might be understood as part of the wider cultural environment shaping online discourse.

The SMIDGE documentary titled ‘Middle Rage – Social Media and the War on Democracy’ was subsequently screened. Following the screening, the session moved into a discussion with the filmmakers, Sian Hamlett and Mitchell Harris, moderated in a conversational format with audience engagement. The post-screening discussion began by foregrounding the challenge of communicating about extremism in ways that are accurate, evidence-based and ethically responsible while still being understandable and engaging for wider audiences.



A central theme that emerged early in the discussion was the difficulty of defining extremism and determining where the boundary lies between legitimate protest or activism and “extreme” behaviour. Mitchell Harris described a specific editorial debate that occurred during the film’s production process, using it as an example of the ethical decisions involved in documentary storytelling. He explained that during editing, the team reviewed the sequencing of imagery in the introduction and considered whether the juxtaposition of different forms of public disruption could unintentionally imply equivalence between qualitatively different acts. He described deliberations around aligning footage of severe disorder, including acts such as burning vehicles, alongside images of protest activity such as Extinction Rebellion standing in the road and blocking traffic. The filmmakers questioned whether placing such images close to the word “extremism” might implicitly categorise certain forms of protest as extremist, and whether the film’s framing would be read as making a claim about where “extremism” begins. This was presented as a concrete example of how film editing functions as an act of interpretation, not neutral reproduction.

Harris elaborated that the editorial debate was not simply aesthetic but conceptual and political: how should a documentary reflect the “spectrum” of actions that are socially contested, and who has the authority to classify an action as extreme? In illustrating this dilemma, he raised a practical and ethical question: if protest activity blocks an ambulance and endangers lives, can it be

considered “extreme” in a similar sense to violent destruction, and how do audiences interpret those parallels when presented visually? He framed this not as a settled conclusion but as a complex judgement that filmmakers must navigate carefully, particularly when addressing politically sensitive issues. He noted that the team ultimately made a deliberate editing choice, moving certain images to avoid implying an unintended equivalence and to ensure the documentary did not inadvertently “wag the finger” at legitimate activism while addressing online extremism.

Sian Hamlett reinforced the point that documentary-making inevitably involves selection and construction. She explicitly acknowledged that the documentary represents a “construction of reality” shaped by the team’s decisions, and that the film’s responsibility is therefore to maintain clarity, fairness and evidence-based framing while also remaining accessible to the intended audience.

The panel discussion then moved into wider reflections on trust, expertise and the political context of online extremism. Mitchell Harris linked the documentary’s communication challenges to broader social conditions, pointing to what he characterised as a contemporary “distrust” or “misunderstanding of expertise,” which he located particularly in the UK context in the period following Brexit. He suggested that one challenge facing documentary storytelling, more broadly public-facing communication on extremism and misinformation, is that audiences may increasingly “question everything,” including basic facts. His intervention connected the documentary’s role to a wider democratic challenge: the weakening of shared epistemic foundations and the reduced authority of expert knowledge.

Within this exchange, the filmmakers argued that one function of a research-grounded documentary is to help rebuild trust by making the evidentiary basis of claims visible. Harris suggested that viewers should be able to engage with the documentary with confidence that statements are “backed up” by the research underpinning the wider project, even if broader social conditions make trust more fragile. This was presented as both a justification for the documentary approach and a constraint: filmmakers can support critical engagement but cannot fully overcome structural mistrust alone.

A further theme developed around regulation and the limits of purely educational responses. The discussion included the argument that without structural platform governance, interventions may remain reactive. In the transcript, a participant contribution characterised the current situation as a “game of whack-a-mole” in which harmful content reappears continuously while institutions attempt to respond piecemeal. The contribution argued that underlying mechanisms of amplification require regulatory approaches, including the possibility of European action on platform governance and even the development of alternative public-interest platforms designed to support democratic values and pro-social moderation. This intervention was framed as a call for systemic solutions, with education and training viewed as supportive but insufficient on their own.

In response, the discussion explicitly returned to the project’s demographic focus and the challenge of reaching middle-aged adults. A point made in the discussion was that middle-aged people may resist being “educated” in the way that youth can be reached through schools or structured curricula. The argument presented was that interventions for this demographic must be framed differently, less as instruction and more as empowerment, by providing information and options

while allowing individuals to feel agency in decision-making. The transcript captures the logic that this group is more receptive when approaches preserve autonomy and avoid patronising tones, which was also echoed in the filmmakers’ remarks about not “wagging the finger” and avoiding didactic communication.



A major audience-driven segment followed, initiated by a question from Bill Knopp, a UK counterterrorism policing practitioner and SMIDGE Advisory Board member. He grounded his question in the operational experience of recent years and described multiple contemporary UK contexts of protest, disorder and political mobilisation. He then proposed a framing question about whether current observations represent a phenomenon of “middle-age rage,” suggesting that many visible mobilisations appear dominated by older demographics. He contrasted this with what he described as an apparent absence of youth activism, raising the possibility that middle-aged mobilisation is simply more visible because it is “the only rage.” This question explicitly invited the panel to interpret the project’s focus through the lens of contemporary protest dynamics and demographic participation.

The responses engaged with this question as both a sociological and political issue. The discussion touched on how different movements utilise social media for mobilisation and how digital strategies shape visibility. In engaging with the question, panellists drew attention to how some groups may be more “savvy” in their online communication tactics, which can influence not only their reach but also how they are perceived publicly and institutionally. This led into a discussion about the relationship between messaging, acceptability and institutional response, including the question of why certain groups appear to avoid proscription despite perceptions of extremity, potentially because their communication is framed in ways that remain socially legible or politically tolerable.

The discussion then moved explicitly into the topic of proscription and the criteria used by governments to ban organisations. In the exchange, Bill Knopp responded by outlining the broad logic of the UK proscription process and indicated that proscription decisions require a governmental judgement that a group is engaged in “significant violence,” a category that may also incorporate disruption to infrastructure. He indicated that these decisions can be contested and are subject to legal and political challenge, and he limited his comments accordingly. This segment reinforced one of the panel’s underlying themes: defining extremism—and determining institutional responses to it—is inherently political, contested and shaped by legal thresholds as well as public narrative framing.

Across the Panel II discussion, the documentary served as a concrete anchor for broader issues: how to represent contested behaviours responsibly; how narrative sequencing, image choice and framing shape meaning; how cultural outputs can communicate evidence without alienating audiences; and how trust, expertise and regulation intersect with public-facing interventions. The conversation repeatedly returned to the need for balance: accessibility without oversimplification, engagement without sensationalism, and reflection without patronisation.

6.4 Panel III – Common Challenges and Best Practices from Related Projects

This session was conceived as a comparative and cross-project exchange aimed at situating the SMIDGE findings within a broader European research and practice landscape. While the morning panels had focused primarily on SMIDGE’s own empirical results and media outputs, Panel III widened the perspective to include other EU-funded initiatives addressing extremism, polarisation, misinformation and democratic resilience from complementary angles.

The panel was moderated by Ludmila Malai from Inclusive Europe, who opened the session by welcoming participants back and outlining its objectives. She explained that the purpose was to move from a single-project focus toward shared reflection across “sister projects” that had collaborated or exchanged knowledge with SMIDGE during the project’s lifetime. The moderator explicitly framed the discussion around three guiding questions: what key insights had emerged from each project’s research, what challenges were encountered during implementation and stakeholder engagement, and what concrete solutions, tools or policy recommendations could be transferred across contexts. She stressed that the aim was not only to present findings but also to reflect critically on lessons learned and practical implications.

Four initiatives were represented in the session: SMIDGE, OppAttune, ARENAS and ENCODE. Each speaker delivered a focused presentation, followed by collective discussion and reflections.

The first presentation was delivered by Line Nybro Petersen (University of Copenhagen) on behalf of SMIDGE. Petersen elaborated further on the project’s conceptual framework, particularly the notion of “hybridised extremism” and the identification of so-called “HYPE spaces.” She explained that these environments are characterised by fluid ideological boundaries and rapid shifts in targets

and narratives, making them difficult to categorise through traditional extremist typologies. Unlike clearly defined ideological groups with identifiable enemies or coherent programmes, actors in hybridised spaces combine humour, irony, mainstream cultural references and extremist elements in ways that blur distinctions between entertainment and political mobilisation.

Petersen emphasised that such hybridity presents a significant challenge for detection and prevention. Law enforcement and monitoring systems often rely on stable ideological markers or explicit organisational affiliations. In contrast, hybrid spaces operate through rapidly evolving, loosely connected networks where out-groups can change unpredictably and where harassment or hostility may be directed at shifting targets. This makes threat assessment considerably more complex. She illustrated this with a Danish case study related to controversies around a children's television programme, demonstrating how seemingly trivial cultural content can become politicised and embedded within broader polarising narratives. Through this example, she showed how online communities mobilised around cultural grievances, gradually linking them to broader conspiratorial or extremist framings. Her intervention underlined that contemporary extremism often emerges not from formal organisations but from everyday digital interactions and affective communities.

The discussion then moved to the OppAttune project, presented by Sandra Obradovic and Joana Ricarte. Their contribution focused on the concept of “everyday extremism” and the process they termed “political attunement.” Rather than concentrating solely on overt radicalisation, OppAttune examines how ordinary citizens become gradually aligned with polarised or exclusionary viewpoints through everyday communication practices. The speakers argued that extremism frequently develops incrementally through normalised discourse rather than sudden ideological conversion.

They described their research approach as centred on building democratic capacities and strengthening resilience at the community level. Instead of only countering harmful narratives, the project seeks to cultivate skills that enable individuals to engage critically and constructively in democratic life. These include dialogue competencies, empathy, critical reflection and media awareness. The presenters highlighted that such capacities act as protective factors by reducing susceptibility to manipulative or divisive messaging. In their view, prevention requires reinforcing democratic habits rather than solely targeting problematic content.

Obradovic and Ricarte also discussed practical challenges encountered during implementation. Recruiting participants beyond already engaged or highly educated groups proved difficult, and ensuring meaningful participation required trust-building and sustained local partnerships. They noted that short-term interventions are often insufficient and that long-term engagement is necessary to produce durable change. Their reflections emphasised that community-based work demands time, adaptability and sensitivity to local contexts.

The third presentation was delivered by Louise Burté on behalf of the ARENAS project. Her intervention focused on an experimental educational approach centred on “soft skills” as a means of preventing extremism. Burté explained that the project had conducted interventions with young people aimed at strengthening competencies such as emotional awareness, critical thinking and

collaborative problem-solving. Rather than providing didactic instruction about extremism, the project used narrative scenarios, characters and interactive exercises to allow participants to explore complex social situations and reflect on their responses.

She described how the experimental design enabled the team to assess changes in participants' perceptions of misinformation, populism and manipulative content. Early findings suggested that experiential and narrative-based learning could foster deeper engagement than purely informational approaches. Burté emphasised that the project is now developing a digital platform to support teachers and schools across Europe, offering structured activities and story-based pathways to analyse online content critically. She framed this as a practical exploitation pathway that translates research into usable educational tools.



The final presentation was delivered by Seyma Celem representing the ENCODE project. Celem introduced the audience to the project's core premise: that emotions constitute a central driver of political behaviour and susceptibility to radicalisation. She began interactively, asking participants how they felt at that moment and contrasting this with how they feel when reading the news or engaging with political developments. This exercise illustrated the emotional dimensions underlying everyday media consumption.

Celem argued that while extremism and radicalisation are often treated as ideological or cognitive phenomena, emotional processes such as fear, anger, frustration and distrust frequently precede and shape political choices. Drawing on political psychology research, she explained that emotions influence trust, decision-making and value formation. Consequently, interventions that ignore affective dimensions risk addressing only surface-level symptoms. The ENCODE project therefore

studies emotional dynamics within digital public spheres, investigating how emotional content circulates and how it may contribute to polarisation.

Her presentation emphasised that acknowledging emotions is not a sign of irrationality but rather a realistic recognition of how human decision-making operates. By mapping emotional triggers and responses, the project aims to inform more effective communication strategies and policy approaches.

Across the session, several common themes emerged. All speakers highlighted the limitations of purely content-focused or enforcement-oriented strategies. Instead, they advocated approaches that address underlying social, emotional and behavioural factors. Engagement, education, resilience-building and community trust repeatedly appeared as central elements. The panel thus reinforced the idea that prevention requires systemic and multi-level responses rather than isolated interventions.

Before opening the floor to questions, the moderator invited speakers to prepare a concise “policy translation” of their work by imagining a scenario in which they had only thirty seconds with a policymaker. She asked each panellist to identify one recommendation that should be taken into account in the near future, explicitly framing the task as a realism check on how project insights can be communicated under time pressure. The speakers returned to this prompt at the end of the session. Petersen responded with two priorities: first, that digital literacy initiatives should explicitly include and not overlook the middle-aged demographic; and second, that the present moment requires stronger attention to “digital sovereignty” alongside continued platform-focused legislation and governance in Europe.

Burté similarly linked her response to the digital environment, arguing that citizens should be supported in learning to use platforms in more “sovereign” ways, while also being trained to disagree without hostility, emphasising the importance of “keeping being human” in digital spaces rather than reproducing antagonistic dynamics online.

Obradovic focused her short recommendation on political trust and institutional behaviour, urging policymakers to care about and invest in citizens not only during election periods; in her view, visible effort and resourcing outside election cycles is necessary to rebuild trust and engagement.

In a closely linked intervention during the same closing exchange, Celem underscored that policy communication and counter-strategies should prioritise authenticity and simplicity, warning that complex framing and long explanations do not translate well to everyday publics or time-limited policymaker contexts; she argued that actors defending democratic values should not mirror populist or authoritarian communication styles, but instead “find [their] own way” and present ideas in forms that are easy to grasp and remember.

Audience participation formed an integral part of the session. Questions from attendees asked speakers to elaborate on how they adapted interventions for different demographic groups and how they addressed resistance or scepticism among participants. In response, speakers emphasised the importance of context sensitivity. Approaches that work with young people do not necessarily translate to adults, and messaging must be tailored to local realities. Flexibility and co-creation with communities were repeatedly identified as key success factors.

By the conclusion of Panel III, several cross-cutting messages had clearly emerged. First, emotional and social dimensions are central to understanding susceptibility to extremist narratives. Second, participatory and skills-based approaches often yield stronger engagement than top-down communication. Third, recruitment and evaluation remain in persistent challenges requiring methodological creativity. Fourth, sustainability depends on embedding resources within existing institutions and networks. Finally, collaboration between projects enhances impact by sharing knowledge and avoiding redundancy.

6.5 Panel IV – Policy Discussion: From Evidence to Action

Panel IV marked the final substantive session of the conference and was conceived explicitly as a transition from research evidence to implementation and policy action. After a full day dedicated to research findings, methodologies, and cross-project exchanges, the focus shifted toward institutional uptake, regulatory frameworks and practical exploitation of results. The discussion was moderated by Mentor Vrajolli from the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies.

Opening the session, Vrajolli acknowledged the intensity of the day and positioned the panel as the moment where researchers attempt what he described as a core ambition of applied research: understanding “how we can transform our research into actions.” He noted that this is often a persistent gap within research projects and that the objective of the panel was therefore highly practical. He encouraged active participation from the audience.

Anna De Marchi, information officer at European Commission DG CONNECT working on digital policy innovation and online regulation, began by situating her remarks within her role working on enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA). She first provided a structured overview of what the legislation does before linking it to the conference theme of online extremism and manipulation.

She explained that the DSA establishes EU-wide rules aimed at transparency and accountability of online platforms. These include mandatory transparency reporting, improved data access for researchers, and stronger rights for users to report illegal content and seek redress. She emphasised that one particularly significant element is the risk management framework applicable to very large online platforms (those with more than 45 million users). These platforms must identify systemic risks and implement mitigation measures.

She outlined the types of risks defined in the regulation, including dissemination of illegal content, negative effects on civic discourse and elections, gender-based violence, harms to minors, and broader impacts on public health and wellbeing. The Commission engages platforms in structured dialogue around how they identify and mitigate these risks.

She described enforcement actions already taken, noting approximately fifteen investigations across a range of platforms including X, Meta, TikTok, AliExpress and Temu. These investigations largely concern whether risk management obligations are being adequately fulfilled. She also referred to enforcement related to notice-and-action systems to ensure that users can easily report harmful content and receive swift responses.

A recurring theme in her intervention was that the DSA targets systemic issues rather than only individual pieces of content. The focus is on governance structures, risk patterns and design features that enable harmful content to spread. She also highlighted the importance of member states through Digital Services Coordinators and emphasised cooperation across national authorities to address linguistic and local specificities.

She stressed the significance of researcher data access provisions, describing them as essential for enabling independent evidence that can inform enforcement. She further referenced complementary instruments such as the Code of Conduct on Disinformation and Hate Speech, trusted flaggers and monitoring exercises.



Finally, she introduced the “democracy shield” initiative, which expands efforts beyond election periods to broader education, crisis response and collaboration with platforms to reduce radicalisation pathways. She noted that recent reports from the European Board for Digital Services identify radicalisation and extremism as growing risks requiring stronger mitigation.

Becky Slack opened her intervention by situating her professional background in journalism and strategic communications. She explained that she had worked across major media organisations including the Guardian, the BBC and other political and charity sector publications, and that her current work focuses on advising charities, trade unions and civil society organisations on crisis communications and media strategy. In particular, she described that many of the crises her clients face today are directly driven by disinformation, deepfakes and coordinated online attacks. Her perspective, therefore, was framed not as regulatory or academic but as highly operational and

communications-focused, concerned with how narratives spread and how organisations respond in real time.

She began by addressing the common assumption that fact-checking alone is sufficient to counter misinformation. While emphasising that fact-checking remains essential and foundational to journalism, she argued that it has significant practical limitations. She noted that people generally resist being told they are wrong and may perceive corrective messages as condescending or dismissive. This, she explained, often triggers defensiveness and reduces openness to new information. Moreover, she stressed that emotional responses typically outweigh factual correction, stating that fear, anger, loss or resentment frequently override rational evaluation. As a result, content that resonates emotionally often spreads more effectively than content that is simply accurate.

Slack also highlighted issues of trust, particularly since the COVID-19 period, when many audiences became suspicious of fact-checking organisations and questioned who funds or controls them. This erosion of trust, she argued, further limits the effectiveness of traditional corrective approaches.

She therefore outlined three complementary communication tactics. The first was pre-bunking, defined as getting ahead of harmful narratives before they become entrenched. Drawing on crisis communications practice, she explained that the actor who frames the issue first often controls how it is interpreted. She described pre-bunking as proactively alerting audiences to likely manipulation tactics and encouraging critical reflection before misinformation spreads. She illustrated this with examples of dissecting media language, showing how word choices shape perception and thereby increasing audience awareness of framing effects.

The second tactic concerned trust-building language. She argued that communicators must acknowledge people's concerns and meet them where they are, rather than dismissing their beliefs outright. For instance, if individuals attribute housing shortages to migration, simply telling them they are wrong will not persuade them. Instead, communicators should recognise their frustration and then introduce broader structural explanations. The goal is to ensure people feel heard rather than corrected.

The third element concerned the importance of messengers. Slack stressed that who delivers a message can matter as much as the message itself. Politicians or institutions directly involved in controversies are often mistrusted. Instead, trusted figures within communities or sectors may be more effective. She described a case where a hostile online influencer spread harmful misinformation about a client organisation. Rather than responding directly, they mobilised respected advocates within the sector to publicly counter the claims. This strategy successfully reduced amplification and “took the wind out” of the misinformation.

Slack concluded by emphasising that online extremism cannot be separated from offline social conditions. She provided an extended example from her hometown, where local authorities built housing without corresponding schools or healthcare services. As services became overstretched, resentment grew. In the absence of strong local journalism and community organisations, migrants were wrongly blamed for systemic failures. She argued that such structural conditions create fertile

ground for extremist narratives, and that purely online interventions are insufficient without addressing offline realities.

Juliane von Reppert-Bismarck followed by explicitly aligning her work with Slack's observations, noting that Lie Detectors exists precisely to address these vulnerabilities through prevention rather than correction. Introducing herself as a former journalist with two decades of experience, she described how events such as Brexit and the first Trump election revealed to her the extent of filter bubbles and the lack of basic media literacy skills among the public. She observed that many citizens struggle to distinguish between bots, trolls, jokes and legitimate journalism, despite these being skills that journalists use daily.

She explained that Lie Detectors is a journalist-driven media literacy organisation that brings professional reporters directly into classrooms to teach practical verification skills. Students are taught how to check sources, evaluate claims and understand how journalism works. She emphasised that their approach is experiential and skills-based rather than theoretical.

A significant point she raised concerned independence and trust. Early on, the organisation decided not to accept funding from large online platforms, even though such funding was offered. This decision, she noted, proved critical when working with sceptical teachers, who are often wary of corporate or political influence. Being able to demonstrate independence helped establish credibility.

Von Reppert-Bismarck framed the problem in terms of "supply" and "demand." Supply refers to the platforms and systems that facilitate rapid spread of information, while demand refers to why citizens consume and share it. While regulatory approaches target supply, she argued that building resilience among citizens addresses demand. Given the slow pace of regulation, she maintained that immediate work must focus on resilience building.

She described the scale of their activities, including training over 600 journalists and delivering more than a thousand classroom visits annually. She emphasised that although children are the official target group, teachers are the critical multipliers. Many teachers invite sessions simply to get a short break, yet subsequently express strong interest and acknowledge their own lack of confidence navigating digital spaces.

She reported that teachers consistently identify lack of time, lack of incentives and lack of training as barriers to addressing online issues. They also fear controversy or parental backlash. Furthermore, a pronounced generational divide exists: teachers rely on traditional information platforms, while students use TikTok, Discord, Twitch, gaming environments and other spaces where adults are largely absent. She stressed that these environments are difficult or impossible to moderate through conventional fact-checking or content removal, reinforcing the need for education rather than solely regulation.

Her recommendations focused on sustained, scalable and long-term funding rather than short-term innovative pilots. She argued that what works is already known; what is missing is scale and continuity. She called for embedding media literacy into teacher training curricula and funding repeated, large-scale implementation rather than isolated projects.

Saman Nazari then presented an operational and disruption-focused perspective. He began by asking the audience how many had observed influence operations and how many knew what to do about them, using the limited responses to illustrate a gap between awareness and action.

He explained that Alliance4Europe initially concentrated on analysing disinformation but has since shifted toward active disruption. Their work involves mapping coordinated inauthentic behaviour, identifying bot networks, analysing infrastructure and detecting vulnerabilities exploited by threat actors. They attribute actors where possible and examine technical and behavioural components of campaigns.

Nazari described a methodology under development that systematises disruption into three phases: preparation, disruption and mitigation. Preparation involves evidence collection and documentation. Disruption includes engagement with platforms, service providers, banks and regulators to dismantle operations. Mitigation focuses on reducing harm if disruption fails, including pre-bunking and public education.

He provided a detailed case study from French elections, where a network linked to Russian mercenary interests created pages impersonating different French constituencies and ran unlabeled political ads. Direct engagement with platforms and authorities initially failed. Only after involving media coverage, which triggered public scrutiny, did platforms act rapidly and remove the network. This demonstrated the leverage of coordinated pressure.

Nazari described the broader ambition as creating coordinated national task forces and a Europe-wide network of experts capable of rapid deployment, likening it to a “NATO for democracy defence.”

The audience then engaged extensively. One participant asked whether combating extremism can be apolitical given its association with right-wing movements. Von Reppert-Bismarck emphasised neutrality in educational settings, focusing on skills rather than ideology. Slack acknowledged that in practice much disinformation targeting charities comes from the far right, making the issue inherently political for her work. De Marchi emphasised that the DSA is legally and institutionally bipartisan, while Nazari stressed their focus on manipulative behaviours rather than ideology.

Another participant, from the European Commission’s Research Executive Agency, offered encouraging reflections and emphasised continuity of EU funding and future collaboration.

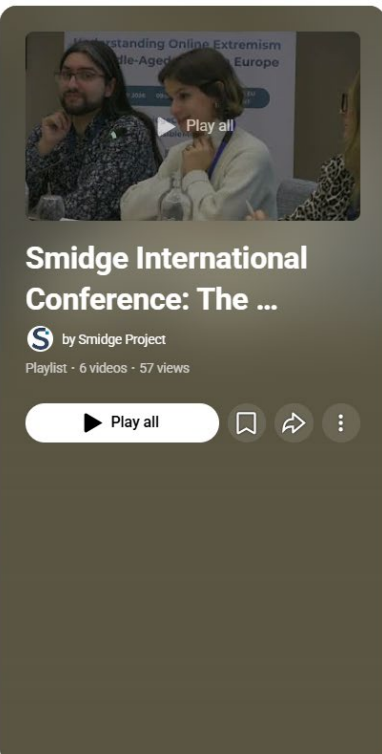
A further intervention raised concerns about weak enforcement of the DSA and limited trusted flaggers. Von Reppert-Bismarck expressed scepticism about regulation alone and advocated subnational action and measurable impact. Nazari highlighted the need for coordination and patience while legal precedents develop. De Marchi explained the need for cautious, legally robust enforcement to avoid early losses. Slack argued for greater support to civil society organisations overwhelmed by these challenges.

Finally, a question on connecting students with civil society prompted multiple speakers to invite collaboration, noting abundant data and research needs but limited capacity.

Collectively, the discussion underscored that no single measure is sufficient. Regulation, communication, education and coordinated disruption must operate simultaneously. The panel therefore reinforced the conference's broader message that effective responses to online extremism require systemic, preventive and collaborative approaches that extend beyond research outputs and into everyday practice across institutions and communities.

7. Dissemination and Legacy

All sessions were recorded and uploaded to the project's YouTube channel and website, ensuring asynchronous access for those unable to attend and supporting continued dissemination. A written summary and supporting materials were also published online. A total of 10 social media posts were published across SMIDGE communication channels on X, Bluesky and LinkedIn to promote the event. During the event, 18 live updates were shared, followed by six additional posts providing access to the event report and recordings. In line with the consortium's sustainability commitments, these resources will remain publicly accessible for at least eight years after project completion.



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8. Metrics and Impact Indicators

Indicator	Value
Invitations sent	1532
Registrations	73

Attendees (in person)	53
Countries represented	8
Page visits (conference page)	458
Social media impressions	10504 (LinkedIn and X)
Follow-up stakeholder requests	13
Evaluation responses received	5
Media kits distributed	40
Recordings uploaded	5
Partner organisations represented	8

Table 4 Metrics and Impact Indicators

9. Exploitation Pathways and Evaluation

The conference generated immediate and longer-term outcomes. Participants engaged directly with project tools, requested further information on training resources and expressed interest in integrating outputs into their institutional practices. The event strengthened professional networks and created opportunities for collaboration with EU bodies, media organisations and civil society actors. By combining evidence presentation with practical demonstrations, the conference effectively linked research to implementation.

In addition to the formal programme sessions, an informal and interactive dissemination activity was organised in the break area to further engage participants with selected project outputs. Three flipboards were installed and used to display printed versions of eight counter-narrative memes developed within the SMIDGE project. These materials were intentionally positioned in the coffee and networking space to encourage spontaneous interaction and discussion among attendees during breaks. The objective was to create a low-threshold, conversational setting in which participants could naturally gather around the visuals, reflect on their messaging and exchange perspectives on their potential use in professional contexts such as education, journalism or awareness-raising. This approach effectively transformed break times into small, informal workshops, facilitating peer-to-peer dialogue and enabling the practical dissemination and exploitation of the counter-narrative materials.



The conference was also evaluated through participant feedback forms, which indicated a very high level of satisfaction. Respondents rated the overall conference, its content, usefulness and impact as *excellent*, and highlighted the documentary screening as particularly effective in complementing the research presentations and enhancing engagement. Participants emphasised the value of the event for knowledge exchange and networking, noting the relevance of the topics and the quality of discussions. The main critical feedback concerned the intensity of the programme, with some participants suggesting that the breadth and depth of content could have been spread across two days to allow more time for reflection and interaction.

10. Conclusion

The SMIDGE Final Conference successfully consolidated three years of interdisciplinary research into a coherent and accessible format for stakeholders. Through structured dialogue, diverse participation and comprehensive documentation, it served both as a dissemination milestone and as a concrete exploitation mechanism. The event confirmed the relevance of the project's focus on middle-aged adults and provided clear pathways for continued uptake of SMIDGE resources beyond the funding period.

