



SMIDGE

Social Media Narratives: Addressing Extremism in Middle-Age



Funded by
the European Union



WHAT Understanding Middle-Aged Digital Engagement

SMIDGE is an EU-funded Horizon Europe research project examining how online narratives, including misinformation, conspiracy theories, and extremist content, circulate, with a focus on people aged 45–65. This group plays a significant role in shaping public debate, social norms, and political life across Europe. Their influence in professional, civic, and community settings makes them central to how information is interpreted and shared.

WHY Revealing Online Extremism in a New Light

Middle-aged adults are often overlooked in online extremism research, yet they are highly engaged in society as decision-makers, community leaders, and influencers. Understanding how digital narratives affect this demographic is crucial because their engagement shapes public opinion, impacts policymaking, and can either amplify or counteract harmful content. By focusing on this group, SMIDGE uncovers why certain narratives resonate, how misinformation spreads, and where targeted interventions can make the greatest impact on democratic participation and social cohesion.

HOW A Holistic Approach

SMIDGE addresses these questions through an interdisciplinary methodology, combining social network analysis, content analysis, and large-scale surveys across Europe to map online discourses and their effects. Beyond research, the project takes action by collaboratively developing counter-narratives, educational resources, and policy recommendations. It also provides practical tools and training for journalists, educators, and security professionals, ensuring that findings are translated into evidence-based strategies to support informed digital engagement and counter harmful narratives effectively.

OBJECTIVES



Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism Factors

Investigate and comprehend the major drivers contributing to the surge of online extremist narratives across Europe.



Understand Middle-Aged Interactions Online

Explore how online narratives affect adults aged 45–65, considering the factors, influences and pathways that shape their engagement with digital content.



Develop Inclusive Counter-Narratives

Create politically neutral counter-content through a co-creative process, involving and aimed at middle-aged individuals, to foster reflexivity and challenge extremist narratives.



Foster Reflexivity Across Stakeholders

Promote first and second-order reflexivity in vulnerable individuals and professionals (journalists, security personnel, educators) to enhance their understanding and counter-extremism approaches.



Provide Evidence-Based Tools and Resources

Develop educational resources, training materials, MOOCs and webinars to empower security professionals, journalists and educators in countering online extremism in the 45–65 age group.



Disseminate Insights for Informed Policy

Share findings, counter-narratives, and recommendations with a broad range of stakeholders, such as EU-level networks, civil society and expert organisations, and law enforcement bodies, to support evidence-based policymaking on online extremism.

TIMELINE & MILESTONES

2023 MARCH

Technological and Social Network Analysis of Extremist Communities on Social Media

Examination of networking technologies, data scraping of extremist content and qualitative textual analysis of social media, all aimed at understanding and countering online extremism by identifying structural connections, emotional aspects, entry points for counter-messaging and patterns of content migration across platforms.

Creating the Counter Narratives

Producing more than 20 micro-content pieces for various platforms, developing learning materials, including a 'Lateral Reading' course, a journalism-focused course and webinars to deconstruct extremist narratives, reaching an estimated 20K participants.

Dissemination, Communication and Exploitation

Dissemination by mapping relevant stakeholders and establishing liaison and outreach with EU projects and organizations; organizing a Final Symposium and round table discussions with security officers and journalists to disseminate the final results at the European/regional level.



Horizon Scanning and Mapping of the Current Discourse

Formulating innovative approaches through thematic reviews, literature analysis and content mapping, ultimately creating a comprehensive database with a gender and intersectional perspective.

Understanding the 'Attractiveness' of the Narrative

Development of an online survey to explore factors influencing extremist attitudes, the organization of focus groups across Europe to examine the impact of social media on beliefs, and the evaluation of new media content through focus groups and interviews to assess its effectiveness in promoting reflective thinking and countering extremism.

Guidelines, Recommendations and Policy briefs

Identification of stakeholder needs and requirements for guidelines, addressing responsible research and innovation, supranational and European laws, and a comparative survey of conspiracy theories; creating policy briefs and recommendations for policy and decision-makers, considering the heterogeneity of the middle-aged target group and implementing responsible research and innovation processes for more targeted and appropriate policy.

2026 FEBRUARY

PARTNERS



Københavns Universitet (UCPH)

The University of Copenhagen is the project coordinator and responsible for administrative, legal and financial management. Additionally, the university conducts periodic data scraping and qualitative methods to analyse the digital contexts in which extremist content flourishes.



De Montfort University (DMU)

De Montfort University's Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility (CCSR) has significant ethical expertise and is responsible for the project's scientific management plan, which will address ethical, legal and societal concerns through a 'Responsibility-by-design' approach.



FASresearch

FASresearch, a spin-off company from the University of Vienna, provides social network analysis of target media sites, the users/accounts, technologies and social media content used in spreading misinformation and extremist views, applying an interdisciplinary framework.



Hallgarten-Franchetti Centro Studi Villa Montesca (FVM)

The FVM foundation, a research and training centre in Italy, takes part in the production of webinars and create training materials including a 'Lateral reading' course to be uploaded to the MOOC, providing long-term resources for journalists.



Inclusive Europe (INEU)

Inclusive Europe, an NGO in Brussels, is tasked with organising focus groups and undertaking the project's dissemination and communication responsibilities. This includes organising the roundtable discussion and final conference events.



Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)

KCSS develops a database with the main characteristics of existing online extremist videos. Then, they produce webinars, alternative counter content and educational tools to build awareness, elicit positive reflection and critical thinking.



The University of Milan (UMIL)

UMIL conducts horizon scanning of the social, political, philosophical, psychological, legal and technical literature about online extremism and malicious use of social media to undermine trust in governments. UMIL will also create policy briefs and recommendations for policy and decision-makers



UCLan Cyprus

The UCLan Cyprus University is responsible for conducting psychological analysis through surveys, focus groups and interviews to understand what specific tools and techniques draw middle-aged people to and from extremism and conspiracy theories.

MILESTONES

Counter-Narratives Videos

The SMIDGE Project has released a series of [counter-narrative videos](#), now available on YouTube, marking a significant milestone in its mission to combat misinformation, disinformation, and extremist narratives among middle-aged populations across Europe.

Developed through extensive interdisciplinary research and collaborative production processes, these counter-narratives exemplify the project's commitment to ethical, and responsible research and innovation. The newly published content provides a practical and creative translation of SMIDGE's research findings into engaging audiovisual materials that encourage reflection, empathy, and critical thinking.

Produced in partnership with De Montfort University and Hamlett Films, the counter-narratives draw on SMIDGE's research into digital misinformation and behavioural dynamics. This collaboration combines academic expertise with creative storytelling to produce compelling, research-informed media that supports education, policy, and community engagement.

The counter-narratives are open educational resources, freely usable by:

- Educators and trainers in media literacy and civic education
- Community and youth organisations
- Journalists, policymakers, and communication professionals
- They are suitable for individual reflection or group discussions and can be integrated into workshops, awareness campaigns, and classroom settings.





SMIDGE MOOC Platform

The SMIDGE Project has officially launched the [SMIDGE MOOC Platform](#), a comprehensive online learning platform designed to strengthen media literacy and counter online extremism. The platform is the result of the dedicated work and collaboration of Fondazione Villa Montesca, one of the partners of the SMIDGE Project, which has developed an educational tool to address the growing challenges of misinformation and digital radicalisation in contemporary society.

The SMIDGE MOOC Platform offers journalists, security analysts, educators, and other professionals an advanced and engaging training experience focused on media literacy, disinformation, and the social impact of digital narratives, with particular attention to middle-aged citizens.

Through interactive modules and applied learning, the platform explores how media systems shape public opinion, how online environments foster manipulation and extremism, and how responsible communication can strengthen democratic values. Its goal is to equip participants with analytical skills, fact-checking techniques, and ethical awareness to navigate and respond effectively to the challenges of today's complex media landscape.

The course consists of twelve training units and a section of in-depth materials. The learning path begins with the foundations of media literacy and the mechanisms of news manipulation, then examines the dynamics of disinformation, online radicalization, and the political and economic structures of media ecosystems. It also investigates how social media architectures and cognitive biases influence how individuals interpret information.



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