SMIDGE

Social Media Narratives:
Addressing Extremism in Middle-Age

ABOUT SMIDGE

WHAT   **Understanding Middle-Aged Vulnerability**

SMIDGE is an EU-funded Horizon project dedicated to understanding the often overlooked middle-aged population (45-65) by uncovering the hidden impact of extremist narratives. The three-year project aims to explore how conspiracy theories and misinformation wield influence over political discourse, democracy and institutions.

WHY   **Revealing Online Extremism in a New Light**

Recognizing an unexplored realm in research, the SMIDGE Project undertakes the pressing challenge of mitigating the impact of extremist narratives on democratic processes. Focusing on the often-neglected middle-aged demographic, SMIDGE aims to unravel the complexities of susceptibility and influence, positioning this group at the forefront of efforts to combat extremist content in the online landscape.

HOW   **A Holistic Approach**

Utilizing a comprehensive methodology, SMIDGE conducts thorough social network and content analyses, along with extensive surveys across Europe. Immersed in the complex landscape of extremist discourses, the project uncovers underlying dynamics. Going beyond analysis, SMIDGE takes proactive measures — collaboratively crafting counter-narratives, developing educational resources and formulating policy briefs. Embracing a multi-disciplinary approach, the project ensures a nuanced understanding, providing effective, evidence-based tools and training for journalists and security professionals to combat fake news and disinformation.

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 Vulnerability

Explore the susceptibility of 45-65-year-olds to online extremist content, considering their unique characteristics, influences and pathways to extremism.

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 wide range of stakeholders, including RAN, European Foundation for Democracy, Age Platform Europe and law enforcement agencies, to inform evidence-based policies addressing online extremism.

TIMELINE & MILESTONES

2023 MARCH

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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