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The importance of media literacy in a culture of extremist violence

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The United States is now experiencing significant levels of political extremism, rage, and anti-government activism that is associated with targeted violence and domestic terrorism. Domestic terrorism is intended to inflict injuries beyond the direct victims by threatening and intimidating entire communities.



All around the world, those who perpetuate extremist violence are motivated by ideologies, specific issues, or political causes and use social media and online forums to influence public opinion and spread violent extremist narratives and activity (Patel & Koushik, 2017). Some individuals have attacked demonstrators and have targeted houses of worship and crowded commercial facilities or gatherings. Others have promoted a race war, justifying civil disorder that provides opportunities to engage in violence in furtherance of ideological objectives.

Protests and political rallies have been co-opted by both far-left and far-right extremists. Violent extremists have also targeted government, military, and police as well as private individuals based on race, gender, and other factors. Media coverage of mass shootings play a significant role in shaping public opinion about racially-targeted extremist violence (Hellmüller, Hase, & Lindner, 2022). In the United States, data from three surveys before and after the 2022 mass shootings in Buffalo (NY) and Uvalde (TX) revealed how media coverage of racially-targeted extremist violence creates feelings of dread and irrational fear among the general public (Dalafave & Viscusi, 2023).

Democracies are at risk when violence is used as a political tool to promote fear and hate. But the people who commit targeted violence and violent extremism are also our neighbours, our friends, and our family members. When they encounter conspiracy theories, propaganda, and disinformation that simplifies the world into

in-groups and out-groups, they discover the pleasures of a simple and satisfying worldview where villains are harming humanity (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019).

Survey research with young adults in six countries shows that social media is among the most common settings where young people encounter hate speech. Researchers found that acceptance of online hate is culturally situated and influenced by cultural background (Celuch et al, 2022). Over time, participation in communities of online hate can lead people to believe that committing violence against their enemies enables them to rise to the level of hero. For example, on January 6th, many members of militia groups who participated in violent insurrection thought of their actions as patriotic (Feuer & Montague, 2022).

Many people around the world are concerned about the general rise of intolerance that is fuelling the threat of extremist violence. Evidence of hateful ideologies and violence can be found in our communities and online. In the U.S., Neo-Nazi and KKK recruitment messages can be found on traffic signs. Online, people post and share forms of digital media that arouse strong emotions, including anger, hatred, and fear. Anti-government activists have harassed politicians, public officials, educators, and even librarians at public gatherings. But because of the wide scope of domestic extremism today, approaches that focus only on law enforcement and public safety are insufficient, especially because of the growing public disregard for law enforcement that has proliferated (Bell, 2017).

Effective prevention requires cooperation and coordination between relevant community stakeholders — this is known as a “whole-of-society” approach (Martin, 2018). Community leaders can promote a culture of tolerance and open dialogue to demonstrate the importance of rejecting violent ideologies by supporting the most vulnerable community members. Other key civil society actors include people from the fields of information communications technology, social media, and journalism.

All social media users can use the power of counterspeech in reacting to online hate – and researchers have found that Twitter users who got exposed to an empathy-based counterspeech message were more likely to delete their own xenophobic hate speech and produce less hate speech in the future (Hangartner et al, 2021). Empathetic feedback from online peers can help people resist the allure of hateful media messages. For all these reasons, the broader public must be partners in preventing and countering terrorism. Community-based media literacy education may be important in preventing the hate that leads to violence.

How media literacy community-based interventions prevent extremist violence

Media literacy has long been an educational intervention used in the practice of public health (Hobbs, 2010). But with propaganda and disinformation becoming increasingly disruptive and affecting all Americans, a whole-of-society education initiative is needed. Media literacy education cannot be confined to schools and students in elementary and secondary schools – it is something that adults of all ages now urgently need.

The media representation of the 2020 U.S. election and its dramatic aftermath – along with topics including immigration, racial justice, the coronavirus pandemic, and vaccination – only added to the ongoing concerns about so-called “fake news” and “cancel culture.” Questions are being raised about the appropriate role of government in addressing the problem of disinformation, but some of our most visible politicians are also functioning as “conflict entrepreneurs,” the term used to describe those who seek to exploit or profit from us-vs-them conflict (Ripley, 2021). Even among those who do not have direct contact with members of neo-Nazi, alt-right, Antifa, or militia groups, many families have experienced interpersonal tensions and even violence because of increased political polarization. These disruptions have been felt in the workplace, the community, the school, and in family life, exacerbated by the systematic and widespread dissemination of falsehoods and inflammatory propaganda. But many Americans feel helpless to address the situation, leading people towards an avoid-and-deny stance which may provide temporary respite but also interferes with the building of the social consensus that is essential for human flourishing.

Even as most people rely on access to a mobile phone and internet, the digital ecosystem has become more and more challenging for people of all ages to navigate. Every day, people access information, entertainment, and persuasion online, where the line between fact-based evidence and opinion can be blurry. Emotionally compelling content can be so eye-popping that it can compel people to share it. A host of websites that look like news offer false and inflammatory rhetoric on a wide range of controversial topics. With the rise of algorithmic personalization, people’s information ecosystems have narrowed, making it less likely for them to encounter unfamiliar or new ideas (Hobbs 2020). In addition, when hateful propaganda and disinformation are delivered through forms of entertainment like

memes, pop music, and videos, its appeal can lead people to bypass critical thinking (Hawden et al, 2019).

Media literacy (ML) education aims to improve how participants consume, create, and share information, entertainment, and persuasion. The term is often used as a shorthand for critical thinking about media, but it is fundamentally part of an expanded conceptualization of literacy that includes both “reading” and “writing” practices that are now essential for work, life, and citizenship (NAMLE, 2023). As people learn how to critically analyze communications, ideas, and forms of indoctrination, they are better able to recognize and resist the persuasive force of these messages.

ML interventions can also facilitate an individual’s natural growth track toward valuing pluralism by helping them recognize the prevalence of extreme ideas in which “we and them” and “good and evil” are easily distinguished. ML interventions shift the focus “away from safeguarding children from radical ideologies and toward giving them the tools and information that help them think critically about their own beliefs, connections with others and society, and their options for taking action” (Amit, & Kafy, 2022, p. 10).

In a systematic review of the literature, the RAND Corporation recommended that policymakers and practitioners increase participation from diverse constituencies in scaling ML efforts. According to RAND, ML is made up of several specific competencies, such as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate media messages in a variety of forms. ML education teaches participants to consider the implications of message construction from numerous angles, such as how the motivations of those disseminating information could influence content selection (Huguet et al, 2019).

Dialogue and discussion are key features of media literacy education, with common use of terms like “critical discussion”, “difficult dialogue”, “frank and candid talk”, and “non-judgmental discussion”. In such environments, people may express their worries about the current state of public affairs. When a space is established where people can feel safe to express ideas without fear of condemnation, this type of discourse fosters new ways for individuals to interpret their identity and critically assess and reorganize their assumptions and viewpoints (Amit, & Kafy, 2022).

Courageous conversations

Over the past 20 years, the Media Education Lab has become the premiere provider of media literacy training and educational services in the world, reaching more than 20,000 people in 2021 with programs and services on four continents. One program, Courageous Rhode Island, a state-wide model for using media literacy and active listening to address the threat of violent extremism, is funded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3). Based on our experience in implementing this program, we believe that media literacy competencies are increasing public safety by bringing communities together to develop their critical thinking and communication skills in ways that promote compassion, understanding, and intellectual curiosity.

In the Spring of 2023, we hosted Courageous Conversations, a 10-session online webinar series that used a combination of media literacy lessons and deep listening strategies to mobilize a coalition of diverse stakeholders, including young people, parents and grandparents, educators and librarians, and people in faith communities, veterans' groups, and other community members. In sessions that are part informational and part conversational, participants learned how to recognize and resist harmful propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation that may take the form of memes, news, activism, websites, videos, and social media posts. Participants came from across Rhode Island, the USA, and internationally.

By combining media literacy education with facilitated small-group dialogue and discussion, we helped people build the cognitive, social, and affective skills necessary to navigate their media environments. After only six months, the fully online, synchronous, and highly interactive small group discussion program has already reached more than 865 people. From a preliminary investigation of people who participated in the program, we found that participants gained knowledge about how to prevent violent extremism, increased their ability to critically analyze media messages, and applied active empathic listening strategies in their own lives for conflict reduction (Courageous RI, 2023).

While media literacy education is often conceptualized within the context of a program for children and teens (Bulger & Davison, 2018), it has considerable practical utility for adults, who also benefit from structured, social opportunities to critically analyze media messages using active listening, dialogue, and discussion. As people develop their critical thinking about media and self-expression through dialogue and discussion, they gain respect for diverse perspectives. They become more aware of harmful propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation.

True resilience, which can be defined as tolerance, active listening, emotional self-regulation, intellectual curiosity, and humility may emerge from media literacy education that meets the needs of adults in our communities. Media literacy discussion programs for adults may be a productive approach to peacebuilding as a societal enterprise, helping people refresh their senses about the local practice of genuinely democratic self-governance.

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The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) is a non-governmental organisation that builds on communication rights in order to promote social justice.