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Online Radicalization: Contested Terms and Conceptual Clarity

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2.1 Introduction

Online radicalisation is widely regarded as one of today's most pressing security challenges. Its importance has been emphasised by core European institutions, including the Council of Europe [1], the European Commission [2], EUROPOL [3] and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [4]. These warnings have been echoed by other International Governmental Organisations – the UN's *Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism*, for example, states that the "manipulative messages of violent extremists on social media have achieved considerable success in luring people, especially young women and men, into their ranks" [5] – and by national governments. The UK's Home Affairs Committee has described the use of the internet to promote radicalisation and terrorism as "one of the greatest threats that countries including the UK face" [6], whilst the 2015 White House Summit underscored the need to intensify efforts to counter recruitment and radicalisation to terrorist violence.

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that there is a burgeoning literature on online radicalisation. Within this literature, use of the terms "radicalisation", "self-radicalisation", "online radicalisation" and "echo chamber" is common. Also common is the tendency for those who use these terms to assume that their meanings are self-evident. In this chapter we seek to show that this is not in fact the case. The terms can be, and indeed are, understood in different ways. The tendency to assume that there is a shared understanding of what these contested terms mean, we argue, results in a lack of conceptual clarity.

The chapter begins by explaining why conceptual clarity is important. It then examines in turn the terms "radicalisation", "self-radicalisation", "online radicalisation" and "echo chamber", detailing the different ways in which they are used and explaining the problems to which this definitional uncertainty gives rise. Drawing on this discussion, the chapter concludes by suggesting some directions for future research that will advance understanding of the role the internet plays in contemporary violent extremism.

2.2 The Importance of Conceptual Clarity

In our opinion, there are at least three reasons why conceptual clarity is important. The first reason is the robustness of the research. Suppose that a concept is capable of being understood in three ways: X, Y and Z. If the researcher fails to consider these different understandings and select the one that will be deployed, this could result in internal inconsistency and incoherence. An example would be a policy analysis that analyses the problem situation through the lens of understanding X, articulates analysis criteria that are premised on understanding Y and generates alternative strategies that speak to understanding Z. The same point would apply to empirical research. Many concepts are not readily measurable: "Some are complex, not definable in a simple way, mean different things to different people and do not have definite boundaries" [7]. Abstract concepts must therefore be operationalised, by the construction of observable and measurable variables. It is essential that the variables validly represent the abstract concept. Flitting between different understandings of the abstract concept could result in some variables representing understanding X, other representing understanding Y and still other representing understanding Z. The result will be a flawed measurement of the abstract concept. More generally, a failure to articulate which understanding is being deployed will mean that it is impossible for others to assess whether the variables validly represent the abstract concept or not. Similarly, before sampling a researcher must first define the population to be sampled specifically and unambiguously. If the ambit of the population is unclear, then it will not be possible to determine whether the sample the researcher took was representative and whether the findings are generalisable [8].

The second reason is that a lack of conceptual clarity impedes research reviews and meta-analyses. The former provide "a synthesis of existing knowledge on a specific question, based on an assessment of all relevant empirical research that can be found" [9], whilst the latter provide "an *integrated* and *quantified* summary of research results on a specific question with particular reference to statistical significance and effect size" [10]. In both

cases, the basic premise "is that a series of studies address an identical conceptual hypothesis" [11]. If it is not clear whether the studies on a certain topic adopted understanding X, understanding Y or understanding Z, synthesising the results from the different studies may not be possible.

Leading on from this, the third reason is that conceptual clarity aids the effective and accurate communication of research to others, including other researchers, policy-makers, the media and interested publics. A failure to articulate the sense in which one is using a contested term can result in a discussion in which participants are speaking at cross-purposes. For example, the researcher's message to policy-makers that there is an urgent need for reform might be premised on understanding X, but if this is not made clear then what the policy-maker takes from the research might be that there is an urgent need to deal with the problem in the sense of understanding Z.

2.3 Radicalisation

Definitions of terrorism commonly include a requirement that the actor had a political or ideological motive [12]. As a result, it is often assumed that terrorist actors first develop "radical" beliefs, which subsequently drive their violent behaviour. The word radicalisation is used to describe this process. However, there are a number of difficulties with the term [13][14][15][16][17][18], two of which are particularly relevant for present purposes.

The first difficulty is that, if radicalisation denotes a process, it is unclear exactly what is (or should be) regarded as the end result of this process. Three answers are possible. Semantically, the most obvious answer is that the radicalisation process results in the person becoming a "radical". But, whilst this is how some construe the term [19][20][18][21], the other two understandings are more common. The first of these is that the radicalisation process results in the person possessing "extremist" beliefs [22][23], whilst the other, most popular, understanding is that the culmination of the radicalisation process is engaging in acts of terrorism or other terrorism-related activity (picking up extremist beliefs along the way) [24][25][26][27][28][29].

Whilst the terms "radical", "extremist" and "terrorist" are each contested, the essence of the terms differ. A radical is one who rejects the status quo and believes that there should be sweeping change [18] [19], whilst an extremist holds views that are not only on the margins of society but also foster hate towards an out-group or out-groups [18][22][30]. Meanwhile, a terrorist engages in acts of violence, for political or ideological reasons, with the intention to intimidate or coerce civilians and/or national governments or international governmental organisations [31][32]. In spite of these differences, the word radicalisation is frequently used without any answer being offered to the "radicalisation to what?" question. This leads to the terms "radical", "extremist" and "terrorist" being conflated: a tendency that is no doubt encouraged by the lack of an appropriate "isation" suffix for the words extremism and terrorism (there is no "extremisation" and "terrorisation" does not denote the process of becoming a terrorist).

The second difficulty relates to the understanding of radicalisation that takes terrorism to be the end result of the process. Explicitly or implicitly, this understanding of the term often assumes both the adoption of extremist beliefs and the causative role of these beliefs in the actor's decision to engage in terrorist activity. Whilst it is clear that not all extremists are terrorists – this, after all, is a premise on which much countering violent extremism work is based – what is less understood is the fact that not all terrorists can be described as extremists [16]. As Schuurman and Taylor explain, "terrorism is a tactic; a particular way of using deadly force that can stem from extremist beliefs just as much as it can be adopted for reasons of expediency" [33]. Admittedly, beliefs will often be important, but the notion that an extremist ideology is a *necessary* precondition for terrorist activity does not withstand empirical scrutiny [33][34][35]. As such, an understanding of "radicalisation" that paints extremist beliefs as playing a causative role in every choice to engage in terrorist activity is inherently problematic. A more promising approach is to instead study *how* beliefs affect actors' decisions to take part in terrorist activity, in order to understand the "nature and dynamics of extremist belief systems and their relationship with other factors and influences" [36].

2.4 Self-radicalisation

In this section and the one that follows we turn our attention to two descendants of the term radicalisation: self-radicalisation; and, online radicalisation. In addition to the problems they inherit from their parent term, these concepts suffer from additional difficulties of their own. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that most of the (academic) literature that uses these terms treats their meanings as self-evident. In the process of writing this chapter, we conducted a targeted literature search. The results of this search were reviewed, and a snowballing methodology was employed to identify further items of relevance. After compiling all of the items discovered into a database, we then filtered out those that did not contain any of the terms: "online radicalisation", "online radicalization", "self-radicalisation" or "self-radicalization". The remaining items were reviewed and filtered out if neither online radicalisation nor self-radicalisation was a principal focus of the piece. PhD theses were retained if they met our criteria, but Master's level theses were not. We were left with 43 items that mentioned and had as their principal focus online radicalisation, and 13 for self-radicalisation.[1] We then examined these pieces to determine how many explicitly provided a definition of the relevant term. We found that just nine (21%) contained an explicit definition of online radicalisation, whilst the total for self-radicalisation was four (31%). In this section we focus on the latter term, before turning to the former in the section that follows.

In spite of the lack of an explicit definition in most pieces, it was nonetheless possible to make some inferences about commentators' understandings of the relevant concept. This revealed some significant differences. For example, the term self-radicalisation was understood by many to mean that there had been no interaction with or involvement of others during the individual's radicalisation. This conception was made explicit by von Behr at al, who stated that the term self-radicalisation "implies a process whereby no

[1] Some items were deemed to have both online radicalisation and self-radicalisation as a principal focus.

contact is made with other terrorists or extremists, whether in person or virtually" (2013: 20). Yet others seemed to adopt a looser conception which allows for some interaction with others.
The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), for example, stated that "the Internet allows individuals to 'self-radicalise' without input or encouragement from individuals in an off-line setting (so-called 'lone wolves')" [37]. On its face, this definition only excludes offline interactions with others, and so appears to envisage online interactions as being consistent with an individual self-radicalising. Similarly, Picart speaks of a "lone wolf" terrorist self-radicalising through some "sympathetic connection with an organized terrorist network", adding that "interaction through the internet allows a self-radicalizing terrorist to move into the stage of radical violent action" [38].

These different understandings of how self-radicalisation should be construed can result in significant classificatory differences. Take the case of Shannon Maureen Conley as an example. Conley was aged 19 and living in Colorado when she planned to travel to Syria, via Turkey, and there marry a fighter from the so-called Islamic State (IS) whom she had met online[39]. Conley was a trained nurse and planned to provide medical services and training within an IS camp. She aroused suspicion when she went to a church with a notepad and asked strange questions. When questioned by the FBI she displayed a number of worrying indicators, including referring to military bases as "targets" and seeking to justify "defensive jihad" when Islam is under attack. According to the definition offered by von Behr et al, Conley's case would not be an instance of self-radicalisation because of her online interactions (including Skype conversations) with her suitor. But according to the ISD and Picart, Conley was self-radicalised because there was no input or encouragement from individuals in on offline setting; her only interactions were via the internet.

The previous extracts from the ISD and Picart both describe those who self-radicalise as lone wolves. This is also problematic, both conceptually and empirically. A lone wolf is "a person who acts on his or her own without orders from – or even connections to – an organisation" [40]. So, whilst the term self-radicalisation is commonly used to refer to the process by which someone forms extremist beliefs and/or reaches the point of willingness to engage in terrorist activity, the term lone wolf refers to those who have engaged in some terrorist activity. Conceptually, there is no necessary connection between an individual self-radicalising and an individual engaging in terrorist activity as a lone wolf. A self-radicalised individual may well choose, post-radicalisation, to join a group or network of like-minded individuals. Here the Internet offers opportunities for individuals to seek out like-minded others and experience a sense of community, thereby solidifying their extremist views [40]. Conversely, individuals that were not self-radicalised, i.e. those who were radicalised through interaction with others, may choose to act as lone wolves and engage in terrorist activity alone [41]. Indeed, one study found that 62% of the lone actors examined had had prior contact with clearly radical, extremist, or terrorist individuals [42]. Empirically, the vast majority of commentators agree that radicalisation rarely occurs without interaction with other people [43] [44] [45]. Radicalisation is a "social process" [46]. Yet, the proportion of terrorist attacks that are perpetrated by lone wolves is not similarly low (see: [47]). The assumed connection between self-

radicalisation and acting as a lone wolf is thus not only conceptually unsustainable. It also obscures the former's relative infrequency.

2.5 Online Radicalisation

According to the von Behr et al understanding of self-radicalisation – in which there is no interaction with, or involvement of, others during the individual's radicalisation – there is nothing inherent in the term that is specific to the online domain. In other words, in theory at least, an individual might self-radicalise through the consumption of online materials, offline materials or a combination of the two. In this sense, the possibility of an individual self-radicalising is at least as old as the printing press [20]. In contrast, the term online radicalisation is domain specific. It is limited to radicalisation through online activities only.

A striking feature of the term online radicalisation is the variety of behaviours to which it is used to refer:

> "A wide-range of virtual behaviours is subsumed into the category of online radicalisation. A simple search of news articles from March 2015 shows that a range of behaviours from accessing information on overseas events via the Internet, to accessing extremist content and propaganda, to detailing attack plans in a blog post, have all been considered as online radicalisation" [48]

To a large extent, this reflects one of the difficulties outlined above pertaining to the term radicalisation: it is used to denote both a cognitive process (the formation of extremist beliefs) and a cognitive plus behavioural process (the formation of extremist beliefs that manifest themselves in the individual engaging in terrorist activity). Whilst the detailing of attack plans might be consistent with the latter use of the term, it is difficult to reconcile with an understanding of radicalisation as solely a cognitive process: the fact that the person has created an attack plan suggests that they had already formed extremist beliefs.

There are several studies that focus on the online milieu which construe the radicalisation process as an exclusively cognitive process, i.e. as culminating in the formation of extremist beliefs. For example, in their study of a YouTube group Bermingham et al. define online radicalisation as the process by which someone comes to view violence as a legitimate method of solving social and political conflicts [43]. In Torok's conceptual framework for online radicalisation, she too understands the term to mean the development of extreme beliefs which can lead to terrorism [49], whilst Huey's research into online "memes" does not define the term online radicalisation specifically but does implicitly suggest that it means the development of support for a terrorist group (in this case, IS) [50]. Similarly, Neumann describes online radicalisation as the learning and normalisation of beliefs in virtual communities which allows mobilisation to violence to become possible [17]. All four of these studies thus refer to the possibility of, or support

for, violence, but none regards engaging in terrorist activity as a necessary condition for an individual to have been radicalised.

The study by von Behr et al does not explicitly address the question whether radicalisation is an exclusively cognitive process or a cognitive and behavioural process [45]. The findings of the study are drawn from a total of 15 in-depth case studies: ten of these focussed on individuals that had engaged in terrorist activity, whilst the other five focussed on participants from the Channel Programme (a part of the UK's Prevent Strategy, which aims to dissuade those who have developed, or are in the process of developing, extreme beliefs). By not differentiating between these two groups of case studies the researchers assumed that all 15 individuals had radicalised, even though only ten had engaged in terrorist activity. They therefore implicitly affirmed the solely cognitive understanding of radicalisation. Meanwhile Holt et al's research into victim and jihad videos does distinguish carefully between radicalisation of opinion and radicalisation to action, and focuses on the latter. However, their statement that they chose to "focus on extremist content related to radicalization to violent action" [51] strongly suggests that they assumed a causal relationship in which radicalisation of opinion is a prerequisite for radicalisation to action. Other studies have adopted a more nuanced approach, seeking to assess how those who have been cognitively "radicalised" go on to develop violent behaviours. For example, Koehler's interview-based research with neo-Nazis sought to analyse the significance of the Internet in transmitting extremist beliefs into political activism (including violence) [52]. Similarly, Saifudeen's conceptual model describes how the formation of extremist beliefs online can lead to violent conduct offline [53]. The value of these studies lies in their interrogation of the role that extremist beliefs play in an individual's decision to engage in terrorist activity, without assuming that such beliefs are a necessary prerequisite for, or play a causative role in, an individual's decision to engage in such conduct.

Beyond the divergent views as to the end result of the radicalisation process, perhaps the most problematic feature of the term online radicalisation is its sharp division between the online and offline realms. A number of commentators contrast online interactions with ones in the "real world" (see, e.g., [40][44][50][53]). As Conway explains, this "privileging" of 'real world' activity" understates the "social aspect of social media":

> "Today's Internet does not simply allow for the dissemination and consumption of "extremist material" in a one-way broadcast from producer to consumer, but also high levels of online social interaction around this material. It is precisely the functionalities of the social Web that causes many scholars, policymakers, and others to believe that the Internet is playing a significant role in contemporary radicalization processes" [54]

The case of Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman provides a useful example [55]. He was a member of an offline network of Somalis from the metropolitan area of Minneapolis, who was charged (along with five of his peers) with attempting to travel to Syria in April 2015. The group members were alleged to have radicalised at informal gatherings, such as playing basketball together. However, their inspiration was Abdi Nur – one of the first

to travel from the U.S. to Syria in May 2014 – who relayed propaganda, encouragement and operational advice back to the group via Twitter, Ask.FM and other sites. So, whilst the case involved a strong, offline social network, at the same time the group's activities were facilitated by – and, arguably, dependent upon – the internet.

Whilst it is important not to underestimate the influence of the online realm, it is also important not to commit the opposite error and overstate the significance of the role that the Internet plays in the radicalisation process. To date, there have been very few empirically-grounded studies. What studies there are have found that – whilst the Internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised, is a key source of information, communication and propaganda, and facilitates the process of radicalisation – the Internet is not a substitute for offline communication and networks, but rather facilitates in-person communication, creating more opportunities to become radicalised [45][56][57]. So, the process of radicalisation commonly straddles the offline and online realms. Interactions in both domains frequently go hand-in-hand and there is no stark offline – online dichotomy. Gill et al accordingly argue that, instead of disaggregating the radicalisation process into discrete groups (online radicalisation, prison radicalisation, etc), it may instead be more useful to disaggregate the concept of a "terrorist" into discrete groups (e.g. group actors versus lone-actors)[57]. This would shift the focus to why the offender chose the particular environment, rather than purely looking at the affordances the environment produced.

2.6 Echo Chamber

The term "echo chamber" refers to a setting in which an individual engages with like-minded others, causing opinions to be amplified and reinforced and increasing polarisation. In the current context, its use has three difficulties. The first of these stems from the fact that the term can be used to describe two different phenomena. One is the manifestation of confirmation bias, which when aggregated in a group of people may take the form of "group think" [58] or "group polarisation" [59]. It is well-established that people tend to seek viewpoints that agree, rather than conflict, with their own, and many scholars have argued that this can result in a number of undesirable effects, such as poor judgement or the normalisation of the most extreme views within communities. In terms of radicalisation, this can lead to the demonisation of the "Other" to the point where violence is regarded as acceptable, or even obligatory [60].

The other phenomenon is more contemporary and refers to the personalisation of internet technologies, described by Eli Pariser as the "filter bubble" [61]. Rather than the long-established self-sorting of confirmation bias, which can occur both online or offline, the filter bubble has only existed since around 2009, when Google and Facebook began to utilise users' internet "cookies" for a more personal experience. This works by sorting posts via an algorithm which factors in a number of different values, including friend relationships, explicit user interests, and prior user engagement [62]. Although this topic is rarely empirically analysed within Terrorism Studies literature, an argument could be made that if a user views violent extremist content online, the filter bubble could be

responsible for artificially putting a greater amount of such content in users' feeds.[2] This would exacerbate the effect of the first phenomenon, creating a vicious cycle in which dissenting voices are minimised and extreme ones normalised.

In spite of the differences between these two phenomena, the term "echo chamber" is frequently used without any definition being offered, leaving it unclear which of the two phenomena is being referred to [63][64][65][66][67][68]. Even when a definition is provided, which of the two phenomena is being considered may still remain unclear [37][40][45].

The second difficulty is that there has been a tendency to simply assume, in the absence of supporting empirical data, that the echo chamber phenomena contribute to online radicalisation [66][67][68]. For example, in his book *Understanding Terror Networks* Sageman argued that "the interactivity between a 'bunch of guys' acted as an echo chamber, which progressively radicalized them collectively to the point where they were ready to join a terrorist organization" [69]. In his later book *Leaderless Jihad*, Sageman suggested that this effect also occurs online, with online fora displacing radical mosques as the breeding grounds for terrorists, claiming that their interactivity is key to radicalisation [70]. In particular, he argued: first, that on the internet success is celebrated and copied, while failure is more easily forgotten, giving the impression that the movement is more effective than it really is; and, second, that moderate members of the movement have an easier exit route if they are dissatisfied (by simply not logging on), leaving the more radical members to rule the roost [71]. Despite these seemingly intuitive arguments, Sageman offered no empirical evidence of these effects in action.

The previously mentioned study by von Behr et al. – which was empirically grounded – also discussed the role of echo chambers. The evidence from their case studies supported the hypothesis that the internet acts as an echo chamber: the actors in their sample did tend to engage online to confirm, rather than challenge, their existing beliefs. However, this was subject to an important caveat: "this finding may be due to the fact that the information recovered related to a late stage of the individual's radicalisation" [72]. In other words, it was likely that the actors already held extreme beliefs prior to the data being collected. This leads to a problem of underdetermination; it is not clear whether the online "echo chamber" actually contributed to the process of radicalisation, or, rather, if being radicalised caused the actors to engage in echo chambers.

The study by Wojcieszak surveyed a number of online actors that held extreme beliefs on two online fora (one environmentalist and one neo-Nazi) to assess whether participants demonstrated false consensus, i.e. they believed that their cause was more popular than was actually the case. She found evidence of false consensus on both fora and, importantly, that for the neo-Nazi forum time spent online was significantly correlated with false consensus, even after controlling for a number of factors: "engagement in

[2] Recently, it has been suggested that Facebook's "Suggested Friends" algorithm is responsible for introducing contact between extremists online [81]. Also, it was reported in 2013 that Twitter's account suggestion algorithm was having the effect of connecting individuals at risk of radicalisation with extremist propagandists [82].

ideologically homogeneous online groups substantially exacerbates the tendency among the analysed neo-Nazis to project their attitudes onto others" [73]. This study thus offers some empirical support for Sageman's claim that online a group may appear to be more successful than it actually is. However, on the environmentalist forum, online participation did not account for the false consensus, therefore this effect cannot simply be assumed to always exist.

The lack of empirically grounded research into the echo chamber phenomena has been highlighted by O'Hara and Stevens. They point out that what empirical data does exist is methodologically limited, relying on surveys or other kinds of self-reporting (e.g. the Wojcieszak study) on often small or otherwise unsatisfactory samples (e.g. the von Behr et al study)[74]. These methodological concerns lead us to the final of the three problems, which is a combination of the previous two: empirical studies have failed to (at least attempt to) disaggregate the impact of the two discrete "echo chamber" phenomena. This failing is not unique to terrorism research. Outside the field of Terrorism Studies there is a sizable amount of research that focuses on how users tend to group together [75], how this affects their sentiment [76][77] and whether some users are more susceptible to this than others [78]. However, none of this research managed to ascertain the roles of individual users as opposed to the personalisation effects of the platform they were using and, as a result, conclusions could not be drawn as to which was primarily responsible for any echo chamber effect.

There are, however, two promising pieces of empirical research that do isolate these variables, one within the field of Terrorism Studies and one outside. The first, conducted by O'Callaghan et al. analysed extreme right-wing videos on YouTube and the "recommendations" that are offered to users (based on their cookies). It found that the recommendations "can result in users being excluded from information that is not aligned with their existing perspective, potentially leading to immersion within an extremist ideological bubble" [79]. It should be pointed out, however, that the study focused on what potentially radicalising users *could* view online, rather than how users actually *do* interact with personalised suggestions. It is therefore no more than a promising start for research into the filter bubble effect in the context of radicalisation. The second piece of research, commissioned by Facebook, separated and compared the two phenomena in a different context. Its findings suggested that users' own choices play a larger role than personalisation technology [80]. Whether this same finding would emerge in the context of extremist content remains to be seen. In the meantime, researchers should be careful to pass this epistemological uncertainty along when discussing echo chambers in their work, so as not to ascribe to the echo chamber phenomena a causal role in the radicalisation process that has not yet been established.

2.7 Summary

Radicalisation, self-radicalisation, online radicalisation and echo chambers are contested terms. In this chapter we have shown that each is capable of being understood, and is in fact used, in different ways. Radicalisation may refer to either a solely cognitive process – resulting in the formation of either radical or extremist beliefs – or a cognitive and

behavioural process. These different understandings of the term radicalisation result in different understandings of the behaviours that fall within the ambit of the term online radicalisation. Meanwhile, self-radicalisation is used by some to denote that there was no interaction with others in an offline setting, whilst others use it to denote that there was no interaction with others at all. And, finally, the term echo chamber can be used to refer to either the self-sorting of individual users or the personalisation effects of the platform they are using.

In spite of the different possible understandings of each of these terms, more often than not researchers fail to state the sense in which they are using them. This is illustrated by the fact that, in our literature search, only one-in-five of the research items with a principal focus on online radicalisation provided an explicit definition of the term. This lack of conceptual clarity has a number of detrimental consequences. First, it can detract from the robustness of the research. For example, previous empirical studies of the echo chamber effect have failed to distinguish between the role of individual users (confirmation bias) and the personalisation effects of the platform they were using (filter bubble), meaning that conclusions could not be drawn as to which of these phenomena was primarily responsible for any echo chamber effect. Second, it can hamper the construction of research reviews and meta-analyses. Synthesising the findings of different research items within a field requires that the understanding of key concepts is made clear. This is especially important when the different understandings of a term like self-radicalisation can lead to widely diverging classifications of individual cases, such as that of Shannon Maureen Conley. Third, it has an obfuscatory effect on communication of the research to others. For example, use of the term online radicalisation perpetuates a sharp distinction between the offline and online realms even though this distinction is problematic and appears to be unsustainable. Similarly, we saw above that using the term radicalisation in a way that paints extremist beliefs as playing a causative role in every choice to engage in terrorist activity is at odds with the findings of empirical research. Using the term in this way thus not only exaggerates the role of ideology, it also downplays the role of other factors that in some cases may have had a more significant influence.

At this point, one might wonder exactly what can be done to resolve the issues we have raised in this chapter. To seek to impose on researchers homogenised language is, of course, unrealistic and undesirable, whilst a call to researchers to define the terms they use more clearly and explicitly may sound somewhat trite. Instead, we conclude by highlighting the beginnings of a promising research agenda that has emerged in the course of our discussion. This agenda seeks to: understand how ideological beliefs affect actors' decisions to engage in terrorist activity, alongside other factors and influences; disaggregate the concept of a "terrorist" (as opposed to the concept of "radicalisation"), in order to shift the focus to the actors' reasons for choosing a particular environment for specific behaviours; and, empirically assess the relative influence of confirmation bias and filter bubbles within violent extremist echo chambers. Importantly, this agenda not only moves away from the befuddling batch of buzzwords we have discussed in this chapter; it also promises a deeper understanding of the role that the internet plays in contemporary violent extremism.

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