

# RADICALIZATION IN TIMES OF COVID:

A review of rapid response challenges for prevention practitioners in Germany & the United States



## INTRODUCTION

As Covid-19 forced many people into isolation and increased the reliance on the internet and social media for public interaction, concern arose about what effects the pandemic may be having on radicalization and polarization. Research has shown that the pandemic increased uncertainty in daily lives, caused psychological distress, and inspired social polarization and conflict (*Levinson, et al., 2021*). It was within this context that we investigated how the pandemic affected the ability of educators and social workers, who are often the first responders to youth radicalization, to monitor this increased risk? Tens of millions of German and American children found themselves in extraordinary circumstances that required them to be online much of the day. The pandemic decreased social contact, and by extension, limited intergroup contact, which policy makers consider important to the prevention of right-wing radicalization (*Graefe-Geusch, forthcoming*). Parents had to adapt to teleworking from the same physical location, while simultaneously managing childcare. Thus, youth have rapidly increased their online presence in unsupervised ways. While increased use of the internet by itself does not necessarily imply a higher rate of online radicalization, the wider context warranted concern. The pandemic coincides with growing polarization in both Germany and the U.S., a rising distrust of government information regarding the pandemic, and more individuals forced to navigate new platforms of communication (*Dyck, et al., 2018; Humprecht, 2019; Verstraete & Bambauer, 2017*). Simultaneously, posts on right-wing extremist and incel forums increased during the pandemic (*Davies, et al., 2021*). These trends translate into an augmented risk of extremist groups using the increased government distrust to normalize their messaging, and to a spread of misinformation, conspiracies, and scapegoating (*Davies, 2021*).

In response to this heightened risk, the [Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab \(PERIL\)](#) at American University, with financial support from the U.S. office of the [Rosa Luxemburg Foundation](#), undertook research on how the pandemic affected educators' and social workers' ability to monitor and respond to the increased risk of potential radicalization. **PERIL** conducted a study in the first summer of the pandemic, when understanding of the Covid-19 virus was considerably lower, and government responses were acute and disruptive to youths' social lives and education. From May 2020 through August 2020, **PERIL** conducted a rapid response assessment project of radicalization in the COVID-19 era in Germany and the US, contacting 56 organizations to request interviews, conducting 29 interviews and 2 focus groups (with an additional 5 individuals in targeted educator or trainer professional roles) with key experts and practitioners across Germany and America. Our goal is to compile a list of current responses and promising practices to online radicalization, which can be compared cross-nationally, and to understand how the pandemic is affecting these responses and practices.

This report presents the findings from interviews with organizations focused on public education around radicalization and schools, who are important mentors for students, among whom some could be at risk of radicalization. In Germany and America, educators were concerned with a heightened risk of radicalization during the pandemic. Additionally, the pandemic negatively affected important resources such as funding, face-to-face interaction, and the time needed for educators to meaningfully engage students on political and civic education. Nevertheless, there are key differences between the two countries. Germany has more organizations focused on civic education and education partnerships around radicalization than the United States; however, the U.S. organizations and educators were better prepared to continue their work online, as the technical skills and know-how were more abundant. Overall, the pandemic increased the need for funding and support to educators countering extremism, while also making the work harder.

The report first outlines the context of radicalization in the case studies, particularly during the pandemic. We explain our methodology before outlining our findings. The findings are organized around commonalities and differences between Germany and the U.S., and then focus on the gaps and needs we identified. We conclude with a look towards future research endeavors.



## BACKGROUND

As the pandemic hit, both countries experienced an increase in social polarization, right-wing, and anti-government mobilization. The pandemic only heightens these concerns.

This report defines extremism as the belief that one group of people is in direct and bitter conflict with other groups who don't share the same racial or ethnic, gender or sexual, religious, or political identity. Extremist ideologies separate the world into simplistic, black-and-white categories based on "us" and "them" identities, and believe that conflicts between the two opposing sides can only be resolved through total separation, domination, or other forms of violence. Extremism seeks to create division and polarization because it validates the belief in a world where people with different identities can't live and work together. Further, for the purposes of this report, radicalization here is defined as the process through which an individual with distrust of out-group members becomes activated to the point of holding an extremist worldview or a pervasive "us versus them" outlook, and embrace violence as the inevitable resolution to this tension between groups. In other words, radicalization is the process wherein people transition from holding an extremist belief or a few extremist beliefs, to gradually holding so many extremist beliefs that violence and domination of the 'Other' becomes the logical extension and outcome of a now interconnected set of ideas, which have formed an extremist ideology/worldview. Finally, we note that the terms "far right" and "right wing" are used in different ways throughout the literature and in each country. We use these terms interchangeably to refer to a mix of movements and ideologies that express supremacist beliefs (white supremacy, male supremacy, Christian supremacy, and Western supremacy), authoritarianism, anti-democratic views, and anti-government views.

Right-wing ideology and terrorism has a complicated past in Germany: in West Germany, post-WWII, state and civil society leaders, and especially the social movement in the 1960s, brought forth a collective memory which stigmatized expressions of far-right sentiment and parties (Rosset, Hayes, & Dudek, 2020). The student movement of the 1960s demanded a critical confrontation of the past and demanded that public discourse wrestled with Germans as perpetrators or enablers. West Germany cultivated decentralized and diverse practices around remembering the Holocaust, which directly impacted political sensitivities (Arakchiyska, 2012) This process is referred to as Vergangenheitsbewältigung, or 'a wrestling with and coming to terms with one's past.' The outcome was a civic culture skeptical of authoritarianism, nationalism, and outspoken xenophobia, even if personal sentiments still may have embraced some of these sentiments. This process notwithstanding, in the 1960s a right-wing party called the NPD started gaining political momentum, though it failed to become wide spread because its popularity rose concurrently with the rise of neo-Nazi terrorist groups like Junge Nationaldemokraten, which badly damaged its image. (Mudde, 2000) Nevertheless, the NPD remained a small party in West Germany up until 2010.

In contrast, in East Germany the Communist party controlled the formation of a common memory and prioritized communist patriotism. They emphasized the Nazi crimes against communists, focusing on the suffering of the communists specifically. In the creation myth of the East German Republic, all East Germans were asked to identify as communists. Thus, in the process of creating a communist identity, East Germans were absolved from reckoning with the crimes of the holocaust. Instead, the narrative was that East German communists either courageously fought the Nazi regime,

or heroically suffered at the hand of the Nazi regime (Bundeszentrale fuer politische Bildung, 2008). They were neither perpetrators nor bystanders. As only few East Germans had participated in the resistance, the state actively constructed this national identity through rituals and memorials and through the suppression of countering narratives. Consequentially, there were only sparse attempts by civil society, such as churches, to commemorate the genocide and to recon with the antisemitism. After unification, West Germany imposed its normative approach to WWII on the East, which inspired resentment (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2008).

These factors contributed to a resurgence of far-right ideas and the far-right political party. The current resurgence was particularly strong in East Germany, where both the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Homeland (PEGIDA) protest movement started, and Germany's right-wing, anti-immigration party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) gained electoral popularity. But notably this resurgence did not stay contained to the East. The 2015 migration influx created a new point of right-wing mobilization in both East and West Germany. In the 2016 election, AfD became a significant political player in the former communist states of Germany (Economist, 2016), with 24% of the vote in Sachsen-Anhalt, and 21% in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, significantly higher than in Western states, where it ranges from 5.5% (Bremen) to 15% (Baden-Württemberg) (Jansen & Meisner, 2017). This also correlated with higher rates of right-wing violence in those areas. In 2015, while the former East German states housed only 21% of the German population, more than half of all right-wing extremist attacks occurred there (Schmid, 2015). The AfD also slowly rose in prominence in West Germany, where it passed the 5% election mark in both Hamburg and

Bremen, two West German cities (Rydgren, 2018) Simultaneously, right-wing acts of terrorism surged in Germany, starting with the uncovering of the terrorist Nationalist Socialist Underground cell in 2011, which conducted several assassinations and bombings (Koehler, 2018) Further, in 2020 Germany's Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) started officially surveilling a section of the AfD called Der Flügel ('The Wing') as a potential threat to Germany's constitutional order. BfV soon expanded this surveillance to the entire party (Noestlinger, 2021).

Covid-19 thus coincides with a decade-long renaissance of far-right mobilization. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right groups in Germany capitalized on the uncertainty to spread misinformation and conspiracy theories about both the virus itself and governments' public health response (McNeil-Willson, 2020). As a result, Germany witnessed particularly prominent right-wing violence and mobilization in the months preceding and then overlapping with the pandemic. In 2019, Germany experienced terror attacks on a synagogue in October (BBC, 2020), as well as the political murder of a conservative, pro-migrant politician in June by a far-right extremist (BBC, 2021), and in 2020, a deadly attack on a hookah bar in Hanau in Western Germany (Ewing & Eddy, 2020). Simultaneously, right-wing, anti-European, autocratic, and anti-migration messaging featured prominently in party mobilization and subsequently, the electoral success of the populist right-wing Alternative Party for Germany (AfD) (Hill, 2020). The rise of right-wing populist parties appears to reflect growing xenophobia (Rydgen, 2015; Zick, et al., 2019) and the normalization of previously taboo far-right sentiments (Miller-Idriss, 2017).



The United States also experienced an uptick of far right activity over the past decade, and this trend has been accelerating. This trend is rooted in several political currents in the U.S. landscape. For example, among U.S. conservatives in particular there has been a growing concern of the relative decline of U.S. conservatism, as well as a concern with the dwindling opportunities for white Americans (Kydd 2021). Additionally, there are other social movements, which are contributing to an increased presence of right-wing ideology. For example, a renewed right wing populism coalesced with pre-existent organized White supremacy, Christian nationalist, and white nationalist groups (Berlet and Sunshine 2019). Partisan and media polarization as well as social media feedback loops heighten the perceived threat of changes in the U.S. political landscape. This heightened threat perception fueled this renaissance of right-wing ideology, and the formation of armed right-wing groups (Kydd 2021). Different social movements unite around a scapegoating of the other, which they blame for “unravelling the threads that weave together the idealized unified ‘traditional’ national culture and the core ethnic stock.” (Berlet and Sunshine 2019, 481)

The roots of these movements are historical and multi-faceted. The U.S. has a long history of right-wing populist movements reviving throughout its history. Additionally, the U.S., unlike Germany, has not fostered a centralized historic narrative around the atrocities of the past. In addition, there are acute financial pressures in a context of increasing income inequality. In effect, between the 1980s and 2010s, ninety percent of Americans received no rise in salary, yet the wealthy were able to increase their income from dividends from a rising GDP by ten percent (Berlet and Sunshine 2019). This trend intensified during the pandemic, which increased economic insecurity for many U.S. residents, while many wealthy Americans could reap from investments in rising companies.

Right-wing groups are capitalizing on this environment in which economic uncertainty coalesces with demographic changes and political polarization to recruit online. The alt right movement refers to this coalescence of movements and subcultures that share an “ideology of white nationalism, misogyny, antisemitism, and authoritarianism.” (Boatman 2019) These groups are openly recruiting online, targeting socially and economically disenfranchised individuals. Most at risk are individuals with rep-existing social and emotional difficulties. White supremacist groups bait these individuals through a strategy of validation and externalization or scapegoating of feelings, such as “it is everyone else’s fault for feeling rejected, emasculated, angry, and lonely.” (Boatman 2019) The pandemic has amplified this trend. For example, there has been an uptick of online activity and overt recruitment from alt right groups. For example, Moonshot conducted an analysis of online content after the onset of the pandemic, and found a 12% increase in the engagement with violent extremist online content in states with stay at home orders (Moonshot 2020) There are also other metrics. For example, in a separate report, Moonshot found a 300% increase in the use of inflammatory hashtags that specifically incite violence against Chinese people. (Moonshot 2020 Covid-19)

The results of this renaissance of right-wing ideas and activism are an increase of measurable right-wing threat. For example, right-wing terrorist attacks in the U.S. quadrupled between 2016 and 2017, culminating in the 2017 Charlottesville ‘Unite the Right’ rally. Further, the 2018 synagogue attack in Pittsburgh, and 13 packaged bombs sent to Democratic politicians, are two high-profile examples of this rise in right-wing activity pre-pandemic (Jones, 2018). Right-wing extremist groups utilize social media and the internet for propaganda, coordination, and recruitment (Jones, 2018). This right-wing mobilization persisted during the pandemic, and in January 2021, the U.S. experienced a historic insurrection attempt, with a cadre of right-wing groups collectively storming the capital building.

## METHODOLOGY

We conducted the qualitative research project across two countries from May until September 2020: Germany and the United States. To identify interested educators and responders to radicalization, we combined a general internet search with the more focused approach of reaching out to PERIL’s network of people working on countering radicalization. After assembling a list of educators and organizations that work on disrupting radicalization efforts, we contacted all organizations identified. To further recruit participants, we pursued a convenience sample through a snowball method (Weiss, 1995). Cumulatively, we contacted 57 organizations, 37 across Germany and another 20 across the United States. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, we used semi-structured interviews to collect the data. This approach permitted us to gather information on specific questions, compare answers across interviews, while also allowing interviewees to freely share any concerns and insights they accumulated based on their expertise. We conducted 37 total interviews, as well as two focus groups - one in Germany and one in the US. Cumulatively, the findings reported here represent the experiences of 39 individuals, who are either educators or work on civic education to counter radicalization.

We conducted 17 interviews in Germany, which included representatives from Miteinander e.V.; Apabiz; Amadeo Antonio Stiftung; GIRDS; Aussteigerprogramm Sachsen; Martin Niemöller Stiftung/ Erinnerungsort Topf & Söhne – Die Ofenbauer von Auschwitz (one interviewee representing both institutions); Kirche Stärkt Demokratie Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Kirche & Rechtsextremismus; Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung; Inside Out.; Regionalzentrum für demokratische Kultur Westmecklenburg; Mobile Beratung gegen Rechtsextremismus Berlin, a school principal

in Thuringia, a Ph.D Candidate at University Tübingen in the department of political science researching the impact of conspiracy theories (also active in “Emanzipation & Frieden e.V.” and “Jungen Forum” of the “Deutsch-Israelischen Gesellschaft” Stuttgart), and Bildungsstätte Anne Frank.

In the United States, we contacted 20 organizations to request interviews. The smaller number of organizations contacted reflects the fewer number of organizations engaged in combating far-right extremism and/or deradicalization work. Twelve interviews were conducted, with representatives from Life After Hate, Moonshot, an academic expert on far-right extremism, Free Radicals, the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, the Anti-Defamation League, the Southern Poverty Law Center, Colorado Resilience Collaborative, a former violent white supremacist, the McCain Institute, New Summit Academy, and the Denver Police Department.

We also conducted one focus group in each country with educators of youth and young children in order to explore the challenges they face in preventing radicalization, and the tools they would find useful. Two U.S. educators joined the focus group in September 2020. Educator A is a high school teacher based in North Carolina and educator B is a high school principal in Vermont. The German focus group with three participants took place in August 2020. All three of the participants were mid-career teachers at public schools in Berlin and Brandenburg. One of the teachers taught primary school - specifically, grades 1-4, although she did also teach 5 and 6 in English language courses. The other two teachers were employed at the same lower track secondary school in Berlin’s North West. The schools that the participants worked at served a wide range of students, from 500 (primary school) to 800 (secondary school) students.

“EXTREMISTS  
NEVER  
MISS AN  
OPPORTUNITY  
TO TAKE  
ADVANTAGE  
OF A CRISIS.”

- Focus Group Participant

## FINDINGS

We interviewed organizations charged with directly responding to radicalization, as well as educators, who frequently are the first point of contact for at-risk students. In both countries, the need to counter radicalization was heightened during the pandemic. Simultaneously, the pandemic undercut resources for this cause in terms of funding, the social capital of face-to-face interaction, and the time needed for educators to authentically connect with students around these topics. In comparison to the United States, Germany had more outside groups that could help educators, but lagged behind the US in the efficacy of their online engagement. Overall, Covid-19 both increased the need for resources to support educators countering extremism, and made that day-to-day work harder to do.



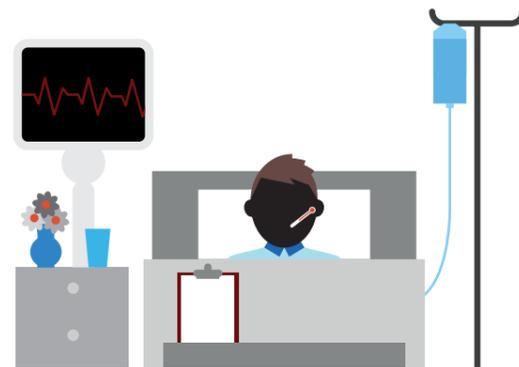
## COMMONALITIES

Organizations in both the U.S. and Germany expressed dismay over the pandemic-related need for more counter-radicalization work, while simultaneously limiting the funding for that kind of work. Educators noted that there is a dearth of resources that provide step-by-step or in-depth information on how to respond to potential radicalization.

Interviewees in both countries noted that the pandemic gave right-wing and anti-government groups new ways of engaging with the public in ways that could allow them to recruit and/or normalize their message. One interview expressed this concern directly:

The pandemic has sealed the deal and made it clear that online radicalization will be a serious problem going into the future...[for right-wing sympathizers] COVID-19 added fuel to the fire and given them a reason to reinforce “Jews are behind the pandemic” narratives.

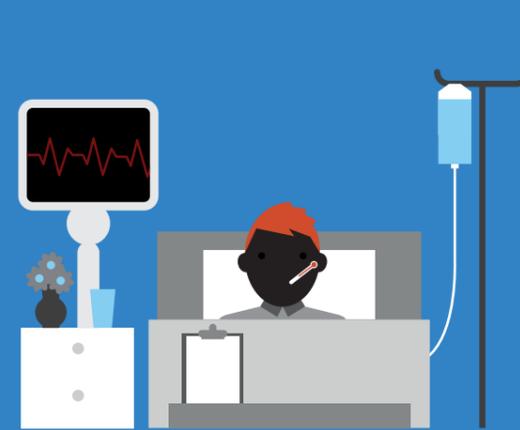
Yet the manner through which this process of radicalization took place differed slightly between the two countries. In Germany, educators and responders to radicalization were concerned about an increased presence of right-wing groups in public spaces. Far-right groups joined the growing mobilization against pandemic restriction in the streets. In fact, multiple different groups appeared to join protests and demonstrations along with concerned citizens. Educators were anxious about potential new collaborations, the cross-pollination of ideas, and recruitment into extremist groups. As fears and distrust of the government’s response to the pandemic began to grow, extremist groups used this historic moment as an opportunity to connect COVID fears to existing extremist narratives and normalize their radicalizing ideology. For example, some of these groups have utilized the public opposition to pandemic restriction to co-opt and defame symbols from the



Holocaust. Examples include protesters wearing yellow stars inscribed with the phrase “not vaccinated” or wearing shirts representing famous Holocaust victims, such as Anne Frank and Sophie Scholl, in order to link the persecution of their ideology with the persecution of Jews and pro-democracy activists in Germany’s past. This invoking of the Holocaust memory is historically very sensitive in Germany.

An ancillary effect of differing political responses to the Covid-19 pandemic is that there is a lack of countermobilization on the Left, as more liberal citizens tend to more often heed the Covid-19 restrictions on gatherings. In Germany, the usual counter-demonstrations against right-wing mobilization have been absent due to Covid-19 concerns. Educators worried that extremist groups entering public discourse without the typical opposition to them could embolden these extremist groups.

Focus groups revealed a concern that the growth in strength and popularity of these extremist groups would erode the norms around political debate and participation. Germany has been experiencing an erosion of what used to be the political center, as far-right and anti-democratic values are increasingly able to establish themselves in what used to be called the “bürgerliches Milieu,” or bourgeoisie. To counter these developments, several of the interviewees organized online education campaigns. However, they expressed doubts whether their online efforts reached the target audience.



U.S. organizations noted similar concerns about far-right and anti-government groups capitalizing on the polarization around the government’s response to the pandemic. While the narratives are the same, the process through which this radicalization takes place in the U.S. differs from Germany. Educators emphasized the rise of conspiracy theories in social media, which increased the ability of extremists to recruit, propagandize, and fear-monger online.

Right-wing groups are using the polarization around pandemic restrictions to germinate and spread extremist ideas. For example, observers noted that the rise of conspiracy theories by right-wing groups paralleled an increase in anti-Asian rhetoric, rationalizing white supremacy narratives. In conspiracy-laden platforms, there is a shared skepticism of government overreach and a coordinated campaign of disinformation around the pandemic. One participant described it as, “a collection of worldviews that intersect around the collapse of civilization.” White nationalists are tapping into these sentiments and strategically adding white supremacist concepts, including blaming Asians and Jews, for the pandemic. By seizing on feelings of frustration, fear, and isolation, extremist groups can interweave their old, established tropes into the fabric of a contemporary health crisis. Of particular concern to one participant was the fear that new synergies in online forums and social media accounts could entice

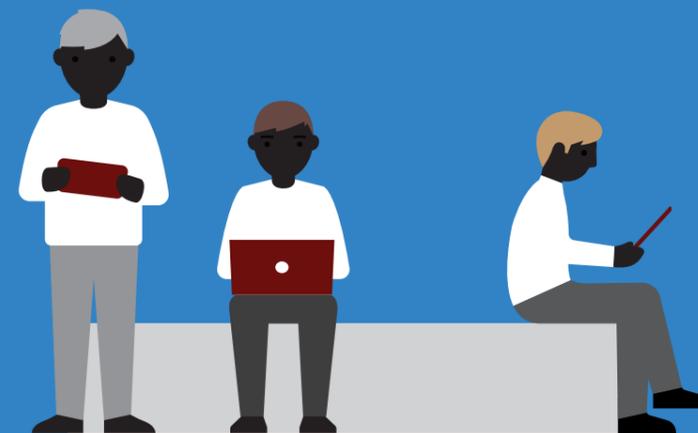


believers of conspiracy theories to enter into white nationalist spaces. U.S organizations thus argued that the pandemic heightened the importance of work to monitor and counter right wing messaging online. Ten out of twelve respondents accessed platforms used by extremist groups— notably Telegram, Twitter, Gab, and Facebook— to gain up-to-date information on trends, rhetoric, and developing narratives that these groups promote.

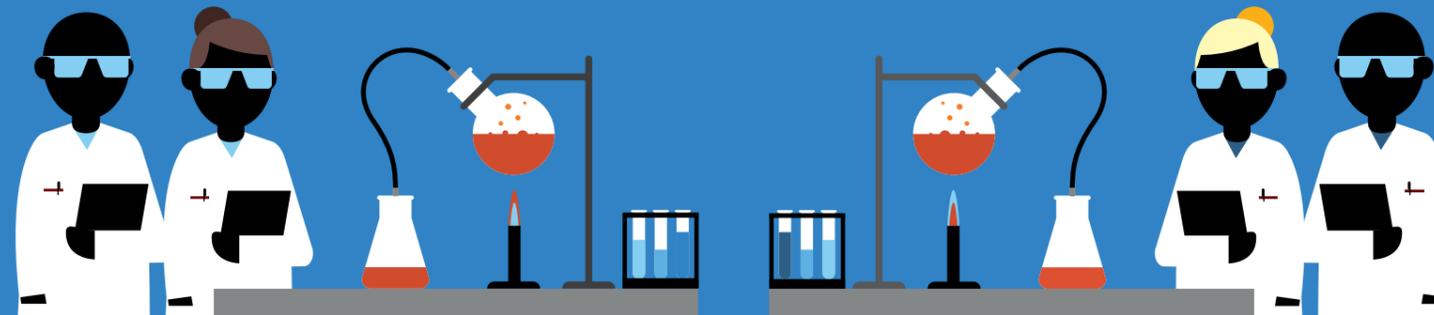
Educators noted that students lack media and political literacy within this context of polarization. German educators noted that their students lived in an “information bubble” fueled by a social media feedback loop through WhatsApp, Instagram, snapchat, and other digital platforms. German students were thus predominantly consuming one-sided information and lacked avenues for receiving neutral information about daily political developments and current affairs. The educators’ main response was to integrate political news stories and current events into their lesson plans, to teach students the difference between trustworthy and untrustworthy sources.

**DIE HABEN KEINE  
FERNSEHER MEHR,  
DEN MAN UM 20 UHR  
EINSCHALTET UND DA  
KOMMT DIE TAGESSCHAU  
[...] DIE HABEN HALT DAS  
HANDY UND ENTWEDER SIE  
KLICKEN DIE NACHRICHTEN  
APP AN ODER NICHT UND  
MEISTENS TUN SIE DAS  
HALT NICHT.**

THEY DON'T HAVE TV'S ANYMORE  
WHERE YOU TURN IT ON AT 8 PM, AND  
EVERYWHERE, THE DAYTIME NEWS  
COMES ON [...] THEY JUST HAVE THE  
CELL PHONE AND EITHER THEY CLICK  
ON THE NEWS APP OR THEY DON'T AND  
MOST OF THE TIME THEY JUST DON'T



## DIFFERENCES



American educators expressed concerns about rising extremism among students during the pandemic and amidst a politically tumultuous moment of American history - one where leadership routinely deployed divisive language and gave voice to a variety of conspiracy theories. One American educator stated that their school is in an area where debates around Confederate statues are particularly tense and that the history was not yet distant. In his words, “the past is not so past here.” All U.S.-based focus group participants noted that the trends in media consumption and the pandemic’s effect on extremism are particularly hard for adolescents, who are in a space of massive personal transition amidst peer pressure. The innate search for meaning and belonging during that formative time may make adolescents vulnerable to extremist messaging. Educators in both countries noted a lack of specific resources that provide in-depth information or approach-methods that take educators step-by-step through dealing with violent extremism in school spaces.

Finally, educators in both countries noted that the current political climate made it difficult to discuss these issues. They underscored the tension between having to preserve political neutrality, while also working in a highly political - and politicized - field. In the German context, educators were very aware that they had to be neutral when discussing the German far right party, even if some of the statements from that party reflected

extremist rhetoric. U.S. educators also observed a hesitancy among their colleagues to engage in discussions about violent extremism in an increasingly tense political atmosphere. Of note is that since collecting this data, several states in the U.S. have started campaigns to restrict educators’ abilities to teach race as a social construct, which is embedded in legal systems and structural inequalities (Sawchuck, 2021). These campaigns to outlaw teaching critical race theory likely aggravated the hesitancy that we uncovered in our research. Schools have become battlegrounds for waging culture wars related to race and education. Extremists have begun using PTA meetings and school council gatherings as opportunities to intimidate school administrators and teachers into not including lessons on slavery and systemic racism (Frenkel, 2021).

Organizations charged with civic education in both countries mentioned that the pandemic threatened their funding. In the U.S., the pandemic led to a higher competition around funding, due to the attention shifting towards the public health crisis and away from work on violent extremism. In fact, one respondent argued that funding in the U.S. is reactionary already: if there’s an attack, people will ask where and how they can invest in organizations that are doing counter work, but are not as proactive when it comes to investing in long-term goals. Thus, the pandemic seems to have sapped the attention to and funding for groups working to counter right-wing radicalization. In Germany, there was also concern for future funding, as the pandemic undercut in-person programming. Community-based organizations engaging in political education primarily with school populations note that the pandemic restricted and disrupted their in-person work, which was crucial to the effectiveness of their programs. Additionally, these workshops are frequently their main source of income. Their concerns led the Federal Committee for Political Education to appeal to the German national government for a rescue plan for these organizations that secured funding for them (*Bundesausschuß politische Bildung 2020*). NGOs noted concerns that they may lose national funding, as the government incurred larger spending to respond to the pandemic.

One of the key differences was how much the pandemic affected operations. While in the U.S. organizations working in education around radicalization were already doing a lot of their work online, organizations in Germany were relying more on in-person programming. Thus, German organizations struggled to move their content to online, web-based formats and to reach the intended audiences. Many respondents cited a lack of knowledge in how to effectively translate in-person programming to online spaces. One of the interviewees in fact said that he feels like German NGOs are lagging about 10 to 15 years behind in offering effective civic education online. Despite these challenges, all respondents agreed that the pandemic was also an opportunity to develop this vital area of organizational outreach.

Another difference was the extent to which educators saw it as their responsibility to counter radicalization. In Germany, educators, and schools themselves appeared less focused on their own responses to radicalization, and instead relied on outside public education initiatives by civic organizations and social workers. In fact, none of the educators viewed radicalization (especially far-right radicalization) as a major concern for them or their schools. In fact, one participant commented that xenophobia reflected the home environment, in which the child grew up, and was thus outside her authority. Yet that very school represented by that participant was the only school to have an actual protocol in place to handle cases of misconduct and radicalization at the school. This protocol was developed by teachers over the past year. Within this context, this lack of concern by educators was surprising. In fact, there had been instances of Islamic radicalization in at least one of the secondary schools represented. All participants explained that their schools did not have resources that would help teachers to work against radicalization. Instead, the participants referred to social workers employed at their schools who were well connected and would know what to do. De-radicalization work was thus “outsourced” by teachers to social workers. The participants said they would gladly make use of anything offered to the school and its staff for free.

U.S. educators instead wished that they had outside resources to help them respond. For example, they requested access to organizations of former radicalized members, who could be available to help with off ramping via face-to-face interventions, resources to encourage frequent conversations between colleagues on topics related to disinformation/extremism, and educational development programs for staff on these topics. Unique to the U.S. context was that the educators perceived a difference in response to these topics based on the race of the teacher. Participants noted that other white educators need to be encouraged to discuss race and gender to create a learning environment which encourages thoughtful reflection and deeper conversation about difficult social topics linked with extremism. Additionally, U.S. educators noted that many of their colleagues were hesitant to engage in discussion around these topics in these times of political polarization. He described the reluctance as unspoken, like an electric current, which you can not touch but you can feel.

U.S. educators also noted that their schools improved their responses to bigotry, even though reporting rates were still low, and change was too slow. The schools had ways for students to report incidents and these specific schools had restorative justice procedures in place. This contrasted with German educators, who noted that the school had few such procedures in place. In Germany, instances of bigotry would be treated akin to other egregious violations, and go through school leadership to decide punishment, especially in the case of repeat offenders.

For civic education in the U.S., one of the unique concerns mentioned was the infiltration of mobilizing efforts by disingenuous actors entering discussion groups, which caused apprehension among people working to counter radicalization. Another concern was increased anxiety, defensiveness, and fragility in adolescent students. One participant highlighted the need for more public education fostering critical and complex thinking skills, open-mindedness, positive identity development, and a basic understanding of psychology so that adolescents may better understand their reactions.

## GAPS

Organizations in Germany and in the U.S. stressed the importance of continued funding to meet growing radicalization and the normalization of extremist rhetoric in the public sphere. In the German context in particular, organizations stressed the need to improve their ability to translate their in-person training and knowledge-production to new digital contexts. They expressed uncertainty about how to adapt programs and educational initiatives, which rely on trust-building through face-to-face contact, to the digital realm.

Educators also expressed an unease about preparedness for radicalization in current times and a lack of resources. The lack of resources readily available and oriented towards educators is concerning, particularly as divisive rhetoric and ideologically-motivated violence continues to be centered politically. One educator noted that teachers uniquely understand the need for resources that address extremism in an in-depth and thoughtful manner, given their direct contact with students expressing such ideas; however, several participants also noted that they are frequently inundated with written resources and instead requested tools that were short, in keywords, easy to digest, with specific action-focused steps to take. There is a need for resources that target educators in a manner that is practical and easily absorbed. Such future guides ought to be specific, and yet adaptable enough to allow educators to adapt any resources to their specific communities' needs. Educators also sought resources for engaging with adolescents that went beyond the superficial and helped them engage the students as young adults with civic responsibilities. Of note is that we interviewed only one educator focused on primary education, and she expressed a strong need for resources which address younger audiences.

U.S. secondary educators requested a list of specific individuals and organizations that they could call that would come to the school and implement a workshop, or a training targeted at specific issues for teachers or students.

Both focus groups mentioned the importance of prioritizing political education. For example, in Germany, both educators and organizations tasked with engaging around public education against radicalization noted a lack of focus on political education. The lack of in-person education and the instability of teaching during the pandemic has meant that teachers prioritized students' progress in core subjects such as math, German, and the sciences. Similarly, the U.S. educators noted that space for teaching political and media literacy was crucial. Subjects referred to this as teaching how, "responsible citizenship meets academia and social media spheres." U.S. educators highlighted how the ultimate goals should include providing students with skills that will go beyond the classroom, by emphasizing critical thinking, source verification, fact-checking, historically contextualizing events, and closely reading of sources. Educators in both countries stated that engagement around these topics takes time for students to talk about political and citizenship education, which they viewed as the most effective way to counter possible tendencies towards radicalization and extremism.

Finally, there is a need for methodologies to evaluate programs, interventions, and other works that are currently in development. Many respondents wished for more external evaluations, as well as more information-sharing on what worked across different contexts. Thus, there was a demand for more cross-organizational collaborations to further the understanding of what education initiatives work.

## DISCUSSION

COVID-19 exerted stress on all levels of civil society and government. Systems that were already vulnerable or weakened due to a lack of investment, broke down during the pandemic. Educational institutions were no different. Young people, already at risk of radicalization due to more frequent use of social media and apps/forums that may host extremist content, were forced online more frequently and for longer during the lockdown. School was conducted online, socializing was moved almost entirely online, and quarantine orders incentivized digital rather than in-person activities. All of this was occurring behind the backdrop of increased polarization in political discourse, and the increased use of digital platforms that incentivize anger and fear as means of garnering clicks, views, and engagement. Teachers and educators were left to determine local public health policy and how to educate students during a global pandemic, all the while, extremist groups were using this time as an opportunity to groom and recruit adolescents into their ranks. The lack of understanding, awareness, and resources available to fill this gap, contributed to increased radicalization of students and polarization of communities.

These are entrenched social issues, which existed before the pandemic started and will endure after COVID-19 has finished. However, the pandemic has exacerbated the issue of polarization and emboldened extremist groups who found new avenues of persuasion during the lockdown orders and mask mandates. Recruitment into extremist ideologies can often begin with a relatable harm; gun owners who feel persecuted and unfairly stigmatized by politicians; men who feel marginalized in



custody disputes; impoverished white people who feel the strain of economic precarity and the effects of late stage capitalism. These relatable harms then become the opening for recruitment into extremist groups; the individual grievance is linked to a larger system of discrimination and oppression - the governments hates seeing armed Americans and wants to take those guns away, feminism is emasculating the Western male, white privilege is a myth used to control. The mask mandates, the lockdown orders, and the vaccination requirements all require a certain level of sacrifice and discomfort for those adhering to the guidelines, and that discomfort is what extremist groups capitalize on and leverage in order to gain an audience with the general public. With frustrations mounting, extremist groups are able to persuade more people that their anger and their fear are the fault of individuals and groups that already have a history of marginalization. Fears that society is coming undone can be further stoked by promoting violence and civil unrest.

Parents, educators, and those working across civil society desperately need resources and funding to combat the rise of extremism in German and U.S. communities. Yet it is at this very moment where those funds and resources are most burdened. Combating violent extremism in our schools and our communities requires mobilizing government funds, social programs, and education initiatives. Extremist groups are working hard to undermine social cohesion and spread disinformation - civil society must work at least as hard in order to subdue the threat of radicalization.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research must focus on developing interventions and evaluation procedures for said interventions to determine their effectiveness and applicability across demographics. Interventions should be targeted for specific ages, and capable of being tailored to different educational contexts, i.e. urban vs. rural, high SES vs. low SES, primary school students vs. secondary school students.

Another domain of resource development is media literacy aimed at children, adolescents, and adults respectively. Children and youth are more media fluent, but also come into contact with radicalizing content frequently. Many older adults lack media fluency, are not distinguishing between credible and deceptive media content, and sometimes unwittingly spread misinformation and malinformation to their social networks through social media.

## AUTHORS

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