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Cults and Online Violent Extremism

Inform (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements)



Global Network
on Extremism & Technology

This report embraces the popular usage of 'cult' in online spaces to provide a more refined understanding of new online religious phenomena that are of social concern and have some association with violent extremism. The report argues that understandings of 'cults' and online activity need to be carefully nuanced; the complexities of online and offline activities should be risk assessed at the level of both group/social movement and the individual.

This report three groupings that may glorify and inspire violent extremisms: 'Cultic' Religious Groups, 'Online Cultic Milieus' and 'Cultic Fandoms'.



Cultic Religious Groups

'Cultic' Religious Groups, includes older, primarily offline religious traditions moving into the online space. These groups may have had existing problematic offline aspects before moving to online spaces. In many cases, interactions in the online environment have also created new ways that individuals who might be prone to violent extremism interact with these ideologies, practices and networks.

Online Cultic Milieus

'Online Cultic Milieus' draws upon the sociologist Colin Campbell's description of a wider 'field' of 1970s subcultures in which individuals might move between 'Cultic' Religious Groups and explore other forms of rejected or socially 'deviant' knowledge. Online Cultic Milieus form a social space where individuals are able to explore various alternatives to the 'mainstream' and groups attempt to attract the interest of individuals to their causes.

Cultic Fandoms

Cultic Fandoms draws on the historical use of 'cult' as analytical category characterised by groups of people who have an intense interest in a particular subject alongside elements of online 'fandoms' where collective group identity can develop using online social spaces around a shared focus.