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# THE RADICALISATION SPECTRUM: HOW AN INDIVIDUAL'S SUSCEPTIBILITY TO INFLUENCE - NOT IDEOLOGY - INCUBATES RADICALISATION TOWARDS NON-VIOLENT AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Nicole Matejic<sup>1</sup>

This paper proposes a new perspective on how radicalisation occurs. It argues that in group-based environments, radicalisation occurs on an ideologically-agnostic omni-directional spectrum of engagement vs disengagement where susceptibility to influence – not a commitment to a particular ideology at the outset – is a precursor to violent extremism. By using behavioural economics as a framework to organise information, particularly through the lens of an availability cascade, we can observe how influence underpins not only radicalisation, but the master narratives and grievances ideologies depend on. While the role of an ideology, or many ideologies, remain an important feature of radicalisation, this paper argues that the ability of an extremist availability entrepreneur to exert influence onto others across a 'Radicalisation Spectrum' is a constant a feature among those radicalising. This perspective accounts for an increasingly mixed ideological landscape among non-violent and violent extremists and concludes that a person's susceptibility to influence is therefore a consistent marker for evaluating a person's risk of radicalisation.

Keywords: Availability cascades, behavioural economics, counterterrorism, influence, radicalisation, violent extremism.

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## Introduction

The study of violent extremism has often been tethered to the notion that a deep commitment to an extremist ideology is the driving force behind radicalisation. But as some scholars,<sup>1</sup> recent violent extremist plots and terrorist attacks demonstrate,<sup>2</sup> this is not always the case. With attention now focusing on salad-bar types of non-violent and violent extremism, it is clear that a fanaticism towards a particular ideology – or the adoption of or shifting between many ideologies – is not a reliable indicator of violent intent. Scholars have also argued that significance and adventure seeking behaviours along with an attraction to violence (of any kind) presupposes any ideologically based radicalisation.<sup>3</sup> This paper argues that a susceptibility to influence is a common precursive marker among those radicalising towards non-violent and violent extremism in group environments. Further, this paper contends that radicalisation should therefore be viewed on a spectrum of engagement towards the justification of violence or disengagement away from violent ideation. In this way, behavioural economics concepts such as availability cascades, availability entrepreneurs and choice architecture can be used to organise information and serve as practical frameworks to explore radicalisation. When influence – rather than ideology – is the primary consideration, the under-explored element of dissuasion presents an opportunity to expand existing preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) models to not only understand the process in more depth, but better inform prevention initiatives. This paper argues that by acknowledging that all ideologies perform similar functions during radicalisation, a spectrum of radicalisation better reflects the real-world influences that nudge people towards – and away – from violence.

## BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS

The author acknowledges that many readers may be unfamiliar with behavioural economics concepts or how they may be applied to explore and understand radicalisation. A summary of key definitions and their application in the context of radicalisation therefore follows:

***Pre-suasion***, coined by Dr Robert Cialdini, is the cognitive opening event/s or information a person has – including the way “seemingly insignificant and apparently unimportant details” combine – that leaves them susceptible to influence long before they encounter it.<sup>4</sup>

Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein describe ***availability entrepreneurs*** as “activists who manipulate the content of public discourse (to) strive to trigger availability cascades” in order to “advance their agendas.” They define ***availability cascades*** as “a self-reinforcing process of collective belief formation by which an expressed perception triggers a chain reaction that gives that perception increasing plausibility through its rising availability in public discourse. The driving mechanism involves a combination of informational

and reputational motives with individuals endorsing the perception partly by learning from the apparent beliefs of others and partly by distorting their public responses in the interest of maintaining social acceptance.”

*Availability cascades* are made up of two components: (1) an informational cascade and (2) a reputational cascade. As their names suggest, an informational cascade’s primary purpose is to create an insular information ecology that influences people towards the same decision-making outcomes while the reputational cascade’s function is to merge the “value of an idea (or belief) with the value action holds.”<sup>5</sup> It does this by cultivating groupthink so that each in-group member makes decisions based on what other in-group members say, do and believe. As a result, availability cascades are inherently participative: they require the continued investment of members to remain in motion and as a result are particularly suited to understanding how influence is exerted in on-line and social media-based environments.

This paper introduces the concepts of *extremist availability entrepreneurs* and *extremist availability cascades*. For ease of reference, these terms will be referred to as extremist influencers and extremist cascades following this section.

In practical terms, an *extremist availability entrepreneur* (extremist influencer) is an activist and/or person holding influence within an extremist ecosystem that leads others towards adopting shared grievances and, sometimes, justifying violence to remedy those beliefs. For example, Osama Bin Laden<sup>6</sup> was an extremist availability entrepreneur, as was Asahara Shoko (founder and leader of Aum Shinriko)<sup>7</sup> and Elmer Steward Rhodes (founder and leader of the Oath Keepers)<sup>8</sup> because they all led others to adopt shared grievances that justified a violent response. Extremist availability entrepreneurs can also comprise of those whose extreme beliefs are non-violent or those who cultivate a sense of shared grievance while inciting others to commit violent extremist acts that they themselves would never undertake.

An *extremist availability cascade* (extremist cascade) is an ecosystem that manufactures or adopts and incubates grievances by deploying ideological master narratives to influence the decision-making of those within the cascade. These extremist influencers may influence others towards non-violent or violent extremes. For example, Osama Bin Laden built extremist availability cascades using al-Qaeda as a vehicle to promote his ideas, justify his beliefs, and share terrorist and violent extremist content to enable recruiters to attract new followers and radicalise them. ISIS adopted much of the choice architecture that al-Qaeda built, and with the benefit of time that delivered advances and increased accessibility to technology, created online extremist availability cascades with strong connections to offline networks. Many of those networks were able to bridge the think-do gap, by turning those ideas into active non-violent support or violent action around the world.<sup>9</sup>

Extremist influencers may operate several extremist cascades simultaneously such as multiple social media accounts, websites, in-person workshops and associated e-commerce enterprises. These enterprises often span both the on and offline environments.

Extremists can also be considered extremist influencers with correlating extremist cascades, even if they are not operating or leading those cascades themselves, because they constructed the influence-based conditions for them to flourish. Anders Breivik, for example, by publishing a manifesto coinciding with his 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway, became an extremist influencer and his manifesto has spawned numerous copy-cat extremist cascades, with those influences resulting in numerous terrorist attacks.<sup>10</sup> Dylann Roof<sup>11</sup> and Brenton Tarrant<sup>12</sup> are other examples of absent but highly influential extremist influencers. In these instances, like-minded extremist influencers perform a tactical role in extremist cascade formation and maintenance to further the strategic intent of their absent idol.

It is important to point out that not all availability entrepreneurs or cascades are extreme in nature or hold violent ideation. Anyone with sufficient prominence in their sphere of influence – or who finds themselves in one – can be a choice architect of their own availability cascade and many availability entrepreneurs use their influence in positive ways for the benefit of others. For example, when Australian singer Kylie Minogue was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005, the media coverage and Minogue's own announcement influenced a prolonged, over 90% increase in bookings for mammogram screenings in Australia. By sharing her story, Minogue's influence bolstered public health information campaigns and created the impetus for numerous availability cascades to form in support of voluntary screening initiatives. Scholars and healthcare practitioners referred to this as 'The Kylie effect' and her continued advocacy for breast cancer awareness continues to propel availability cascades towards positive voluntary screening outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

To avoid any doubt regarding the terminology used in this paper, non-violent and/or violent extremist and terrorist are defined as "interdependent" but clearly distinct from each another. In this context "an individual who justifies the use of violence in pursuit" of their beliefs "typically... once they have moved through a process of radicalisation" is considered a non-violent/violent extremist, while a terrorist is someone who has carried out "the act of violence" (terrorism) in support of those beliefs.<sup>14</sup>

## **INFLUENCE VERSUS IDEOLOGY**

To understand how influence underpins radicalisation – and later supports ideological adoption – trajectories modelling radicalisation towards extremism need to start from a place that pre-supposes any exposure to an extremist influencer or extremist cascade. While typically this is not articulated as a separately defined segment of the radicalisation process and it remains an under-explored area of study, the modelling

of notable scholars does capture it. In Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko's 'Two Pyramids' model, the Opinion and Action pyramids best captures this pre-suasion point in their identification of neutrality and inertness respectively.<sup>15</sup> In James Khalil's 'The Three Pathways' or 3P model, two of the three pathways clearly articulate areas that could be considered occurring in a pre-suasive context. Pathway 1 states that individuals can progress from non-extremism to non-violent extremism to supporters of violence before going on to be contributors of violence. While Pathway 3 notes that a person's attraction to violence – not the objectives it supports – can influence their decision-making “because they are provided with material incentives, seek adventure, belonging or status.”<sup>16</sup> David Webber and Arie Kruglanski's '3N Approach' also captures elements that pre-suppose any interest or exposure to extremist influencers or their extremist cascades. The 3N's – (1) “the needs or motivation of the individual”; (2) “the ideological narratives of the culture in which the individual is embedded”; and (3) “the dynamic interplay of group pressure and social influence that occurs within the individual's social network”<sup>17</sup> all speak to the types of influences that may contribute to environments that pre-suade a person, priming them for extremist influence. While ideological in nature, the second N can also be seen to encompass environments which are unavoidably influential, accounting for the pre-suasion that occurs, for example, when people are born into extremist families, are prisoners (either by circumstance, such as via war, or because of criminal offending), or whose choice of friends delivers them into a peer-led misadventure. The idea of influence beginning in a 'pre-radicalisation' period of time has also been observed in Peter Phillips' economic analysis of lone-wolf terrorism in the context of opportunities available to law enforcement to disrupt an act of violent extremism. Explaining that economics is fundamentally “about opportunities and choices,” he notes that while economics has “tended to avoid investigating the underlying motivations of terroristic individuals” the gap between economics and psychology is closing. Economics, he remarks, can be helpful identifying the choices prospective violent extremists make from the opportunities available to them.<sup>18</sup> With extremist influencers adept at influencing others towards extreme choices by holding out rewards that sometimes incentivise violence, what leads people towards developing a predisposition to being influenced is therefore a critical point of understanding to prevent radicalisation from occurring. James Khalil and Lorne Dawson's most recent work on the theoretical integration of several models of scholarship on this topic offers a well-considered new perspective, particularly within the structure of their ABC (attitudes-behaviours corrective) model which also has potential utility for mapping the choice architectures prospective violent extremists navigate.<sup>19</sup>

Robert Cialdini's concept of pre-suasion therefore encourages us to consider a new starting point: an individual's *susceptibility to influence* - rather than to focus on their susceptibility to particular extreme ideologies. This is because if someone is unable to be influenced, then the conditions under which radicalisation occurs cannot flourish.

When a person's prior experiences and information collide with an extremist influencer spruiking extreme overvalued beliefs<sup>20</sup> and holding out the rewards contained within an extremist cascade (in-group), a person's susceptibility to heuristics and biases (such as, but not limited to the availability heuristic and recency bias) can result in a type of cognitive hijacking. This could be temporary – with the extreme ideas put forth contemplated before being rejected – or the event could begin a process whereby the individual is drawn into further engagement with the extremist influencer and their extremist cascade, eventually inducing confirmation bias, which in turn rewards them with cognitive consonance around a shared idea or identity. Alternatively, the individual may find the rewards held-out sufficiently influential in isolation of engaging any cognitive biases. Another aspect of extreme influence in contemporary information communication settings is message repetition. This kind of persuasive communication is inherently participative and relies on the co-option of extremist cascade members to actively engage with and spread narratives further. This leads to repeated exposure to extreme overvalued ideas within the cascade but also the amplification of those extreme ideas beyond the group and into mainstream audiences.<sup>21</sup> Messaging repetition has long been a feature of the public relations, marketing and advertising fraternities – where brands repeat content to tap into their audiences attentional bias and leverage the resulting bandwagon effect. Habitual exposure – such as is the case online where content is served to users by algorithmic design – has, however, been observed to be contributing factor to the radicalisation of people who “do not seem especially susceptible to moral change.”<sup>22</sup> This is because sustained, repeated exposure, particularly online can result in the normalisation of ideas that would otherwise seem unreasonable.

That extremist influencers have been observed taking a benign-content approach to drawing in new followers before slowly introducing them to more extreme content<sup>23</sup> is of note given the way heuristics present cognitive shortcuts. The approach fosters in-group reciprocity, leverages the ambiguity effect induced by repetitive narratives, and incubates a rising sense of siege mentality. As Marc Sageman notes, the concept of shared identity reflects the evidence base supporting the “various twists and turns of the process of becoming violent” more accurately than an ideological perspective.<sup>24</sup> These ‘twists and turns’ often address issues of uncertainty in the individual's environment.<sup>25</sup> That extremist influencers, are able to provide the illusion of certainty on issues that matter to people at critical moments in their life is also worthy of note. Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein explain that “often people have little information about the magnitude of a risk or the seriousness of an alleged social problem. (So) they stand to gain from tuning into, and letting themselves be guided by, the signals of others.” Savvy availability entrepreneurs, however, can “fix people's attention on a problem, interpreting phenomena in particular ways... to trigger availability cascades likely to advance their own agenda.”<sup>26</sup>

Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein's observation on 'fixing people's attention' is worthy of further exploration given its role in influencing subsequent decision-making. In the context of non-violent and violent extremism, terrorism, cults, mass suicides, mass shootings and radicalisation Tahir Rahman describes this as the adoption of "extreme overvalued beliefs," defining the term as "rigidly held, non-delusional beliefs." He states that extreme overvalued beliefs can be shared, "relished, amplified and defended by the possessors of the belief" leading to the "belief becoming more dominant over time, more refined and more resistant to challenge."<sup>27</sup> The parallels between an extreme overvalued belief and how an extremist cascade works are worthy of note because both, in group settings, rely on the participative aspect of belief amplification and defence. In many ways, extreme overvalued beliefs are also like sacred beliefs, which people attach such value to that the belief becomes protected.<sup>28</sup> When this happens, challenging or trying to change that belief becomes futile and is interpreted as hostile by the person holding it—causing them to double down on the defence of it. This is because contemporary communications, particularly online, employ techniques that ignite emotion to influence audiences. Combined with algorithms designed to serve users more of the content they engage with, the resulting online marketplace of extreme ideas is a permissive environment for extremist cascades to arise within and flourish. This is because once inside an extremist cascade, the algorithm continues to do the job it was programmed to do: serve more of the types of content that keeps people in a state of cognitive consonance. Happy and content users remain on platforms, providing companies with both an opportunity to extract more behavioural data and, often, to sell more behaviourally targeted advertising.<sup>29</sup> Studies on social media recommendation algorithms have proven that algorithms were not programmed to distinguish between regular content and extreme content, only to promote popular content the algorithm believes the user will respond favourably to.<sup>30</sup> When that popular content is extreme in nature, studies have consistently observed that the outcome is a permissive, influential ecosystem of extreme ideas.<sup>31</sup>

The collision of a person with a pre-suaded worldview and an extremist influencer or extremist cascade, however, does not mean radicalisation is a guaranteed outcome. Timur Kuran and Cass Sunstein acknowledge that "not every member of a society experiencing an information cascade (can) be influenced; those with considerable private information may remain unswayed."<sup>32</sup> In practice, however, once a person has been onboarded into an extremist cascade, disengagement becomes more challenging. That is not to say people cannot or will not disengage – they can and do – however it does raise the opportunity costs of successful third-party interventions because they are more disparate in nature, need to contend with algorithmic content promotion, are informationally challenging and time consuming.



To recap: if we acknowledge that pre-suasion - the frontloading of relevant information or experiences - makes a person more susceptible to influence (Robert Cialdini) then when a person encounters extreme-overvalued beliefs or ideas (Tahir Rahman) that resonate with them (Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman) and which are presented in a persuasive manner by an effective extremist influencer with an extremist cascade (Timur Kuran & Cass Sunstein), favourable conditions for radicalisation to incubate occur. However, it is important to remember that most people exposed to extreme influence will not be receptive to the ideas presented. Subsequently, of those few who are receptive to extreme ideas, the identification of the opportunities available to detect susceptible individuals (Peter Phillips) and create more effective prevention initiatives becomes a possibility.

### **Influence Underpins Ideological Adoption**

The point at which ideology becomes an influential part of the extremist cascade depends on a wide range of variables. Some grievances will already be wedded to extreme overvalued beliefs. Antisemitism for example, is wedded to far-right and far-left ideologies (for differing reasons).<sup>33</sup> A ‘salad-bar’ of ideological ideas has been observed in recent years,<sup>34</sup> with many, according to Colin Clarke and Rasha Al Aqeedi borrowing “from numerous at times seemingly contradictory, ideological foundations”<sup>35</sup>. Conspiracy theories, for example, are an oft recycled patchworked collection of overvalued ideas (only some of which can be considered extreme) misinformation and disinformation.<sup>36</sup> While more orthodox ideologically aligned extremist influencers deploy a pre-made master narrative often steeped in decades or centuries of historical events and/or mythmaking,<sup>37</sup> ‘salad-bar’ extremist influencers tend to sell whichever extreme overvalued idea people are currently buying, riding an often manufactured outrage<sup>38</sup> wave, and pivoting between a few core evergreen extreme grievances to maintain ongoing relevance.<sup>39</sup>

Regardless of the ideology, its role in an extremist cascade is the same: to cultivate a perpetual motion informational cascade that members consistently participate in<sup>40</sup> to increase the plausibility and social proof of the master narratives (or extreme overvalued beliefs) being shared. As a result of these shared extreme overvalued beliefs, polarisation and shared grievances are often the outcome.

The influence a master narrative has on the in-group in an *informational setting* within the extremist cascade results in the curation of information in a way that supports the extremist influencer’s agenda. Again, the ideology in play is immaterial to the objective: the master narrative must exert sufficient influence to denigrate the autonomy of each in-group members decision-making. It is for this reason that members of in-groups are encouraged to only seek answers to their questions from within that extremist cascade-community and extremist influencers go to great lengths to discredit out-grouped

information sources such as mainstream media, official government public information sources, and academia. To achieve this, a *reputational cascade* is modelled and witnessed or experienced by members. It is not enough for an extremist influencer to use their extremist cascade as a self-glorifying soapbox (although plenty of that occurs), to be fully effective they must be able to move their followers into a reputational frame, to influence their behaviour in ways that take them from extreme overvalued belief to behaviours and action/s inspired by it. This transition is perhaps the clearest signal mobilisation toward an action (non-violent or violent) is occurring. For example, the anti-vaccination community, even before the COVID19 pandemic, were successful at creating extreme cascades that segregated in-group members from mainstream medical advice – particularly using social media – to the point where member-parents would preference the information gained from that extreme informational cascade above medical science<sup>41</sup> with harmful, sometimes fatal, outcomes.<sup>42</sup> Unsurprisingly, dissenting voices within the extremist cascade were not tolerated and actively denigrated, with abuse directed at those who challenged the in-group's status quo.<sup>43</sup>

## THE RADICALISATION SPECTRUM

By acknowledging that a susceptibility to influence plays a greater precursive role in an individual's nudge towards radicalisation than specific ideologies (at the outset, and in the absence of unavoidable influencing environments) and accepting that most ideologies serve a common purpose – to incubate extreme overvalued beliefs – then viewing radicalisation as a spectrum of commitment towards or away from extreme overvalued beliefs – some of which may support violence – can be modelled.

People can be influenced in either direction on a spectrum of overvalued extreme belief, and this range of motion accounts more fully for the journeys individuals take toward engagement or disengagement.<sup>44</sup> This reflects the knowledge both scholars and practitioners in the field have observed, of extremists pivoting back and forth between levels of active engagement and disengagement;<sup>45</sup> or stalling and vacillating around a particular level of pre-violent commitment;<sup>46</sup> or reaching the peak of their commitment to the extreme overvalued belief at a point that falls short of an act of violent extremism.<sup>47</sup> These points of pause, vacillation or disengagement within a radicalisation cascade are important to note because deviant behaviours often manifest over time and the reasons that compel someone to move forward into an actively engaged state, can also resolve to move them backward towards disengagement. A spectrum also better accounts for non-violent extremists, whose commitment to extreme overvalued beliefs do not ever progress to violence. As William Allchorn and Elisa Orofino note “non-violent extremism should not be viewed as a conveyer belt to violent extremism; nor should non-violent extremism be considered a Western home-grown phenomena; and non-violent extremists are no less or more influential than their violent counterparts.”<sup>48</sup>

Extremist influencers can also exert sufficient influence on those in their extremist cascades to place a hard ceiling between violent ideation and actual violence. Chris Wilson and James Halpin observed in a study of a New Zealand based white-nationalist organisation that in-groups themselves may moderate the level of radicalism among members to avoid violent extremes when such outcomes would hinder the group’s aspirations and long-term objectives.<sup>49</sup> This research mirrors that which has been explored in decision theory as it indicates both the extant influence the extremist influencer possesses and the presence of anticipated regret<sup>50</sup> which can also exert significant influence on decision-making. Similarly, strategic decision-making pertaining to the timing of any planned violence speaks to terrorist choice,<sup>51</sup> particularly as it applies to target selection<sup>52</sup> and propaganda of the deed aspirations.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, Cascade-like modelling<sup>54</sup> can be adopted to depict the full range of motion within the radicalisation spectrum. This is depicted at Figure 1, where the coloured line represents motion towards engagement in the cascade and the grey line represents motion towards disengagement:

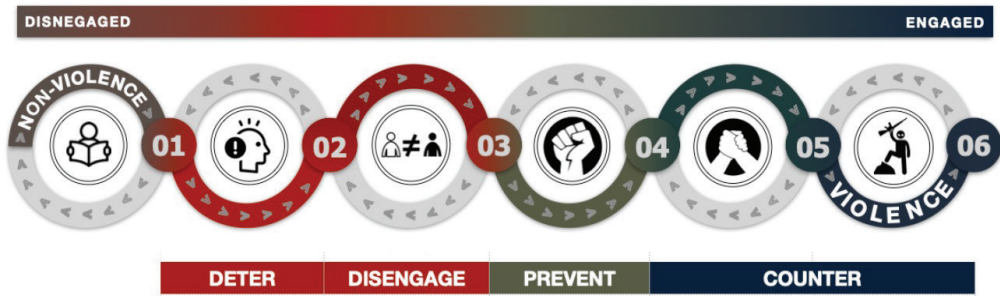


Figure 1: The Radicalisation Spectrum mapped to the Conventional PCVE model of Deter-Disengage-Prevent-Counter.

As the omni-directional nature of the model depicts, those within the availability cascade have a range of mobility options. These options are both influence-led and choice-based. While there are arguments to be made for and against how extremist influencers can coerce people forward in the cascade by denigrating their free-will, not all radicalising environments can be viewed as coercive because extremists are in the majority, rational actors.

The omni-directional nature of the Radicalisation Cascade also provides insights into how extremist influencers build and maintain their extremist cascades, and to what degree there is a level of organisation or strategy involved. For example, non-violent extremists or extremist influencers that are unable to mobilise followers to violent offline action might never pass tiers 3-4; while those who harbour violent ideation – either for themselves or as a means of incitement – will push up against tier 6 with regularity. That the law in many jurisdictions does not have the legislative means to intervene until tiers 4-6 (when a terrorist plot is detected and enough evidence has been gathered to enable a lawful intervention to disrupt it) leaves mitigating earlier radicalising tiers in the deter, disengage, and preventing radicalisation realms.

Importantly, The Radicalisation Spectrum model does not presume that people ideologically *deradicalise* – only disengage from the idea that violence is an acceptable way to remedy their grievances. This is because the notion of divorcing people from their overarching worldview is at odds with one of the foundations of behavioural economics: libertarian paternalism - a person's freedom of choice.<sup>55</sup> From a practitioner perspective, denying someone's agency and worldview – so long as it is non-violent – is also counterproductive to deterrence and disengagement activities. As Alicia Wanless observes: "Want to win hearts and minds? Avoid denigrating them first."<sup>56</sup> Scholars have also noted this. John Horgan, for example, observed that "just because one leaves terrorism behind, it rarely implies (or even necessitates) that one becomes deradicalised."<sup>57</sup>

### **Expanding the conventional PCVE model**

The current PCVE model of deter, disengage, prevent and counter has been a helpful framework for identifying intervention points and assessing an individuals' risk of violence. However, in acknowledging that influence underpins radicalisation, there must also be a recognition of the limitations the current PCVE model offers. Deterrence measures often come too late to be useful, while disengagement initiatives fail to account for the contest of ideas activities like counter narratives provoke. This is problematic because disengagement practitioners must contend with a fledgling, yet increasing, commitment to extreme overvalued beliefs in a radicalising environment that holds out influential, tangible rewards. In comparison, deterrence, and disengagement initiatives – such as nudges towards online resources and limited psycho-social support – offer no such tangible rewards to support the behavioural modification they seek to encourage. Instead, those radicalising are placed in a cognitive contest of ideas amid an increasingly congested information environment. Given human nature preferences cognitive consonance, the process of disengagement becomes a battle of wills in an environment where extremist influencers have a solid head start. In some cases, that head start means PCVE practitioners need to contend with the way their own counter-narratives have been repurposed and used as social proof, supporting the master narratives and grievances that have already been able to establish themselves.

There is also a risk that counter narrative initiatives can contribute to the already congested information environment in ways that add to an individuals' cognitive load. Research studying conspiracy theory-based beliefs found that people who exhibit "automatic thinking styles" also display a susceptibility to various cognitive biases, particularly the conjunction fallacy. This bias "occurs when the likelihood of two independent events occurring together is incorrectly assumed to be higher than the likelihood of the events occurring alone."<sup>58</sup> That extremist influencers may be able to induce cognitive overload to thwart counter narratives is an area of study that is worthy of further exploration. While it is known that "established prejudices and ideological beliefs" along with a human tendency to "passively believe... information that follows existing preconceptions" results in people "accepting information uncritically"<sup>59</sup> less scholarship has focused on the permissive environments extremist influencers and their cascades cultivate. This is of particular concern given the often-high volume and velocity of information and ideas that members of extremist cascades are subjected to, daily. As Carola Salvi et al point out, "overcrowded (information) environments like the internet" and the "cognitive overload" effect of social media impact the way people process and evaluate the information they consume online.<sup>60</sup> This can contribute towards channelling an attentional bias towards particular ideas and beliefs. When combined with automatic thinking styles, defined by Daniel Kahneman as the "unconscious, effortless cognitive process" our brain uses to process information<sup>61</sup> - this confluence of information can be highly influential, because people don't realise they're thinking in this way. This adds another layer of complexity to disengagement initiative design, particularly in online settings which are by design a marketplace of emotively driven ideas.

It is for these reasons, that dissuasion opens opportunities to disrupt radicalisation before it has even begun. By expanding the *deter-disengage-prevent-counter* paradigm to include a 'dissuade' pillar at the outset, an opportunity to mitigate malign influences from presenting as attractive choices is possible. The placement of the 'dissuasion' pillar in the conventional PCVE model can be seen at Figure 2 below:

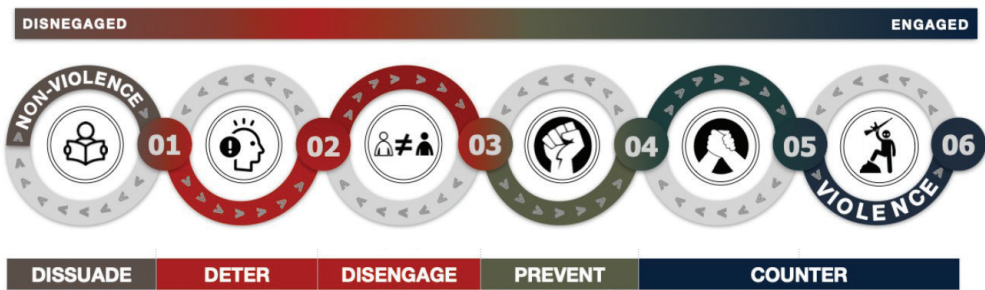


Figure 2: Radicalisation Spectrum mapped to the Conventional PCVE model of Deter-Disengage-Prevent-Counter with the addition of a 'Dissuade' pillar at the outset.

Building resilience is often offered as a solution at the deterrence part of the conventional PCVE model, however resilience is not enough to dissuade a person because it is predicated upon someone's "ability or capacity to recover from harm"<sup>62</sup>. Resilience, therefore, doesn't adequately capture the uncertain journey a person could take across a spectrum of radicalisation, nor does it fully acknowledge the protective factors and mechanisms that already exist, and are needed to build a person's *resistance* toward malign influence in the first place. Instead of designing PCVE initiatives to recover from the harms associated with radicalisation that have already occurred, practitioners should also be turning their attention to dissuading people from radicalising at all.

### DISSUASION: BUILDING PRESILIENCE<sup>®</sup>

Dissuasion as a concept in the context of PCVE rests on a foundation of inoculation theory and risk management. This is because the influences that underpin radicalisation – whether to non-violent or violent extremism – are a constant feature in everyday life. While not every person who is exposed to these influences will go on to radicalise, of those that do, the risk to the people they target is often significant and can be exceptionally harmful. Where inoculation theory is used to "induce psychological resistance against persuasion"<sup>63</sup>; Presilience<sup>®</sup> - a concept coined by Gav Schneider - recognises that "the world we live in is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA)" which necessitates a shift in "focus away from an emphasis on planning, procedures, systems and recovery (which are essentially established to avoid the mistakes of the past)" to a more agile approach that gives people the skills and knowledge to manage uncertainty, while developing critical thinking and enhanced decision-making.<sup>64</sup>

By introducing a 'dissuade' pillar into the PCVE framework, the concept of Presilience<sup>®</sup> provides a framework to adapt this approach to. Instead of trying to control the risk of radicalisation, a Presilience<sup>®</sup>-based approach encourages communities to thrive despite of it. Which is an accurate reflection of all societies - where only very few people radicalise to violence. As Michele Grossman et al 's BRAVE Measure notes, a tendency by practitioners and governments to only focus on the "more security-orientated logics of resilience" by "designating specific ethno-religious communities as risky" is problematic and can contribute to radicalisation, leading to counterproductive outcomes. Further, the question of "why the vast majority of people in so called communities of risk do not ever radicalise to violent extremism" should be the guiding principle for such initiatives to inform better prevention programs.<sup>65</sup>

By taking a risk intelligence approach<sup>66</sup> to PCVE – at the outset via dissuasion – practitioners could develop more adaptive initiatives that recognise the diversity, complexity, and uncertainty of contemporary radicalising environments. The Presilience<sup>®</sup> framework, offering "the best aspects of compliance and resilience" focuses not only on the "opportunities to bounce back more effectively when things go wrong" but advocates for an adaptive approach to problem solving. In the context of radicalisation, this ne-

cessitates the adoption of an agnostic, spectral approach that considers whether people are radicalising towards extremes or violence or disengaging from them. In practical terms, this means that dissuasive initiatives, while also leveraging inoculation theory, need to develop knowledge within communities that span “situational awareness, vigilance and mindfulness.”<sup>67</sup> Within a dissuasive context, these protective factors not only assist in making the messages extremist influencers share less attractive, but it also opens opportunities to foster tolerance, respect and strengthen social cohesion. Further, these protective factors do not presuppose any religious, cultural, or other cohesive environment among a group of people, instead encouraging them to have a good understanding of the world around them and what makes it function and flourish. This then naturally leads into cultivating a sense of vigilance around the types of influences that could seek to maliciously manipulate or disrupt that harmony; which in turn promotes a more mindful outlook that again encourages tolerance. Because human nature prefers cognitive consonance over cognitive dissonance, a presilient<sup>®</sup> approach pre-emptively degrades the environment in which extremist influencers could find receptive minds. A population that is presilient<sup>®</sup> to the tactics of those attempting to manipulate their information environment and disturb their peace, for example, is less likely to find the allure of an extremist influencer and the rewards they hold out – of any kind or variant, violent, or not –attractive.

## TECHNOLOGICAL DISSUASION

Dissuasive, presilient<sup>®</sup> approaches can also extend to technology interventions when they are used to disrupt and degrade online extremist cascades. This is because the opportunity costs for extremist influencers to establish their extremist cascades online are currently low. By raising those opportunity costs, PCVE practitioners can increase the complexity and platform friction extremist influencers need to navigate to build and maintain their extremist cascades. At present, due to an increasingly decentralised information environment, there are few barriers to entry for people attempting to establish themselves as extremist influencers online. While the idea of online decentralisation has many positive features and applications for society, one of the challenges it poses is that just as it enables positive pro-social behaviours to flourish, so too does it enable harmful and extreme cascades to justify and incite violence. While the topic of decentralisation naturally extends to questions of who then decides what is extreme and what is not, this valid query is not the focus of this paper. Suffice to observe in a practical sense that the intersection of free-speech and freedom of expression towards an individual’s lawful right to hold extreme overvalued beliefs differs significantly between jurisdictions and what is acceptable or tolerated in some, will not be tolerated in others. However, where all jurisdictions find consensus is where an individual’s extreme overvalued beliefs infringe upon the lawful rights of others, particularly in violent ways.

That extremist influencers leverage the permissive environments decentralised online spaces offer them is of little surprise, however it does present strategic opportunity. A variety of studies have observed that while it is possible to remove or deplatform extremist influencers, artificially collapsing their extremist cascades – even when they remain absent from them – is far more challenging because extremist cascades have demonstrated a high level of resilience to degradation and disruption, regularly outlasting the extremist influencers that created them. For example, ISIS’ cloud caliphate continues to serve as a content library for extreme Islamists<sup>68</sup> while other violent extremists producing terrorist and violent extremist content continue to exploit smaller tech platforms, archiving and file sharing services to disseminate their propaganda.<sup>69</sup> There is some evidence to support observations of platform migration<sup>70</sup> when extremist cascades are artificially collapsed, such is the case in deplatforming which has the ability to constrain the permissive environment where extremist influencers are able to attract new audiences. While this is useful, it does not solve the problem, only shifting hardened extremists to more decentralised, content moderation resistant and impervious to takedown online spaces.<sup>71</sup> Another unintended consequence of deplatforming – or even the perception of being likely to be deplatformed – is that it results in the bestowal of social proof and relative significance to both the extremist influencer and follower alike. As a result, being deplatformed is now worn like a badge of honour, providing in-group members – with an existing sense of siege mentality - with perceived tangible proof that supports the master narratives they’ve been encouraged to adopt.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Radicalisation Spectrum provides a framework that reflects a current, dynamic environment of radicalisation to non-violent extremism and violent extremism, however more research needs to be conducted to fully validate its usefulness. While the model has been built using doctoral and independent research it would be beneficial to explore its application against a range of situations, case studies and practice-based observations. That the framework’s underlying research is based on open-source data is an additional caveat: while open-source investigations are useful and insightful, it must be recognised that this creates two separate challenges. The first is open-source data and research methods have historically been treated with some scepticism. While this outlook has broadly diminished over time, the validity of concerns around bias, unreliability and completeness remains and are worthy of acknowledgement.<sup>72</sup> The second is that given open-source research is so heavily reliant on what extremists and violent extremists themselves post online, as former Head of Facebook’s Dangerous Organisations Brian Fishman wrote in 2019 “researchers cannot reliably measure how much terrorist content terrorists post online because of the confounding effects of platform countermeasures. Researchers do not see what terrorists post; they see what is left after



countermeasures are employed. For the major platforms, this is usually a small subset of what was posted originally, and it means there is a fundamental bias in nearly all studies of terrorist content online.”<sup>73</sup> While the rise of decentralised social and alternate media networks (and demise of mainstream network trust and safety workforces) may have changed this landscape since Fishman’s 2019 paper, minimal content moderation policies does not mean no content moderation occurs. This is particularly true of qualitative journey-mapping, of which – in part – The Radicalisation Spectrum is based.

It is for these reasons that further research that maps the radicalising and deradicalising, journeys of extremists to this framework needs to contribute to a bank of case studies from a range of influence vectors and ideological points of view. The role of formers, for example, could prove exceptionally useful in building an understanding of the pre-suasive environments that led to their adoption of extreme overvalued beliefs, and why. Similarly, future PCVE initiative design would benefit from taking a deeper dive into the dissuasive pillar, to better focus often finite resourcing and funding on an area that has the potential for optimal effect. Lastly, the scholarship surrounding radicalisation would benefit from further research focused on the many vectors of influence that pre-suppose the adoption of extreme overvalued beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

This article proposes that models of radicalisation explore the role of pre-suasive influence in more depth; and build *presilience*<sup>®</sup> within preventing radicalisation initiatives by adding a ‘dissuade’ pillar at the outset of the conventional ‘deter – disengage – prevent – counter’ paradigm. By expanding existing PCVE modelling, and initiatives, practitioners and scholars can begin to consider building solutions that anticipate and proactively disrupt attempts extremist influencers will make to influence people towards non-violent and violent extremism. This article also proposes that to best model this inclusion, radicalisation should be viewed as a spectrum of engagement towards violence or away from violent ideation. If we view radicalisation as a spectrum of extreme overvalued belief<sup>74</sup> based on influences that impact decision-making - that decouples ideological alignment - the full range of motion those radicalising and disengaging exhibit is more closely captured. Further, an agnostic ‘Radicalisation Spectrum’ accounts for an increasingly common set of mixed extreme overvalued beliefs and non-violent forms of extremism.

This article also establishes that influence not only precedes ideological commitment but underpins the later adoption of it. Therefore, a person’s risk of radicalisation should be weighed according to their susceptibility to influence rather than their risk of subscribing to any particular ideology or their belonging to any particular risk community. While online extremist cascades have a higher resilience to disruption or collapse, they are not immune to counter-influence activities, platform countermeasures or content moderation actions. Extremist influencers, however, are considerably more fragile, even

if their extremist cascades outlast them in some form. This disparity can be attributed to the fickleness of the information environment itself – but it does present practitioners and scholars with an opportunity to build effective dissuasion initiatives to reduce the risk of radicalisation before it has begun. By taking a presilient<sup>®</sup> approach to prevention initiatives, the protective factors that already exist within communities can be leveraged to increase susceptible people’s resistance towards influences that would harm them and others.

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