

2019 Lunch Briefing Series on Violent Online Political Extremism

5 November

Engaging With Online Extremist Material

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NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH
IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM



Engaging with Online Extremist Material

Dr Zoey Reeve – VOX-Pol Research Fellow



**Warning -
some
unpleasant
images!**

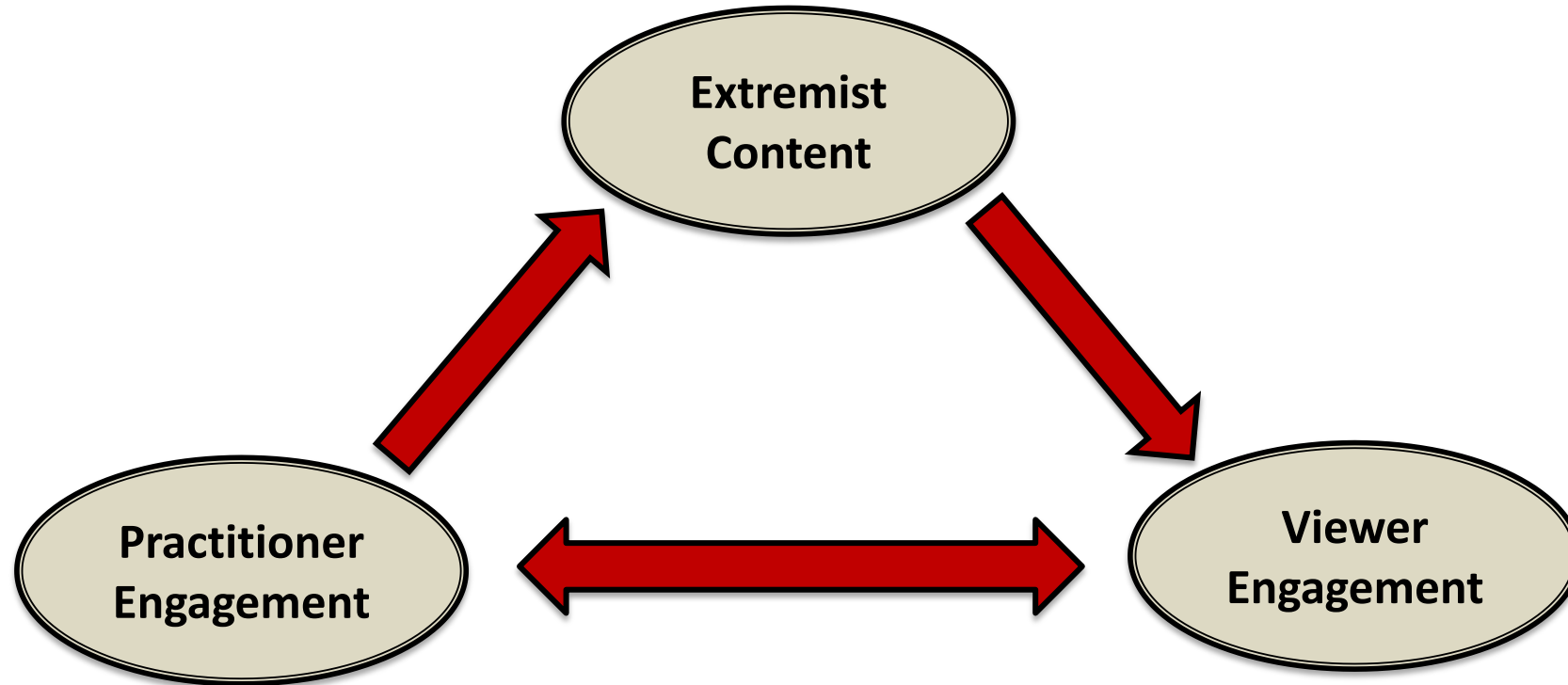


This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no. 312827

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- Links between the internet and radicalisation
 1. Content
 2. Viewer Engagement
 3. Practitioner Engagement
- Core themes & Potential Policy Suggestion

Engaging with Extremist Material



Facilitative

Instrumental

Logistics

Reconnaissance

Buying tickets

Virtual Learning

Communicative

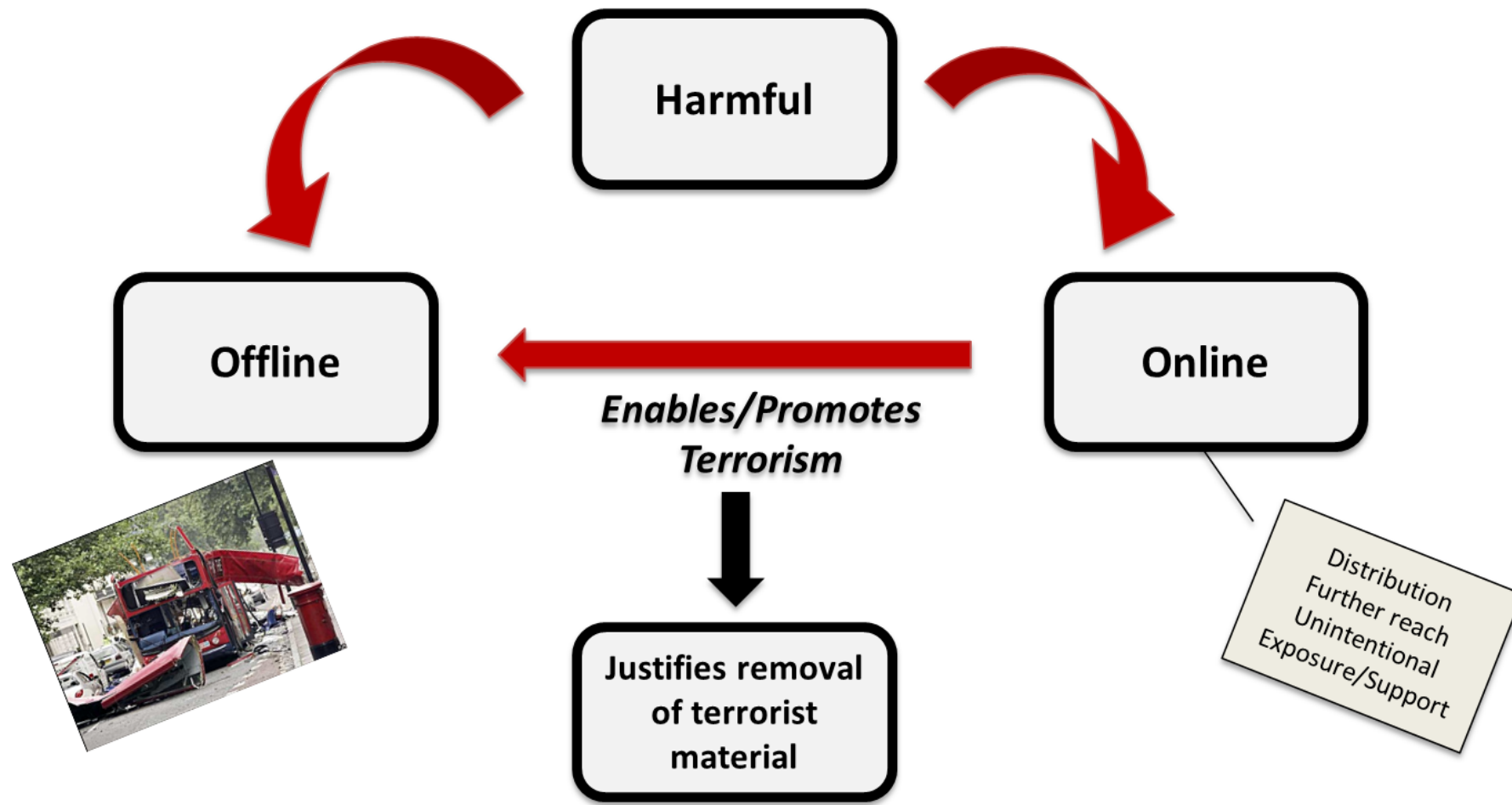
Find information including
propaganda

Share/distribute extremist
message

Create/enable links

Virtual Interaction

Links between Internet and Radicalisation



Links between Internet and Radicalisation



Assumption: The public passively absorb/are radicalised by Terrorist material online.

But: Interaction between the user and the internet (including extremist material) – important factor in radicalisation



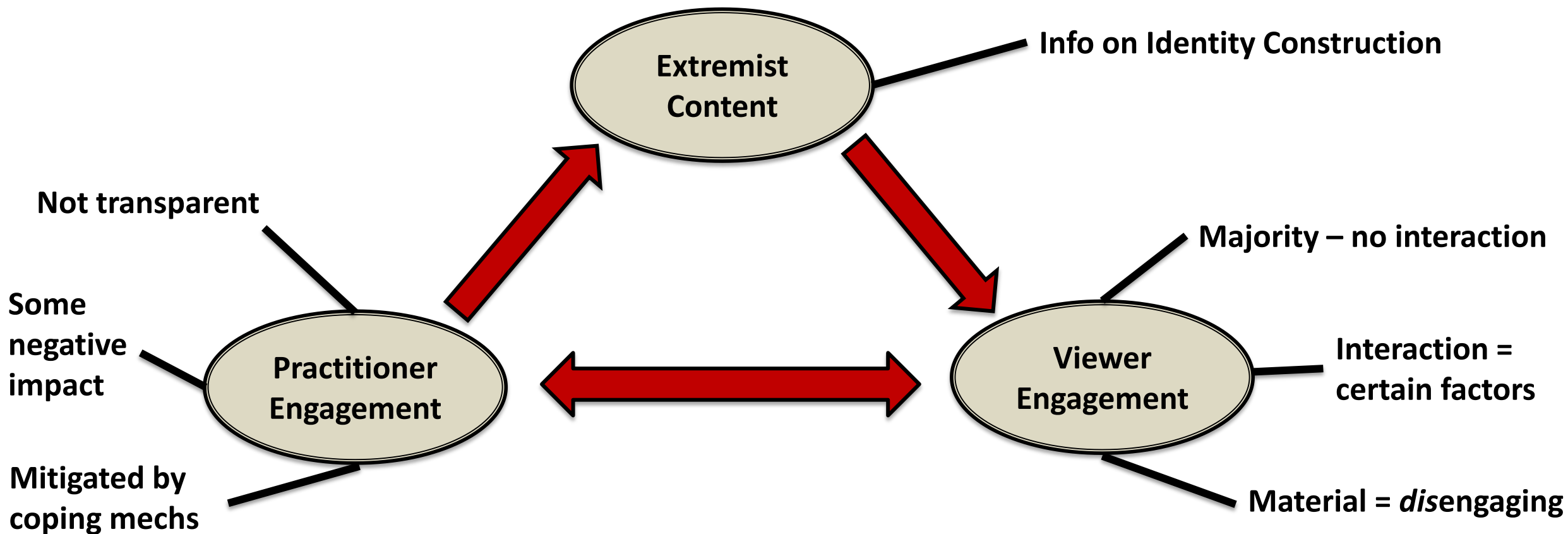
Engaging with Extremist Online Material



1. What is it about extremist material that *may* influence features of the radicalisation process?
2. How, and to what extent do people engage/interact with extremist material?
3. How is terrorist material online identified, assessed and removed by practitioners, and what are the effects of repeated and extensive exposure for practitioners?



Engaging with Extremist Material



**NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH
IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM**



Promoting Engagement with Terrorist
Propaganda: A Social Identity
Interpretation of Jihadi and Far-Right
Videos

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Terrorist Material

- Communicates ideology, threat, dehumanization
- Mobilizing Frame
- Targets certain demographics/viewers
- Triggers emotional and motivational responses to promote engagement
- **People do *not* passively absorb/consume terrorist material.**





What is it about extremist material that *may* have an influence on features underlying the radicalisation process?





Terrorist propaganda provides guidance and means to construct similar identities, including how to perceive threat, and how to behave.



Social Identity (SID) Underlies Radicalisation Process

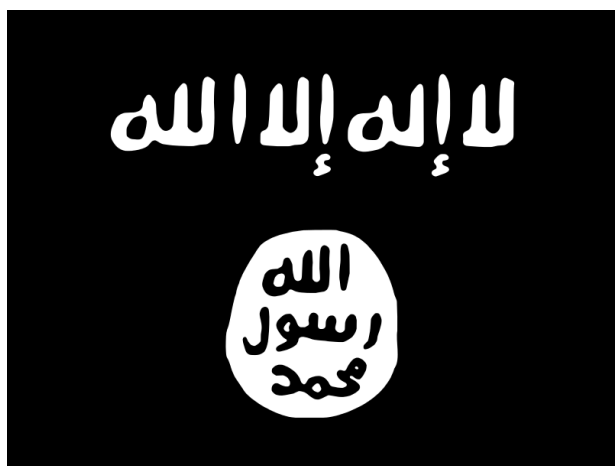


- Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
- SID - intergroup contexts
- Individual: thinks, perceives, behaves as group member
- Status – motivated to attain/maintain SID status
- SID – process of social comparison to attain positive differentiation (i.e. IG/OG bias)



- SID underlies/enables radicalisation process
- Terrorist material taps into SID and promotes a certain type of SID – implications for understanding self, IG, OG, events, and responses.

Methodology



10 Jihadi (166 minutes), 12 Far-Right Videos (57 minutes)

Proscribed groups – Using Google

Qualitative Thematic Analysis (NVivo)

4 themes – IG, OG, Threat, Solution



Who is the Ingroup?

Jihadi



Far-Right



Threatened Ingroup (Status)

Jihadi

- Prevention of Islam's return to greatness/Allah's dominance
- Slaughter and oppression of Muslims/Islam

- Mortality Salience



Far-Right

- Erosion of white privilege and dominance
- White genocide & threats to vulnerable (women, children, elderly)
- Territorial & Cultural Encroachment

- Mortality Salience

Appropriate Ingroup Behaviour

Jihadi

- Join the conflict in Syria
 - Wage terrorism where you can
 - Martyrdom
 - Prayer & charity
 - Peaceful, happy (family) life in Caliphate
-
- Clear & identity building

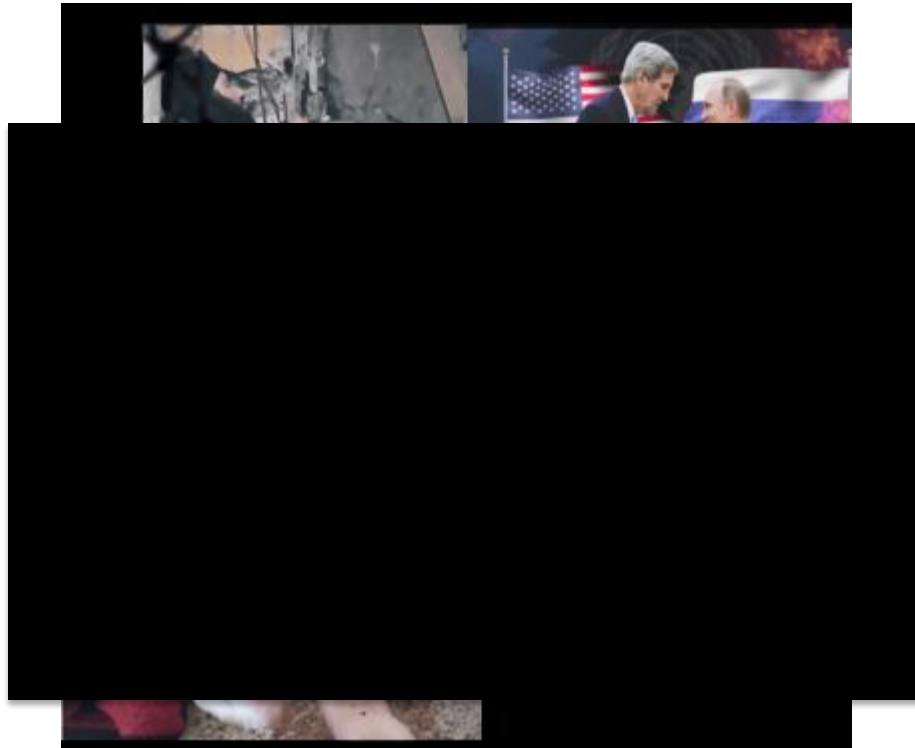
Far-Right

- Spread 'the message'
 - Join your local (far-right/alt-right) group
 - Protests, Marches, Banners, Stickers
 - Keyboard warriors
-
- Vague – like the ingroup identity

Dehumanisation of the Outgroup Justifies/Promotes Violence towards it



Jihadi



Far-Right

- Talking....
- Animals, barbaric, subhuman, kiddie fiddlers etc



Superiority is the Solution (and an attribute)

Jihadi

- Return to Superiority of Muslims and Islam
- Establish Caliphate
- Spread Islam

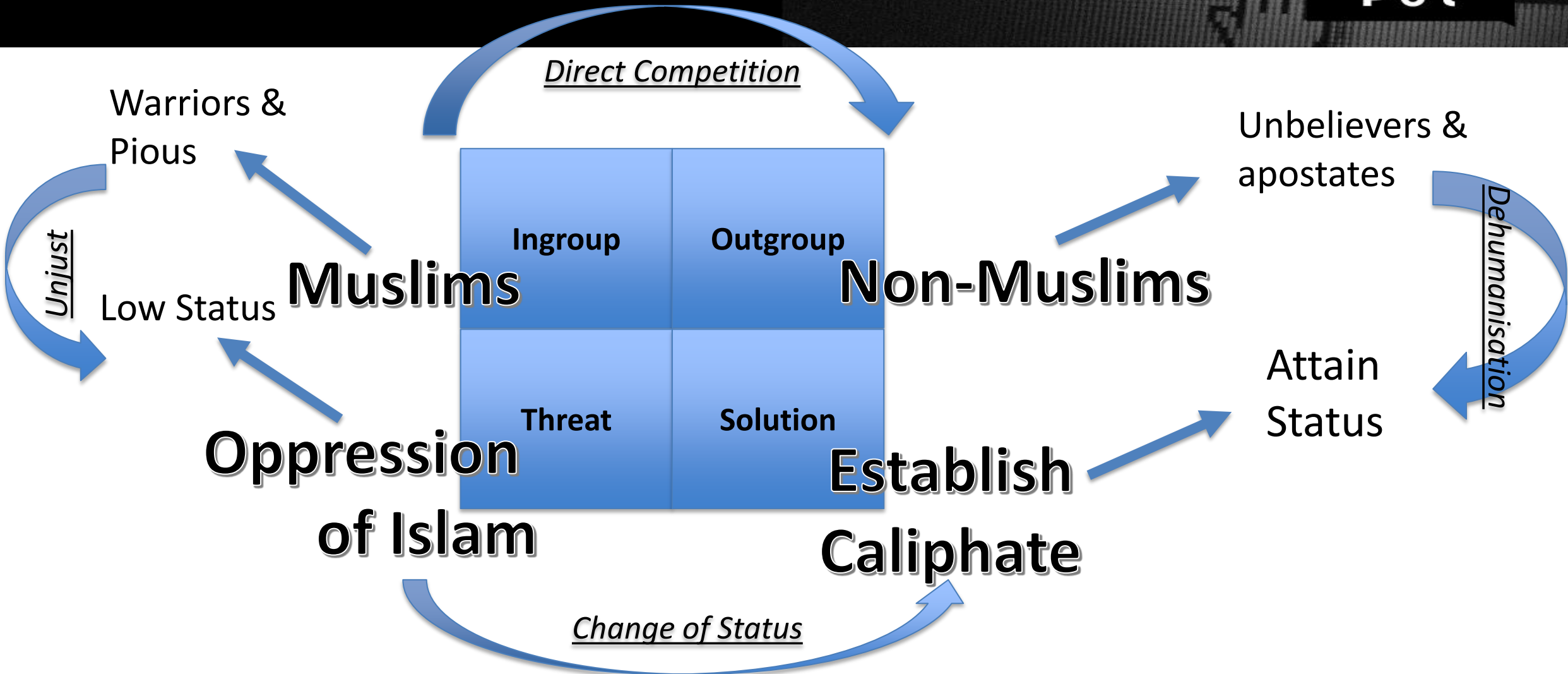
Far-Right

- Maintain Superiority of White race

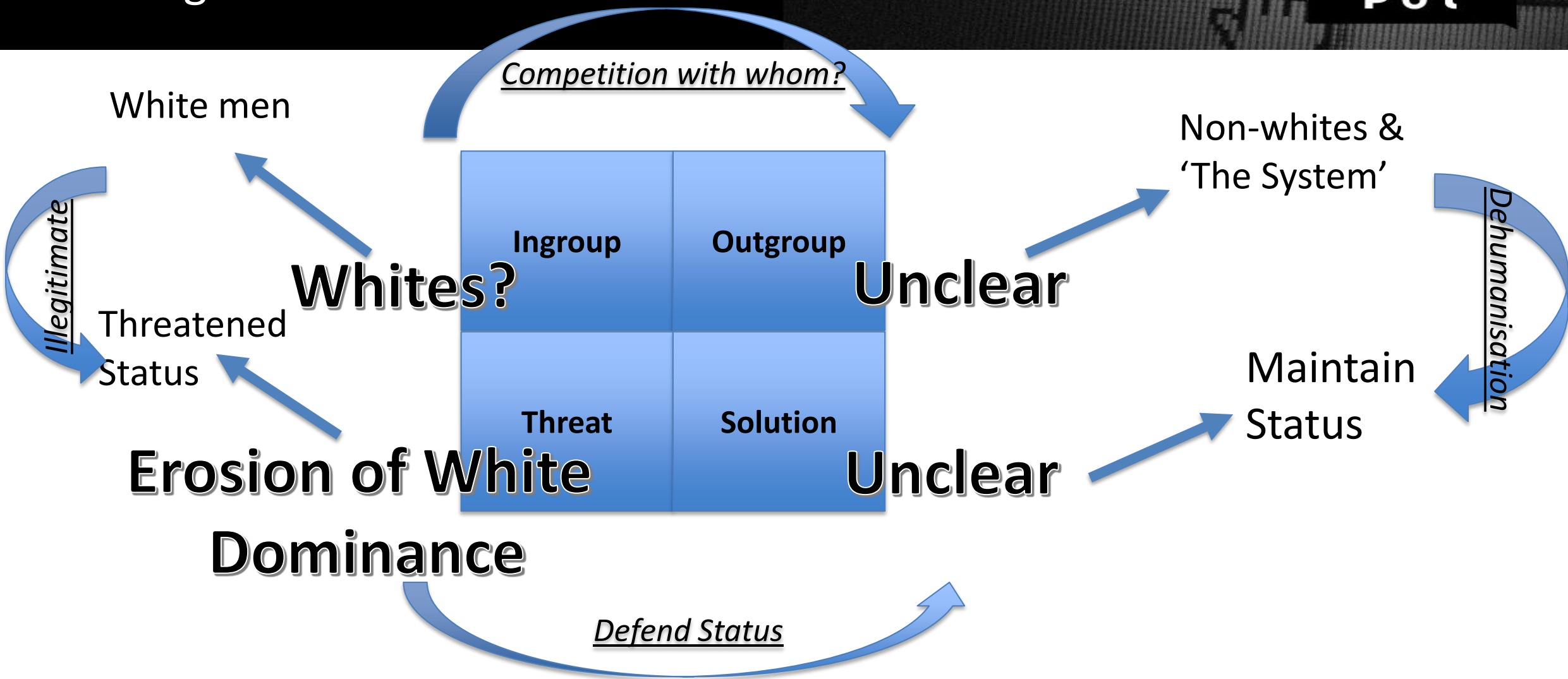


- Fight?
- Spread message?
- Unclear....

Jihadi SID Information



Far-Right SID Information



Theme: What is it about extremist content that *may* influence features associated with radicalisation process?

- Terrorist propaganda provides guidance and means to construct similar identities, including how to perceive threat, and how to behave.
- ISIS provide very clear guidance on how to engage with SID Process – Far-Right.... Not so much....

It is not that the material itself is radicalising, but that the material is tapping into features underlying radicalisation and providing guidance as to how to be a good group member.



Engaging with Online Extremist Material: Experimental Evidence



**NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR
RESEARCH IN VIOLENT ONLINE
POLITICAL EXTREMISM**

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- How, and to what extent, do people engage with online extremist propaganda?



Research Question

- How, and to what extent, do people engage with online extremist propaganda?
- Tweets, Facebook, YouTube Comments, Likes, Dislikes....
 - All work on the DV

Methodology

- Experimental Paradigm – Online study with Qualtrics
 - 70 UCL student participants
 - Webpage – Extremist Group (DV)
 - Mortality Salience Prime & other group-based measures (IV)



Fictional Extremist Material

1. Identity
2. Grievances
3. Innocent & unjustly penalised ingroup
4. Aggressive, dangerous but vague outgroup
5. Extremist group – self-styled defenders
6. Aggression and (implied) violence

The Webpage

- Themes and tone, images
 - Download more info
 - Download stickers/posters
 - Visit websites
 - Watch videos
 - Join the group
- Interaction tools:
 - Like/dislike
 - Share/don't share
 - Follow/don't follow
 - Save/don't save
- Explicit Support:
 - Add material?
 - Add material if got in trouble?
 - Express support for group?

Variables

- Dependent

- Likes/Dislikes
- Online Engagement
- Explicit Support

- Independent

- Mortality Salience (MS)
- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)
- Identity Fusion Scale (IDF)
- Outgroup Hostility – Trolley Dilemma (OGH)
- Activism & Radicalism Scale (ARIS)

Variables

- Dependent

- Likes/Disc...

- Online

- Explicit



- Independent

- **Mortality Salience (MS)**

- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)
- Identity Fusion Scale (IDF)
- Outgroup Hostility – Trolley Dilemma (OGH)
- Activism & Radicalism Scale (ARIS)

Hypothesis: Mortality Salience



Mortality Salience = More Online Engagement &
Explicit Support than no Mortality Salience




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Findings: Mortality Salience



Mortality Salience → Engagement &
Explicit Support for the EU → Mortality Salience

A large, semi-transparent red 'X' mark is superimposed over the text, indicating that the relationship between mortality salience and engagement/support is not supported by the findings.

Findings: Mortality Salience

- Open Questions (Qual) – describe:
 - Institution students (Ingroup)
 - Non-institution students (Outgroup)
 - Extremist group
- Positive/Negative/Neutral

Findings: Mortality Salience

- Ingroup & Outgroup = Positive
 - Psychological distance from (UCL) ingroup
 - No MS effect

Findings: Mortality Salience

- Ingroup & Outgroup = Negative
 - Psychological distance from student ingroup
 - No MS effect



Findings: Mortality Salience

- Mortality Salience has no effect:
 - Material promotes dis-identification from ingroup
 - Inconsistent/negative ingroup identity



Findings: Mortality Salience

- Terrorist/Extremist Propaganda can inhibit:
 - online engagement with extremist material
 - explicit support for extremist group
 - Via Disidentification

.... Depends on stage of radicalisation....?

Hypothesis: Likes/Dislikes



Likes more than Dislikes associated with higher SDO,
IDF, OGH, ARIS



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Findings: Likes/Dislikes



Likes more than Dislikes associated with higher SDO,
~~DE~~, OGH, ~~AX~~S

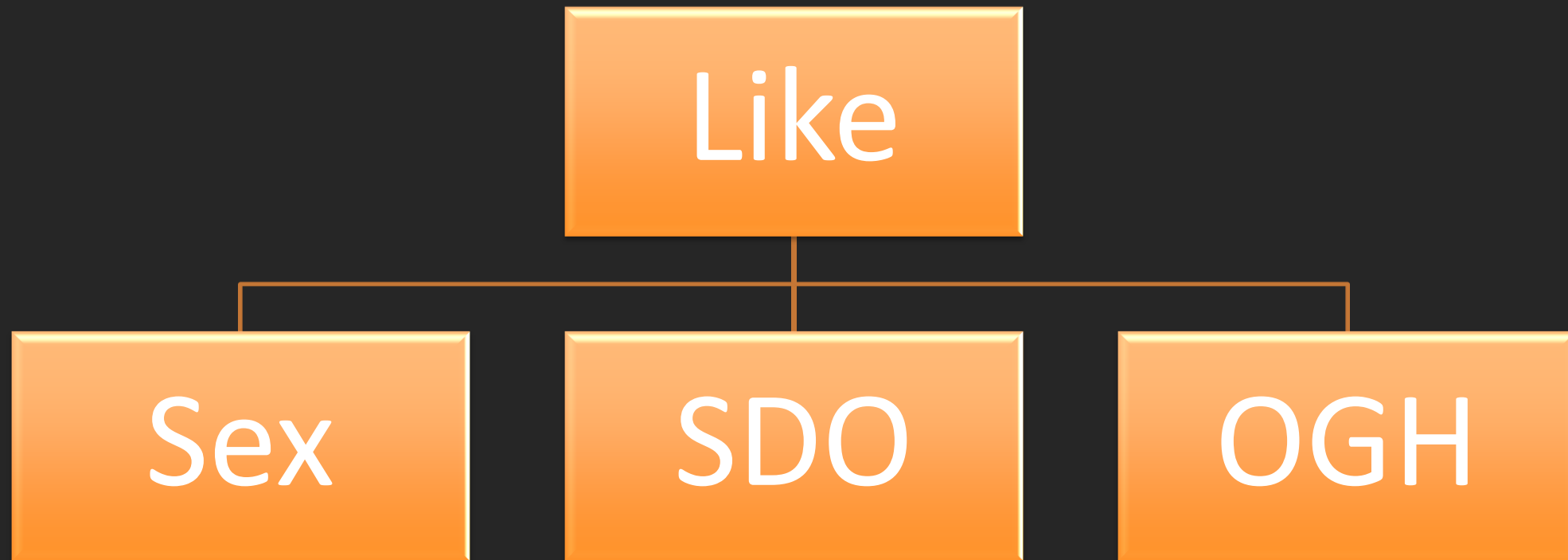


Findings: Likes/Dislikes

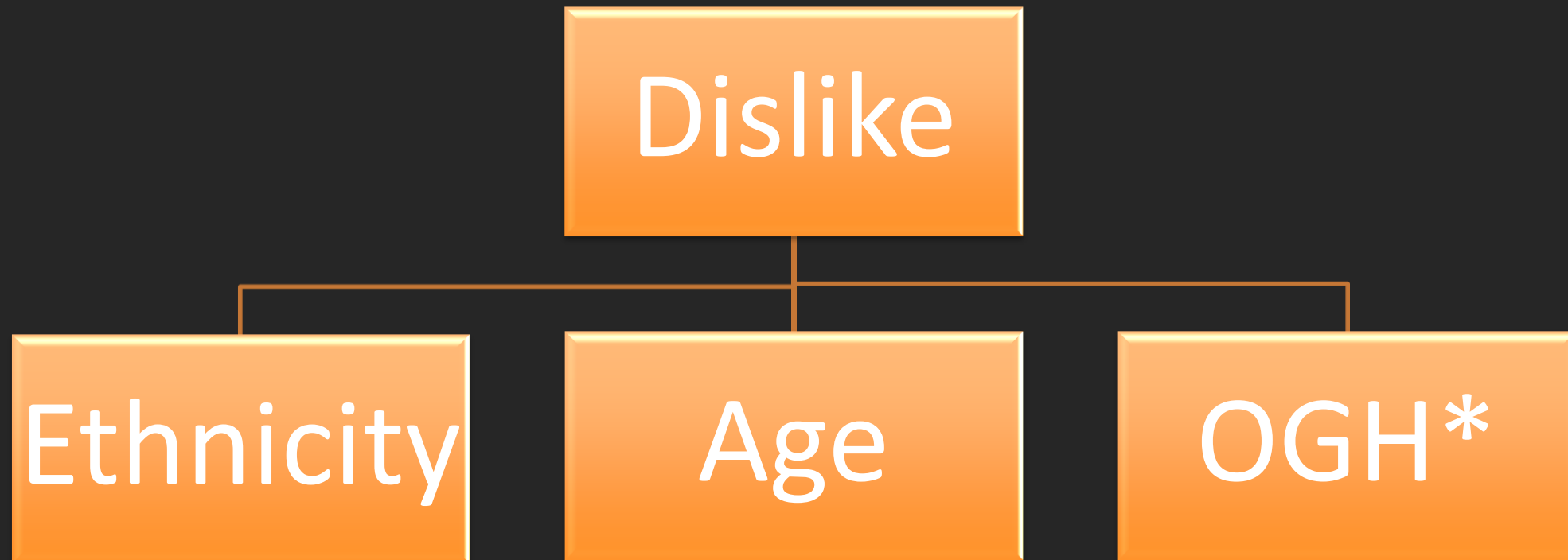
- 74.2% - no interaction
- 16% - Liked
- 53% - Disliked



Findings: Likes/Dislikes



Findings: Likes/Dislikes



Findings: Likes/Dislikes

- Likes/Dislikes – useful feature
- Most prefer not to interact at all
- Differences between those who Like & Dislike

Hypothesis: Online Engagement



Online Engagement associated with higher SDO, IDF,
OGH, AIS, RIS



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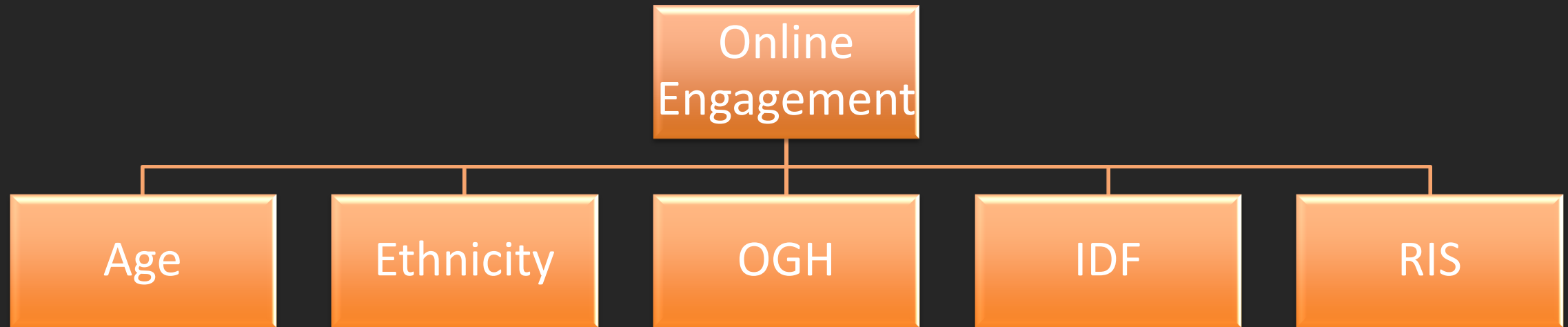
Findings: Online Engagement



Online Engagement associated with higher ~~SI~~, IDF,
OGH, ~~AS~~, RIS



Findings: Online Engagement



Findings: Online Engagement

- OE tended to be low overall
- Certain features associated with OE
- Learn about features of those who don't engage

Hypothesis: Explicit Support



Explicit Support predicted by Online Engagement,
higher SDO, IDF, OGH, and RIS (but not AIS)



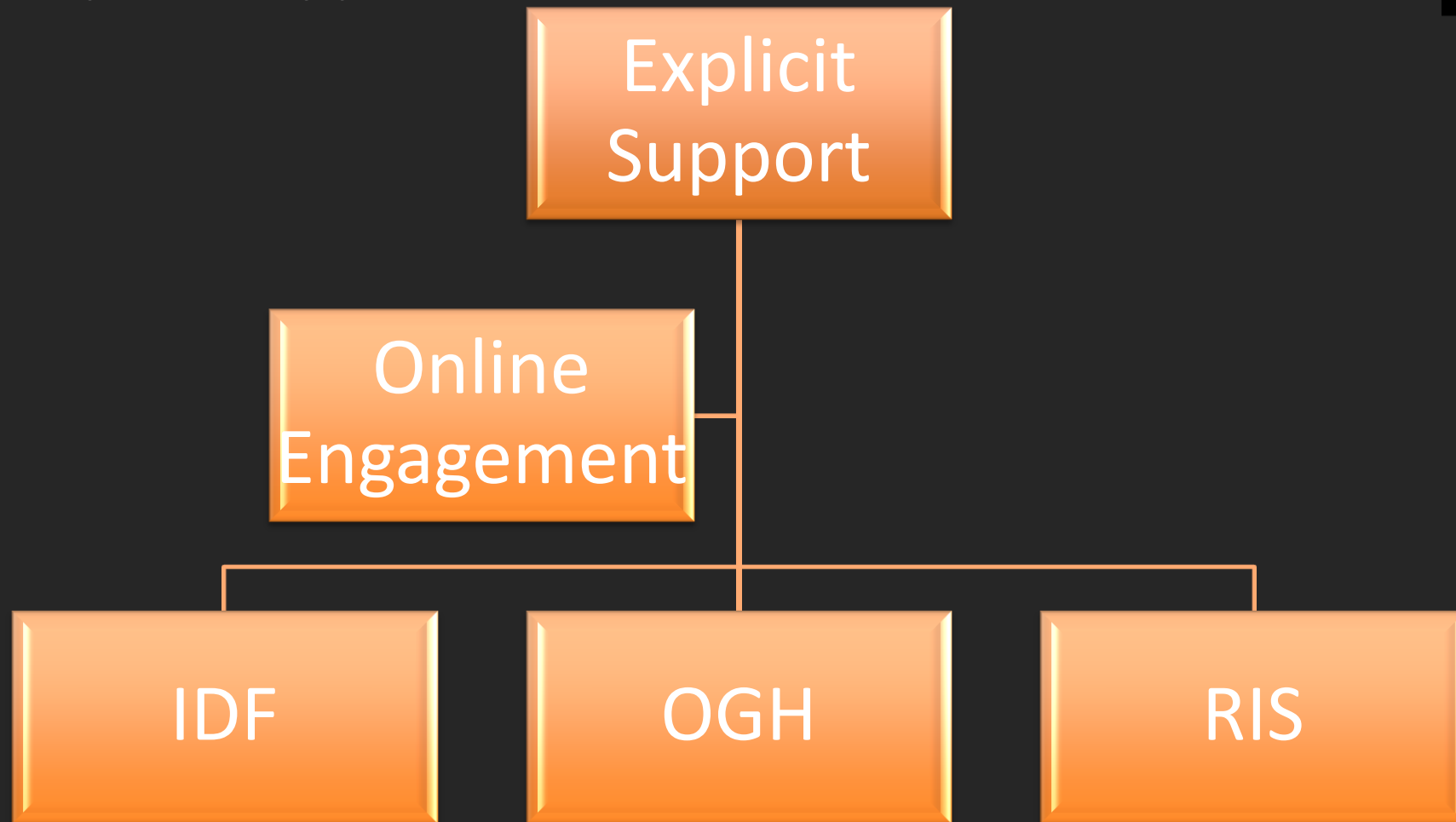
Findings: Explicit Support



Explicit Support predicted by Online Engagement,
higher ~~SD~~, IDF, OGH, and RIS (but not AIS)



Findings: Explicit Support



Findings: Explicit Support



Useful factors for predicting who will (and will not) engage with online propaganda and/or explicitly support extremist groups online



Limitations

- Small & WEIRD sample
- Even smaller N engaging with material = caution
- Ecological Validity?



Conclusion



- How, and to what extent, do people engage with online extremist propaganda?
- Engagement varies...



Conclusion

- Few actively positively or excessively engage
- Those who do:
 - Young and white
 - Identify with ingroup & prefer hierarchy and dominance
 - Positive view of extremist group
 - Hostility towards Outgroups
 - Radicalism intent

Conclusion

- Most don't engage at all
- Those who don't:
 - Older and non-white
 - Lack of identification with ingroup
 - Low Outgroup hostility
 - Lack of Radicalism intent

Conclusion

- Engaging with online extremist material does occur to some degree in some viewers, particularly where certain criteria are met
- Terrorist/Extremist material may inhibit engagement via disidentification with ingroup
- Real world = engagement/support may lead to further exposure/attention of recruiters/mobilisers

**NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH
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**Practitioner Engagement: Decision-
Making and Health & Wellbeing of CTIRU**

Do Zoey Reeve



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How is terrorist material online identified, assessed and removed by practitioners, and what are the effects of repeated and extensive exposure for practitioners?



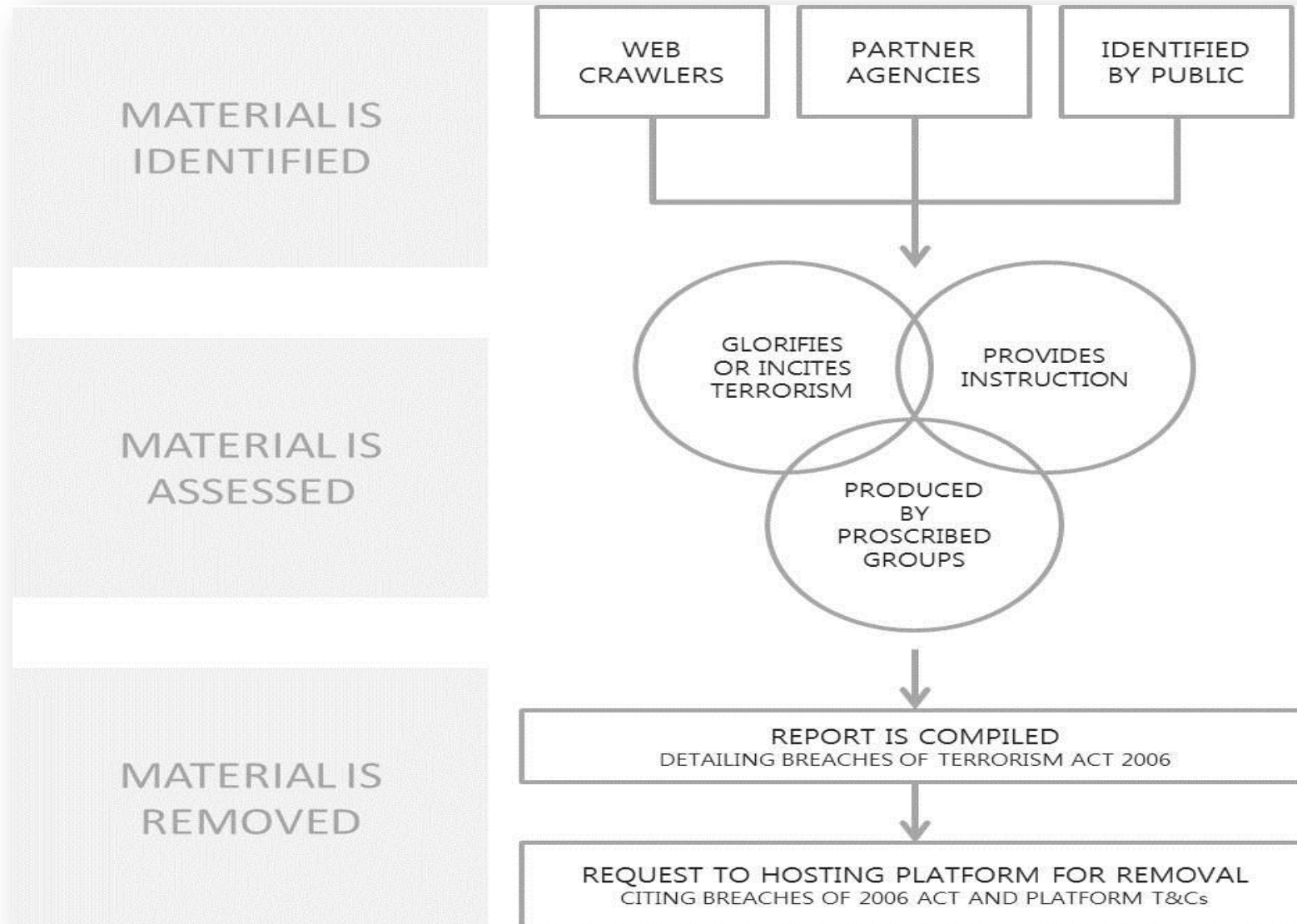


Identifying terrorist material not always transparent. Repeated and extensive exposure not related to radicalisation but can have negative health and wellbeing impact



- Metropolitan Police – established 2010
- Facilitate removal of terrorist material from internet in cooperation with internet platforms/providers
- Facilitated removal of hundreds of thousands items
- Role change – developing AI and capacities of platforms/providers

How is material identified, assessed, and removed?



Why is material removed?



- Illegal to support, glorify/incite or enable terrorism, or be a member of a proscribed terrorist group.
- Underlying assumption/Justification – online terrorist material may facilitate acts of terrorism offline



What material are CTIRU exposed to?

- All sorts of terrorist material
- Non-violent (grey-area) extremist material
- Non-terrorist violent, graphic material
- Newspaper articles

- Videos, Text, Social Media, Music, Images...

- Semi-structured interviews
- 11 CTIRU Case Officers (COs)
- Thematic analysis (NVivo)
 - Stressors
 - Impact
 - Coping mechanisms

Stressors – Graphic Terrorist Material



“There was quite a few people, all kneeling, all in orange suits, and people standing behind them with knives, and they did the horrible deed. And I think it was just the blood and everything, it was the sand and the sea.”



Stressor – Graphic Non-Terrorist Material



“I got one this morning, spaghetti carbonara with a severed penis cooked on it. You see that and you go ‘oh Jesus, what the hell is this?!’ So they’re the ones that impact you more. More challenging than the things you are expecting. There’s a lot of sort of necrophilia on there, a lot of this sort of stuff.”



Stressor – Signs of Torture



“For me, the material that has affected me the most has been videos where people have been executed and they’ve just seemed so placid. They just seem to be resigned to what is happening. I think that is probably the result of being subject to mock executions in the past so that they don’t actually know that what is going to happen on this occasion, is going to happen or not. Torture, which wears them down so they go along with anything for the sake of not being tortured.”



No Escape (Sometimes)



“But if I cast my mind back to 2014 at the height of the Islamic state, it was very hard to leave work because you’d be doing very long hours, and then you’d walk across to the local tube station, and you’d see the front boards showing imagery from the stuff that you’d been viewing all day. So Jihadi John or people in orange suits. You’d go home and if you were in the car, you’d hear it on the radio. And perhaps you’d see it on TV on the news at night. Maybe family members would ask you about it if they knew what you did. So escaping it at that time, was pretty hard.”



“I still felt heavy afterwards but it was just like a- I suppose what it is, is that emotionally, you’re in that moment.”

“I think maybe I’m a little bit concerned about PTSD because it’s pretty horrific stuff, so yeah, flashbacks.”



Physical Impact



“If I’m sitting down all day, I’m invariably not moving, so there’s issues there”

“In the last 5 years, I’ve had to start wearing glasses. So obviously my eyes have been deteriorating somewhat for that to happen. Occasionally I’ll sit next to a window, and when I leave office and go outside and its bright outside, my eyes will take a minute or two to refocus to the light. That’s clearly not good.”



Coping Mechanisms – The Team



“I think the fact that we have a laugh together, we share stuff together, and we talk together, and the morale in the office for the most part in the office is pretty high. I think that makes it a lot easier.”



Coping Mechanisms – The Role



“I’d rather someone like me who has no emotional feeling towards that person, makes sure it’s down rather than, I don’t know. It might not ever happen but you could maybe someone knows them might come across it, and if they saw, that might cause them mental damage for life.”



Coping Mechanisms – Personal Practice



“And you’ll tell someone else ‘oh look at this’ and they’ll come over and take a look at it and share some of the burden of it so you’re not, you don’t have to witness it and put the blinkers down.”

“I’m not one of these people – I view what I have to view. I don’t go around and ask what other people are doing and watch it if I don’t have to.”



Coping Mechanisms – The Individual



“We all have three screens, and I always have something else on, comedies, just something on in the background, family guy or something. That’s a big part of coping for me, because even though I’m not watching it it’s on my headphones, so it distances me a bit.”



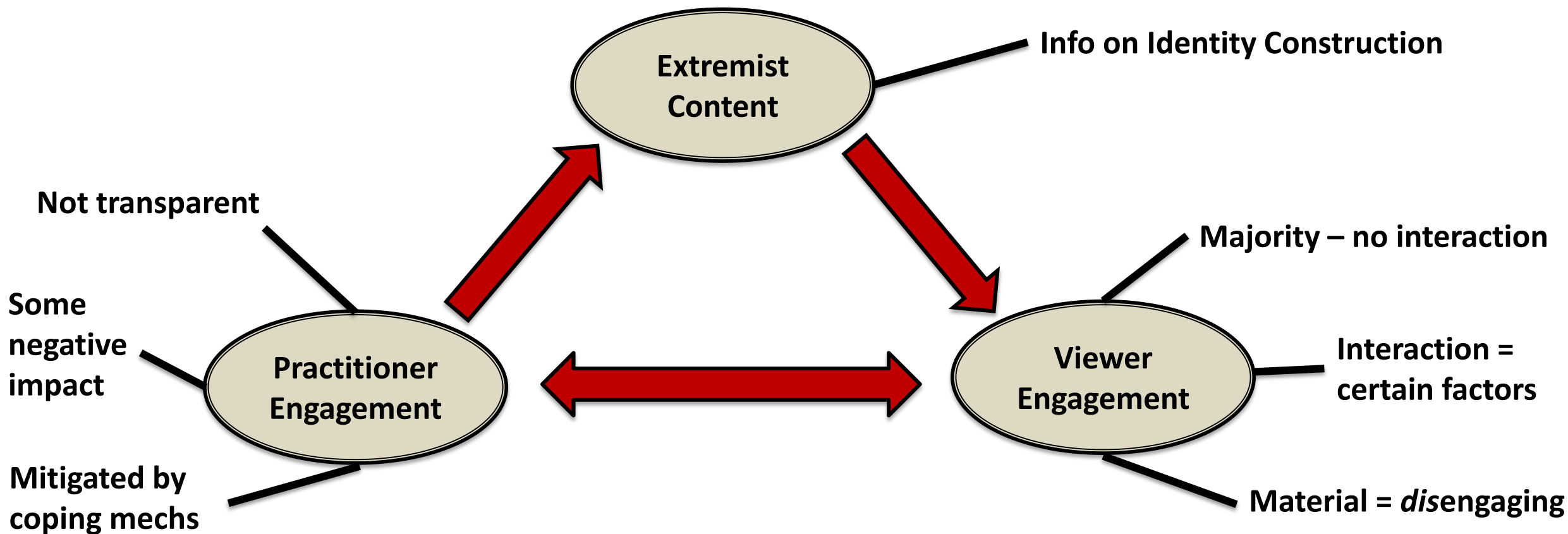
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Identifying terrorist material not always transparent. Repeated and extensive exposure not related to radicalisation but can have negative health and wellbeing impact



Engaging with Extremist Material



Policy Implications



- Online material not radicalising in itself but may influence features associated with radicalisation process (i.e. SID)
- Primary/Secondary interventions to strengthen SID in other ways (i.e. what it is to be IG member, and acceptable ways to achieve positive differentiation)





THANK YOU!

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