

Propaganda, Extremism and Online Recruitment Tactics

Table Talk: Family Conversations About Current Events



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Topic Summary

Extremism and terrorism are often in the news.

On January 6, 2021, as Congress met in the U.S. Capitol to count electoral votes and certify the results of the 2020 Presidential election, a violent mob of right-wing extremists, white supremacists and others stormed the Capitol. They came to Washington, D.C. (and several state capitals) to disrupt and overturn the results of the Presidential election. As House and Senate lawmakers held their floor debates, angry rioters—many wearing and carrying white supremacist, antisemitic and

racist symbolism—invaded the Capitol building, spewing rage and hate. Five people were killed, including one Capitol Police officer. The FBI is investigating whether some of them had plans to kidnap members of Congress and hold them hostage. Many have been arrested and investigations into domestic terrorism have been opened.

Other acts of extremism and terrorism

Other well-known incidents involving white supremacy and domestic extremism include Charlottesville's 'Unite the Right' rally in 2017, and the mass shooting of nine Black parishioners in a Charleston, SC church in 2015 by Dylann Roof, a man who supported white supremacist ideology. There have also been various international incidents that were inspired by the terrorist groups ISIS and Al Qaeda.

What are extremism and terrorism?

Extremism is a concept used to describe religious, social or political belief systems that exist substantially outside of belief systems more broadly accepted in society (i.e., "mainstream" beliefs). Extreme ideologies often seek radical changes in the nature of government, religion or society. Not all extremists are terrorists— some people hold extremist beliefs but do not resort to violence in an attempt to enact those beliefs.

Terrorism is a pre-planned act or attempted act of significant violence by one or more non-state actors in order to further an ideological, social or religious cause, or to harm perceived opponents of such causes. Significant violent acts can include bombings or use of other weapons of mass destruction, assassinations and targeted killings, shooting sprees, arsons and fire bombings, kidnappings and hostage situations and, in some cases, armed robberies.

Terrorist and extremist groups actively try to recruit new members to join their causes in a variety of ways and the internet and social media have been a

powerful tool in their arsenal, especially when trying to entice young people to their cause. Terrorist and extremist groups and their supporters use websites and social media platforms to share propaganda, spread disinformation and misinformation and to foster a sense of community for supporters, which serves to amplify their influence.

How do extremist groups recruit others?

Extremist groups actively try to get new members to join their causes, especially young people. One of the ways they do this is online. Most extremist groups have their own websites and they and their supporters have profiles on different social media sites. They use these to share propaganda and to become friends with people who seem to display interest in what they are thinking, doing and saying. Newcomers might become friends with several different extremists online.

(Propaganda is information that is shared and spread in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people's beliefs, often to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.)

As they see their new friends' posts, the new people grow more and more exposed to terrorist propaganda and also begin to feel like many other people agree with it. They also can talk about it with their new friends online, and sometimes with their in-person friends, too. They come to feel that they are a part of a community with these extremist friends online and to feel like these new online friends are real friends. They may not realize that the extremists don't like them for who they are, but rather are just trying to take advantage of them to further the goals of the extremist group. As people are drawn into these new social groups, they want to maintain their new "friendships" and may also begin to trust their online contacts and believe what they are saying. A few people can forget why extremism and terrorism are hateful and wrong and begin to believe that their new friends have legitimate viewpoints. Over time many come to believe that they have no choice but to use or advocate for violence.

Age

14 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- What were your thoughts and feelings about the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021?
- What do you know about terrorism and extremism and what more do you want to know?
- Have you seen any type of propaganda online? What did you notice about it?
- How do you think propaganda is like advertising and how is it different?
- How do you feel about extremist groups trying to recruit young people online?

Questions to Dig Deeper

- Have you ever found yourself being influenced by advertising or propaganda?
- Why do you think extremist groups target young people for recruitment?
- What do you think should be done about it?

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Be a conscientious consumer of online materials and information and share your findings and insights with others.
- When you see hate speech online, report it so you can bring attention to Internet companies. Use ADL's [Cyber-Safety Action Guide](#).
- Educate others about the topic by sharing information on social media, having individual conversations with other students or organizing an educational forum in school.

Additional Resources

- [Outsmarting Propaganda: Combatting the Lure of Extremist Recruitment Strategies](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [The Alt Right and White Supremacy](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [New Hate and Old: The Changing Face of American White Supremacy](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)