

Pioneering school pilot a breakthrough in building students' resilience to extremism online

- A pioneering new Demos pilot study as part of the Prevent programme shows that school children's resilience to online exploitation and radicalisation can be significantly strengthened through a skills-based teaching approach.
- The pilot in four secondary schools sought to move away from ideology-based interventions, to trial an alternative approach to countering extremism that focused on developing students' critical thinking and digital literacy.
- Student participants were better able to identify manipulative techniques and differentiate between truth and lies in online contexts after the pilot.
- The pilot reinforced Demos' broader research into "digital citizenship" – bringing our shared understanding of citizenship and the rights and responsibilities it entails into the digital age.

A new report from the cross-party think tank Demos finds that equipping young students with critical thinking skills is effective in improving their resilience to extremist material online.

Setting out of the findings of an innovative pilot conducted under the Home Office's Prevent Innovation Fund, *Digital Citizens: Countering Extremism Online* shows how a skills-based, rather than an ideology-based, approach can be an effective and more inclusive countering extremism strategy for young people.

British schools are responsible for identifying and building resilience against radicalisation as part of their duty of care. Four schools in Ealing and Leicester took part in the pilot, in which new resources, produced by Demos in partnership with Bold Creative and designed to develop vital "digital citizenship" skills, were tested in dedicated classroom workshops. This represented a departure from many previous countering extremism initiatives, which have typically focused on countering the ideologies underpinning extremism.

The post-pilot evaluation revealed that the Demos pilot had produced statistically significant improvements in participating students' capacity to think critically about online material, helping them to better protect themselves in an environment where they are spending more and more time, and which is increasingly difficult to police.

Participants demonstrated increased confidence in distinguishing between truth and lies on social media, and also to identify the techniques used to manipulate people on social media. The young people who took part in the pilot also felt more confident that they would know what to do if confronted with hate speech online.

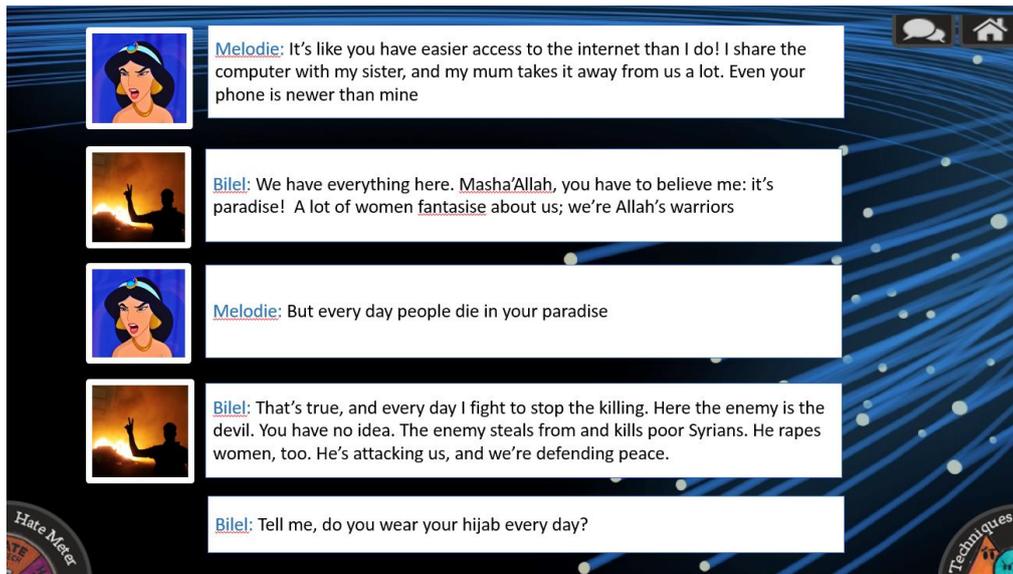
While existing PSHE, Citizenship and British Values aspects of the national curriculum are helping school children to protect themselves against exploitation, Demos believes there are not enough high quality resources designed to increase the resilience of young people to extremism and radicalisation specifically in the digital realm.

Demos has been undertaking a pioneering research programme into the concept of "digital citizenship", focusing on bringing our shared understanding of citizenship and the rights and responsibilities it entails into the digital age. This includes research into improving citizens' understanding of and resilience to online gambling, and also encouraging citizen-led responses to negative online behaviour such as hate speech and misogyny.

About the Workshops

Four schools took part in the pilot workshops – two in Leicester, and two in Ealing.

The resources created by Demos and Bold Creative for the pilot were based around an interactive digital presentation deck, which presented anonymised, real-life instances of extremist propaganda and dialogue on a range of social media platforms. These conversations included video and rich media content on far-right extremism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and Islamist extremism. This deck was supplemented with a range of other materials, including professionally produced A3 print out cards illustrating an extremist conversation online, and blank cards allowing participants to involve themselves in the conversation and apply the skills they have learned. In addition, workshop plans, teacher guidance and a glossary of key terms were also produced, in order to help teachers deliver the resources in the absence of external delivery assistance.



(Actual exchange, presented to students during Demos' workshops)

These resources were delivered through two, one hour long workshops, during PSHE, RE or Citizenship lesson time. The first workshop focused predominantly on critical thinking and the recognition of online propaganda, and the second workshop focused predominantly on Digital Citizenship and peer-to-peer safeguarding. Both were designed to convey a positive social narrative to the participants – that they were in a position of power on social media, and that they had to take a lead in terms of identifying and arguing against extremism and hate speech online, and in terms of peer to peer support. It also focused on the development of specific skills, including the recognition of propaganda and poor arguments and critical thinking, as well as specific knowledge of the different ways in which social media changes the way in which we communicate online.

Commenting on the report, Demos' Head of Citizenship Ralph Scott, said:

“Too often the focus of our efforts to deal with the growing problem of extremism online is to seek to censor content and remove material from social media. Yet time and time again, it has been shown that removing extremist content from the online space is almost impossible, and censorship can only form part of the solution to this problem.

“Young people spend an average of 27 ½ hours a week on social media. More likely than not, they will encounter extremist material online, and they need to be equipped to deal with it when they do. We need to have faith in the capacity of empowered young people to see extremist propaganda for what it is and prepare them accordingly, rather than relying on our ability to protect them from it entirely.

“This pilot project successfully tested a skills-based approach which prepared young people to understand and resist extremism online, showing that such an approach can be effective. Schools need to be provided with more resources that enable them to develop the digital citizenship of young people, in order to effectively contribute in the fight against extremism.” ”

Security Minister, Ben Wallace MP, said:

“We have seen all too clearly the devastating effects radicalisation can have on individuals, families and communities. I am proud that we have been able to support Demos’ valuable and innovative work to help young people develop resilience to online radicalisation. Safeguarding young people from radicalisation is a job for us all, and this is a fine example of the kind of partnership which is absolutely essential if we are going to succeed.”

Notes to Editors –

Digital Citizens: Countering Extremism Online is available to download from on 13/12/16 at:

<http://www.demos.co.uk/project/digital-citizens>

Demos is Britain’s leading cross-party think tank: an independent, educational charity, which produces original and innovative research. Visit: demos.co.uk

This pilot project was supported through a grant from the Home Office’s Prevent Innovation Fund, managed by Innovate UK.

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