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Abstract | Using a large, national survey of online Australians, we measured unintentional and intentional exposure to fringe or radical content and groups online.

Two in five respondents (40.6%) reported being exposed to material they described as fringe, unorthodox or radical. One-quarter of these respondents (23.2%) accessed the content intentionally. One-third (29.9%) said the content they had seen depicted violence.

Fringe or radical content was often accessed through messages, discussions and posts online. Mainstream social media and messaging platforms were the platforms most frequently used to share fringe or radical content. Being a member of a group promoting fringe or radical content was associated with increased sharing of that content with other internet users.

Efforts to restrict access to radical content and groups online, especially on mainstream platforms, may help reduce intentional and unintentional exposure to and sharing of that content.

Exposure to and sharing of fringe or radical content online

Timothy Cubitt and Anthony Morgan

Violent extremists use the internet to communicate with each other and with the general public, to distribute propaganda, radicalise and recruit at-risk individuals, raise funds and plan attacks (Broadhurst et al. 2017; Droogan & Waldek 2018). For example, both Islamist and right-wing extremists, including those involved in committing extremist violence, have been shown to be active online (Gaudette, Scrivens & Venkatesh 2022; Whittaker 2021). Research has focused on the supply side of online extremist content, including how extremist groups use the internet to disseminate radical content (Bastug, Douai & Akca 2020; Droogan, Waldek & Blackhall 2018). Many extremists have moved online because it gives them access to a larger audience and more potential recruits (Broadhurst et al. 2017; Droogan & Waldek 2018). They are selective in the online platforms they use, making choices based on cost, security, reach and user-friendliness (Walther & McCoy 2021). Some mainstream social media platforms are used primarily to reach large audiences, while other more niche platforms are used to circumvent content removal mechanisms and share information securely.

Exposure to and engagement with extremist actors and content online is a risk factor for radicalisation (Frischlich 2021; Reeve 2023). In their large-scale systematic review, Wolfowicz and colleagues (2021) found that exposure to radical content online was a risk factor for attitudes that support the use of violent radical behaviours, while having deviant or radical peers and online contact with extremists was associated with radical behaviours. However, exposure to radical content is usually regarded as a contributory factor to radicalisation rather than a direct cause (Gill et al. 2017), with research focusing on how exposure occurs and how online behaviours can lead to radicalisation (Wolbers et al. 2023). While the internet expands the reach and opportunity of those wanting to distribute radical content, we cannot yet be sure of the conditions under which individuals who hold radical attitudes, supported by online content, mobilise to violence. Recent evidence suggests that exposure to radical content alone does not necessarily lead to radicalisation or violence; however, the increased exposure afforded by the internet may ultimately result in a far larger pool of vulnerable individuals being exposed to radical content (Hassan et al. 2018; Nienierza et al. 2021). Despite this, most extremists are thought to initially encounter this content while searching for it rather than through chance encounters (Nienierza et al. 2021). The risk of radicalisation is considered greater when radical content is intentionally accessed than following passive exposure (Frissen 2021).

Most current research into this area has relied on data extracted from social media platforms (Droogan et al. 2022; Droogan, Waldek & Blackhall 2018). While useful in understanding the type of information shared and behaviours of users active on these platforms, these methods do not establish the extent to which online users are exposed to or intentionally seek out radical content. Similarly, little is known about the online activity of those who go on to share that content, join groups that promote extreme or radical views and invite others to join those groups. In this paper we analyse the characteristics and online behaviours of Australians who access radical content online and the behaviours of those who share radical content and join radical groups who propagate that content.

Methodology

Sample

This research uses data from a large sample of online Australians surveyed about their political and social beliefs (*n*=13,302). Conducted by Roy Morgan Research in late 2022, the survey was sent to panels of individuals aged 18 years and over who had voluntarily joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys. Participants were first recruited from Roy Morgan's Single Source survey panel, which is recruited through a rigorous cluster sampled, face-to-face survey approach. Proportional quota sampling was used to ensure the sample was broadly reflective of the spread of people living in Australia. Quotas were based on the Australian adult population stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). Weighting by age, sex and usual place of residence was undertaken to ensure that the data were representative of the spread of the Australian population. Additional random iterative method weights were applied to correct for education level, internet and social media use.

Respondents were asked whether, in the last 12 months, they had seen political, ideological or religious content online that mainstream society or the government might describe as fringe, unorthodox or radical (hereafter referred to as 'fringe or radical content'). This included online messages, posts or discussions; videos they had watched, shared on bulletin boards or attached to text or email messages (excluding fictional films); and books, magazines, articles or other written material, downloaded to print or received attached to a message such as an email. This latter category included fringe or radical content in the form of political or religious content such as speeches, sermons, manifestos, policies, ideas or information designed to influence respondents' views on world events towards an identifiable ideology or issue. Questions focused on the type of content, whether access had been intentional, and whether respondents had then shared the content with others. Additionally, we asked respondents whether they had ever accessed any of this type of content offline. Finally, respondents were asked whether they had encountered online groups, communities, servers, clubs or forums online (hereafter referred to as 'online groups') that mainstream society or the government might describe as fringe or radical and, if so, whether they had accessed them intentionally or joined the group.

Responses to these questions were used to develop the groups that are the focus of this research:

- respondents who had seen fringe or radical content online in the 12 months prior to the survey but had done so unintentionally (*n*=3,792);
- respondents who had intentionally accessed this content (*n*=1,253);
- respondents who had shared this content (whether they had accessed it intentionally or not, *n*=522); and
- respondents who had intentionally accessed online groups that mainstream society or the government might describe as fringe or radical (*n*=524).

Respondents were excluded from the analysis if they did not answer questions about whether they had viewed fringe or radical content, whether they had done so intentionally, or whether they had shared the content or joined fringe or radical groups.

Analytic approach

The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, we explored the extent and types of content respondents had accessed, unintentionally or intentionally, and the sharing of this content online. We then examined the characteristics of respondents who accessed and shared fringe or radical content, how and when they were first exposed to this material, and their online activity. We then focused specifically on the platforms used to share fringe or radical content online, and the online fringe or radical groups respondents accessed or joined.

Respondents who had seen fringe or radical content unintentionally were compared with respondents who had not seen it to establish factors associated with exposure to fringe or radical content. Next, respondents who intentionally accessed fringe or radical content were compared with those who had been exposed to the content unintentionally, to identify factors related to intentional access as distinct from unintentional exposure. Finally, respondents who shared fringe or radical content (irrespective of whether they had seen it intentionally) were compared with respondents who had seen it but did not share it with others online.

Limitations

Proportional quota-based sampling is a non-probability sampling method. While the sample is large and representative of the spread of the Australian population according to key demographic characteristics, we must be cautious about generalising the results to the wider Australian population.

There are advantages and disadvantages to relying on respondents to assess whether the content they had accessed was fringe, radical or extreme. While we provided guidance to respondents to help them determine whether they had accessed or shared fringe or radical content or participated in a group that promoted fringe or radical views online, respondents may have had different ideas about whether the content was fringe or radical. It is a subjective assessment that is probably linked to their own views around what constitutes mainstream content or the behaviour of most people online. However, relying on respondents to define the content made it possible to measure self-reported exposure and access without collecting information about the content respondents had encountered and without making subjective decisions on whether that content met a pre-determined definition of fringe or radical. Additionally, some respondents may have been reluctant to share information about the content they had accessed or shared, and whether they had done so intentionally, particularly where that content may have been illegal or harmful in nature.

Finally, the distribution of radical content increased during the COVID-19 pandemic (Waldek, Droogan & Ballsun-Stanton 2022). While we do not expect this to have influenced our findings, it is important to note that there were some changes to the online environment shortly prior to this survey.

Results

Exposure to and sharing of fringe or radical content online

Forty-one percent of respondents (*n*=5,402) reported having seen fringe or radical content online in the 12 months prior to the survey (Table 1). Of these, 70.2 percent (*n*=3,792)—28.5 percent of all respondents—reported having seen that content unintentionally. A further 23.2 percent (*n*=1,253)—9.4 percent of all respondents—reported intentionally accessing the content. A small group of respondents who said they had seen fringe or radical content did not disclose whether this exposure was intentional or not (6.6%, *n*=345).

Respondents who said they had seen fringe or radical content online were then asked whether they had shared the content. This was limited to respondents who said they had first accessed the material online (*n*=4,101). One in eight respondents (12.7%, *n*=522) who had seen fringe or radical content said they had also shared it online.

Table 1: Exposure to and sharing of fringe or radical content online (%)	
Exposure (*n*=13,302)	
Had not seen content	45.9
Had seen content	40.6
Did not respond	13.5
Intentional or unintentional exposure (*n*=5,401)	
Unintentionally viewed content	70.2
Viewed content intentionally	23.2
Did not respond	6.6
Sharing (*n*=4,101)	
Did not share content	83.8
Shared content	12.7
Did not respond	3.5

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Type of content accessed online

Three in 10 respondents who said they had accessed fringe or radical content online said that at least some of this online content described, depicted or advocated violence (29.9%; Table 2). Respondents who said they had unintentionally accessed fringe or radical content online were more likely than respondents who accessed it intentionally to say that the content depicted violence (30.5% vs 28.5%, F=24.7, p<0.01), although the rate of exposure was similar overall.

Intentional access to fringe or radical content was more common that unintentional access for every form of content. However, podcasts (F=225.1, p<0.01), presentations or videos (F=178.9, p<0.01), news or documentaries (F=139.8, p<0.01), websites (F=107.5, p<0.01) and online articles (F=83.0, p<0.01) yielded the largest differences between groups. Respondents who accessed the content intentionally were significantly more likely than unintentional viewers to say that the content was designed to discuss ideas (F=225.1, p<0.01), as a call to action (F=18.4, p<0.01), to generate finance (F=17.7, p<0.01), to provide training (F=32.8, p<0.01), to facilitate planning (F=7.4, p<0.01), or simply for entertainment (F=122.6, p<0.01) or news purposes (F=242.4, p<0.01).

Respondents who intentionally accessed fringe or radical content were asked why they had done so. The most common reason given was that they wanted to learn more about the cause, had been following the topic or shared some values with proponents (55.6%). This was followed by a general curiosity, for entertainment reasons, or because they had encountered it while browsing (26.2%). One in six (16.5%) said it was because of perceived government and media bias, manipulation and propaganda and a desire to fact check or seek an alternative view, and one in 10 (10.8%) said they had accessed the content because they saw it being promoted on social media.

Table 2: Type of fringe or radical content accessed online (%)		
	Unintentionally viewed (*n*=3,792)	Intentionally viewed (*n*=1,253)
Content described, depicted or advocated violence	30.5	28.5**
Form in which content was accessed		
Messages, discussions or posts online	57.9	61.1*
Documentaries or news articles	36.9	56.5**
Websites	28.1	44.3**
Presentations or videos	23.0	43.2 **
Online magazines, articles or books	14.3	25.6**
Online gaming	7.8	12.0**
Podcasts	7.1	23.3**
Aim of content		
Explanations, information, discussion and ideas	38.8	66.3**
Recruitment	19.0	14.4**
Call to action	32.3	40.1**
Call for violence	16.0	10.7**
Financing or donations	17.1	22.4**
Training or instruction	5.7	10.5**
Planning or executing actions	8.9	11.6**
Entertainment or comedy	11.7	25.3**
News and current affairs	27.6	52.2**
Propaganda	1.2	1.4
Influence and manipulate	1.2	0.2
Most common reasons for accessing content (on most recent occasion)		
To learn more about the cause, had been following topic or shared some values with proponents	–	55.6
Curious, for entertainment or because encountered while browsing	–	26.2
Government or media are biased and engage in manipulation or propaganda, wanted to fact check	–	16.5
Content was shared or discussed on social media	–	10.8
Recommended or discussed by someone they knew	–	7.0
Disagree with content (no further explanation)	–	5.3
Participate in discussion or exchange of ideas (no further explanation)	–	2.8
Other reason	–	6.3
Don't know or prefer not to say	–	3.5

**statistically significant at $p<0.01$, *statistically significant at $p<0.05$

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Characteristics of individuals who accessed or shared content online

As shown in Table 3, respondents who unintentionally viewed fringe or radical content were more likely than respondents who had not seen such content to be younger (30.8% below the age of 35 vs 26.0%; F=7.3, p<0.01), male (51.9% vs 45.5%; F=23.3, p<0.01) and university educated (41.4% vs 38.3%; F=4.9, p<0.01), and to spend more time online for personal (3.8 vs 3.4 hours; F=3.4, p<0.01) or work (3.2 vs 2.9 hours; F=2.7, p<0.01) purposes. Respondents who intentionally viewed fringe or radical content were more likely than respondents who were unintentionally exposed to be university educated (48.7% vs 41.4%; F=13.7, p<0.01) and male (61.7% vs 51.9%; F=13.7, p<0.01); however, they were also older (51.7% 50 years or over vs 44.4%; F=5.6, p<0.01), and less likely to be employed (59.8% vs 63.7%; F=3.67, p<0.05).

Compared to respondents who did not share fringe or radical content online, respondents who shared this content were younger (36.5% below the age of 35 vs 29.4%; F=3.0, p<0.01), were less likely to be in a relationship (57.1% vs 64.3%; F=4.47, p<0.01), were less likely to be employed (61.6% vs 65.6%; F=2.57, p<0.05), and spent significantly more time online for personal activities (4.6 vs 3.9 hours; F=1.47, p<0.05).

Table 3: Characteristics of individuals who accessed, intentionally engaged with and shared fringe or radical content online

	Had not seen content (*n*=6,104)	Unintentionally viewed content (*n*=3,792)	Intentionally viewed content (*n*=1,253)	Shared content (*n*=4,101)	
				Yes (*n*=522)	No (*n*=3,435)
Gender (%)					
Male	45.5	51.9	61.7	56.5	55.7
Female	54.4	47.5**	37.4**	42.1	43.7
Age group (%)					
18–24	8.9	11.9	9.4	14.1	11.5
25–34	17.1	18.9	14.9	22.4	17.9
35–49	26.4	24.8	23.9	22.8	24.7
50–64	24.3	22.2	25.6	21.9	24.2
65+	23.3	22.2**	26.1**	18.8**	21.8
Highest level of education (%)					
High school	32.8	28.7	24.8	26.5	27.2
Vocational	28.4	29.2	25.3	29.4	27.8
University	38.3	41.4**	48.7**	43.2	44.4

Table 3: Characteristics of individuals who accessed, intentionally engaged with and shared fringe or radical content online (cont.)

	Had not seen content (*n*=6,104)	Unintentionally viewed content (*n*=3,792)	Intentionally viewed content (*n*=1,253)	Shared content (*n*=4,101)	
				Yes (*n*=522)	No (*n*=3,435)
Family situation (%)					
Currently in a relationship	64.1	63.9	61.2	57.1**	64.3
Children living at home	37.7	35.7**	35.2	36.9	35.8
Employment (%)					
Employed	63.1	63.7	59.8	61.6	65.6
Unemployed	4.2	4.1	5.5**	7.4**	4.1
Other	32.8	32.2	34.7	30.9	30.4
Internet use (hours per day)					
Personal	3.4	3.8**	3.9	4.6**	3.9
Work	2.9	3.2**	2.9	3.1**	3.6

**statistically significant at $p<0.01$

Note: 'Other' employment status refers to those who reported being neither employed nor unemployed, such as retired people, full-time carers or those not working due to health conditions, illness or injury

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Initial exposure to content

Respondents who accessed fringe or radical content intentionally were more likely to have experienced their first exposure online (83.3% vs 80.5%; $F=36.7$, $p<0.01$) and to have sought out and found the content themselves (59.6% vs 40.0%; $F=23.3$, $p<0.01$; Table 4). They were also more likely to have first accessed the content while under the age of 18 (5.2% vs 3.4%; $F=1.41$, $p<0.01$). Those who accessed fringe or radical content intentionally reported doing significantly more frequently than those who were exposed unintentionally ($F=51.31$, $p<0.01$), with nearly five times the rate of weekly exposure (34.9% vs 7.2%).

Respondents were also asked whether they knew if their immediate family or friends had accessed fringe or radical content online in the last 12 months. While a large proportion of respondents did not know, respondents who said they intentionally accessed fringe or radical content online were much more likely to also say they had immediate family members (23.0% vs 9.0%; $F=32.9$, $p<0.01$) and friends (29.3% vs 13.0%; $F=31.5$, $p<0.01$) who had accessed similar content online.

Table 4: Initial exposure and frequency of access to fringe or radical content online		
	Unintentionally viewed content (*n*=3,792)	Intentionally viewed content (*n*=1,253)
Online or offline initial exposure to fringe or radical content (%)		
Online	80.5	83.3**
Offline	6.5	9.7
How initial exposure occurred (%)		
Found by themselves	40.0	59.6**
Shared by someone they knew or had met in person	25.3	25.5
Shared by someone they met online	6.9	4.7
Timing of first exposure (%)		
Last 30 days	11.5	20.1**
Last 12 months (but not last 30 days)	38.6	29.5
More than 12 months ago	31.0	43.6
Did not access online	5.9	0.8
Age of first exposure to online content		
Mean (*SD*)	44.2 (18.8)	44.9 (19.0)
Under 18 years (%)	3.4	5.2**
Recent frequency of exposure (%)		
At least weekly	7.2	34.9
At least monthly	22.3	32.5
Have not accessed in the past month	59.3	26.1**
Family and friends known to have accessed fringe or radical content online in the last 12 months (%)		
Immediate family	9.0	23.0**
Friends	13.0	29.3**

**statistically significant at $p<0.01$

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not answer the question; therefore percentages may not total 100

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Platforms used by individuals who accessed content online

Respondents who were unintentionally exposed to fringe or radical content were more likely than respondents who were not exposed to engage with almost all platforms weekly, consistent with the higher amount of time spent online (Table 5). However, compared with those who were unintentionally exposed, respondents who intentionally sought out fringe or radical content were less likely to access Facebook (57.5% vs 68.9%; $F=52.03$, $p<0.01$), Messenger (43.4% vs 48.9%; $F=11.31$, $p<0.01$) and TikTok (12.6% vs 17.8%; $F=15.84$, $p<0.01$) weekly, and more likely to engage with Telegram (5.5% vs 2.5%; $F=24.01$, $p<0.01$), Rumble (2.8% vs 0.5%; $F=39.75$, $p<0.01$), 4chan (1.1% vs 0.5%; $F=5.12$, $p<0.05$), Parler (0.6% vs 0.2%; $F=6.71$, $p<0.01$) and Gab (0.6% vs 0.1%; $F=11.52$, $p<0.01$).

Respondents who shared fringe or radical content online were less likely to engage with Facebook (64.8% vs 68.4%; F=3.65, p<0.05) weekly than respondents who did not, but more likely to engage with Messenger (51.5% vs 49.6%; F=2.61, p<0.05) and TikTok (21.6% vs 16.2%; F=4.68, p<0.01). The most notable differences in weekly platform use related to Telegram (9.4% vs 2.8%; F=17.79, p<0.01) and Rumble (4.2% vs 0.8%; F=13.65, p<0.01), with those who shared fringe or radical content much more likely to use these at least weekly.

Table 5: At least weekly use of specific platforms or apps, by exposure and access to fringe or radical content (%)

	Had not seen content (*n*=6,104)	Unintentionally viewed content (*n*=3,792)	Intentionally viewed content (*n*=1,253)	Shared content (*n*=4,101)	
				Yes (*n*=522)	No (*n*=3,435)
Facebook	62.1	68.9**	57.5**	64.8**	68.4
Messenger	40.6	48.9**	43.4**	51.5**	49.6
WhatsApp	25.6	27.5**	26.5	24.3	28.5
TikTok	13.9	17.8**	12.6**	21.6**	16.2
Twitter	9.1	15.8**	17.6	16.3	17.9
Reddit	5.8	11.6**	11.7	10.8	13.4
Discord	3.9	7.5**	7.0	9.6	7.9
Signal	2.1	2.9**	3.8	4.6	3.1
Telegram	1.5	2.5**	5.5**	9.4**	2.8
WeChat	0.9	1.4**	1.4	2.0	1.2
Rumble	0.2	0.5**	2.8**	4.2**	0.8
4chan	0.2	0.5**	1.1**	1.4	0.6
Parler	0.1	0.2	0.6**	1.0	0.2
Gab	0.1	0.1	0.6**	1.2	0.1
8kun	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.9	0.1
Kiwi Farms	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

**statistically significant at p<0.01

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Platforms used to share fringe or radical content and join groups online

Respondents who reported sharing fringe or radical content (*n*=522) were asked which online platforms they had used to share the content. Most respondents who shared this content did so across social media or communications platforms such as Facebook (30.4%), Messenger (17.4%) or email (11.2%; Table 6). Relatively few respondents identified multiple platforms, suggesting this was the platform respondents most strongly associated with sharing fringe or radical content.

Table 6: Mainstream platforms used to share fringe or radical content (%)	
Facebook	30.3
Messenger	17.4
Email	11.2
Instagram	5.5
WhatsApp	4.3
Twitter	4.2
TikTok	3.9
Telegram	2.9
Reddit	1.4
Snapchat	1.3
Signal	0.9
In-person	2.5
Unspecified messaging app	14.2
Unspecified social media	3.9
Unspecified forum	1.6
Other platform	5.1
Don't know	1.9

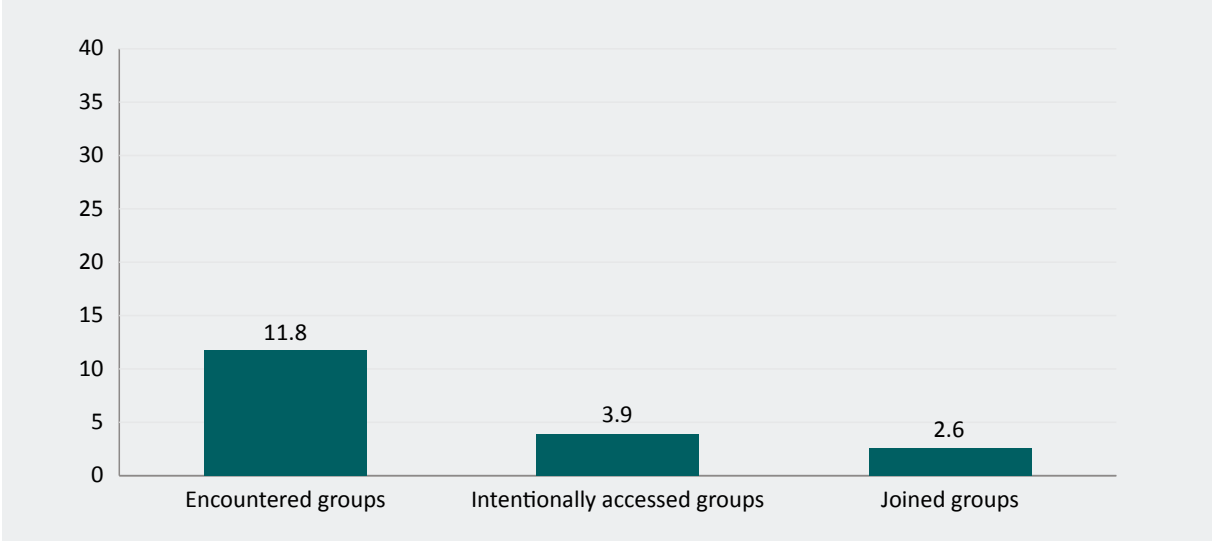
Note: Percentages do not sum to 100 because some respondents indicated sharing content across more than one platform

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Access to fringe or radical online groups

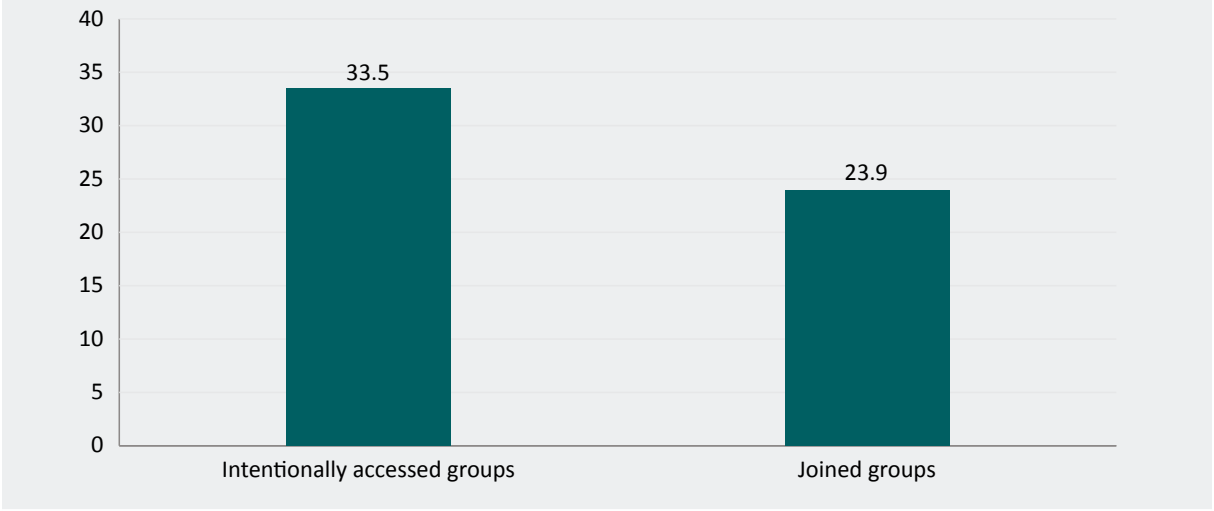
Around one in eight respondents (11.8%, *n*=1,563) had encountered a group online that promoted fringe or radical views, 3.9 percent (*n*=524) intentionally accessed these groups to view the content and 2.6 percent (*n*=346) reported that they had joined one of these groups (Figure 1). One in four respondents who said they had encountered a group online that promoted fringe or radical views said they went on to join a group (23.9%, *n*=374; Figure 2).

Figure 1: Proportion of total sample who encountered and participated in online groups promoting fringe or radical views (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Figure 2: Proportion of respondents who encountered online groups promoting fringe or radical views who went on to access or join those groups (%)



Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Among respondents who had viewed fringe or radical content unintentionally in the last 12 months, 19.4 percent (*n*=735) had encountered a fringe or radical group and 3.5 percent had intentionally accessed the group. Only 2.6 percent of respondents who had been exposed to fringe or radical content online reported intentionally accessing and joining a fringe or radical group and 2.2 percent had invited others to join the group. It is possible that these individuals joined the group (such as a group on a social media platform) before they became aware of the nature of the content being shared by that group.

A significantly higher proportion of respondents who had intentionally accessed fringe or radical content had encountered (34.1% vs 19.4%; F=39.9, p<0.01), intentionally accessed (24.9% vs 9.1%; F=69.0, p<0.01), joined (16.4% vs 7.9%; F=18.6, p<0.01) and invited others to join these groups (2.8% vs 1.5%; F=56.2, p<0.01), when compared with respondents who had viewed the content unintentionally. Similarly, a higher proportion of respondents who shared fringe or radical content encountered (45.1% vs 22.3%; F=32.3, p<0.01), intentionally accessed (68.1% vs 25.2%; F=28.4, p<0.01), joined (56.7% vs 14.1%; F=27.5, p<0.01) and invited others to join these groups (23.7% vs 2.1%; F=58.3, p<0.01), when compared with respondents who had not shared such content online. Respondents who shared fringe or radical content were the most likely to have joined (56.7%, n=296) and invited others to join groups promoting fringe or radical views (23.7%, n=124). Put another way, 42.9 percent of respondents who had intentionally accessed a fringe or radical group, and 52.9 percent of respondents who had joined a fringe or radical group, said they had shared fringe or radical content with others in the 12 months prior to the survey. Among those who had intentionally accessed fringe or radical content, respondents who had joined a fringe or radical group were also much more likely to share content than respondents who were not a member (68.1% vs 27.7%; F=11.3, p<0.01).

The platform most commonly used to access a group promoting fringe or radical views—regardless of the manner in which respondents viewed or shared fringe or radical content—was Facebook.

Table 7: Participation in online groups promoting fringe or radical views (%)

	Unintentionally viewed content (n=3,792)[a]	Intentionally viewed content (n=1,253)[a]	Shared content (n=4,101)	
			Yes (n=522)[b]	No (n=3,435)[b]
Encountered groups	19.4	34.1**	45.1**	22.3
Intentionally accessed groups	9.1	24.9**	68.1**	25.2
Joined groups	7.9	16.4**	56.7**	14.1
Invited others to join the group	1.5	2.8**	23.7**	2.1
Platform used to access a group				
Facebook	49.9	36.0*	39.3	44.4
Social media (not specified)	3.7	9.9	12.1	5.5*
Reddit	13.9	10.4	5.11	17.9**
TikTok	5.3	2.4	4.3	2.1
Telegram	3.9	5.4*	4.9	5.0
Email	1.9	3.9	3.9	2.5
Forums	2.8	8.8	5.3	8.9
Discord	0	1.4	0.0	0.1
4chan	2.9	3.9	0.1	6.8*
YouTube	5.1	6.8	6.9	7.8
Instagram	2.2	4.0	4.1	3.8

**statistically significant at p<0.01, *statistically significant at p<0.05

a: Excludes 356 respondents who did not answer questions about whether they had accessed fringe or radical content intentionally or unintentionally

b: Excludes 144 respondents who did not answer questions about whether they had shared fringe or radical content

Source: Survey of social and political attitudes in Australia, 2022 [computer file]

Discussion

Respondents who were unintentionally exposed to fringe or radical content, or who intentionally accessed or shared such content online, tended to be university educated men who were younger than other respondents and spent a greater amount of time online. This profile is consistent with other research using community samples (Costello et al. 2016). The respondents who accessed radical content intentionally were more likely to spend time on all types of platforms, with the largest differences observed between podcasts, presentations or videos, news or documentaries, websites and online articles. They were also more likely to be under the age of 18 when they first saw radical content, to seek out the content themselves, to access the content at least weekly and to have been accessing the content for more than 12 months, potentially indicating a greater commitment to the online community in which they participate (Scrivens 2021). Pivotally, those who intentionally accessed the content used mainstream social media platforms and messaging apps such as Facebook, TikTok, Messenger and WhatsApp less frequently than other respondents, but used platforms such as Telegram, Rumble and 4chan more frequently. They were also more likely to say their immediate family members and friends had also accessed fringe or radical content online in the 12 months prior to the survey, highlighting the intersection between offline and online networks (Gill et al. 2017).

When respondents were asked why they had accessed fringe or radical content, the most common reason was to learn more about a cause. However, a sizeable minority specifically sought out the content because of perceived government or media bias, manipulation or propaganda. This suggests that many people who sought out the content did so because it aligned with their world views, at least to some degree. One in 10 said the main reason for accessing the content was that they had seen it promoted on social media, reinforcing the prominent role that platforms play in shaping people's online behaviour, including in ways that may be harmful (Droogan, Waldek & Blackhall 2018).

Conversely, respondents who were exposed to fringe or radical content unintentionally were much less likely to have found it themselves and, while they accessed the content less frequently, nearly 90 percent experienced their first exposure online. They spent significantly more time online for both work and personal reasons and, during their time online, were more likely than people who were not exposed to fringe or radical content to be frequent users of unmoderated platforms such as Signal, Telegram, WeChat, Rumble and 4chan. They were also the group most likely to report exposure to content that depicted or advocated violence. It is possible that individuals who intentionally accessed fringe or radical content, by virtue of seeking it out, were better able to control the type of content to which they were exposed, whereas those who were unintentionally exposed could not, leading to a greater chance of exposure to violent content. The latter group were also more sensitive to the aims of the content and were more likely to identify it as calling for violence or as attempting to recruit individuals to a certain ideology.

Respondents who shared fringe or radical content online were younger than those who did not, more likely to be unemployed and spent more personal time online. Similar to those who accessed radical content intentionally, respondents who shared it spent less time on mainstream social media platforms than those who did not share, with the exception of Messenger and TikTok. Notably, those who shared fringe or radical content were significantly more likely than those who did not share to use Telegram, WeChat and Rumble weekly. Although they may have spent less time on mainstream social media, this group reported sharing fringe or radical content across conventional platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, email, Instagram, WhatsApp and Twitter. It is possible that respondents who shared radical content accessed the content from unmoderated platforms and shared it across moderated platforms to individuals who may not have been seeking it out, potentially brokering unintentional exposure on mainstream platforms. The transition of content from unmoderated to mainstream platforms supports the increased normalisation of the content. As this content is increasingly shared across mainstream platforms, opportunities for exposure expand to a wider group, normalising and further supporting the sharing of the content and ultimately increasing the risk of exposure among those who may be vulnerable to radicalisation.

Nearly one in eight respondents had encountered online groups that promoted fringe or radical views. One-third of these respondents accessed and engaged with the groups they had encountered and nearly one-quarter reported joining a group. Individuals who intentionally accessed or shared fringe or radical content accessed and joined online groups at a much higher rate than respondents who encountered the content unintentionally. Around half of those respondents who had shared content online were also member of a group promoting fringe or radical content. Further, two-thirds of respondents who had intentionally accessed fringe or radical content and joined a group online shared the content with other internet users.

While this study has established a strong relationship between intentionally accessing and sharing content and participation in online groups, we cannot be certain about the direction of this relationship. However, it is clear that a large proportion of survey respondents had been exposed to fringe or radical content online on mainstream platforms, many of whom had sought it out intentionally. Those who intentionally sought out this content were more likely than those who were exposed unintentionally to participate in an online group promoting fringe or radical content. Being a member of a group promoting fringe or radical content was clearly associated with increased sharing of that content with other internet users. These individuals act as brokers of fringe and radical content online and of networks that facilitate exposure to this content. Prior research has suggested that, rather than being viewed as simple exposure, online interactions with radical content could at times be considered sophisticated and purposeful (Waldek, Droogan & Lumby 2021). Our findings suggest that active exposure to and sharing of fringe or radical content can be a sophisticated, non-trivial exercise, laying the foundation for the spread of this content online.

Results highlight the importance of removing fringe or radical content from online platforms to reduce exposure to this content. This is especially true of mainstream social media platforms, which were the primary platforms on which radical content was shared and the platforms most commonly used by those unintentionally exposed to the content. This approach may result in reduced downstream opportunities for the sharing of fringe or radical content and, as a result, fewer people joining and recruiting others to join online groups that promote this content.

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