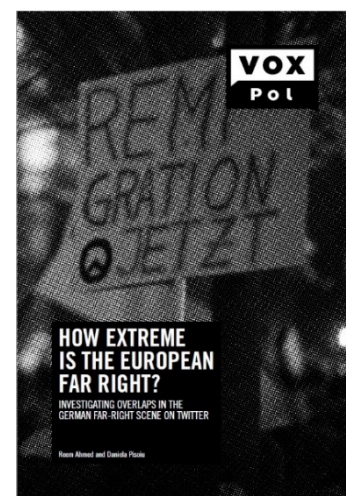
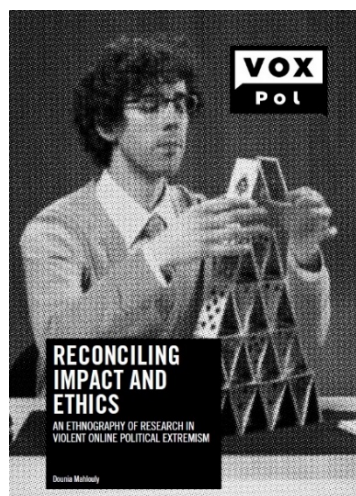
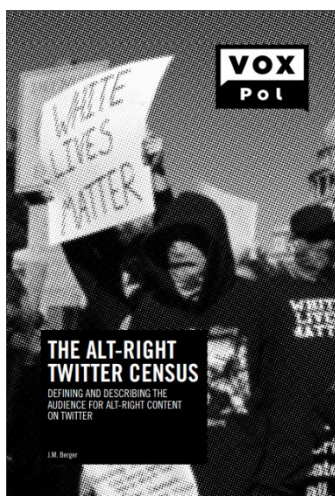
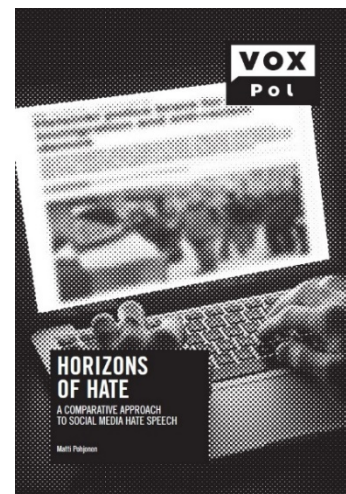
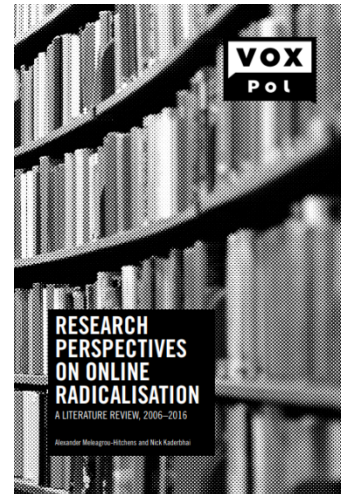
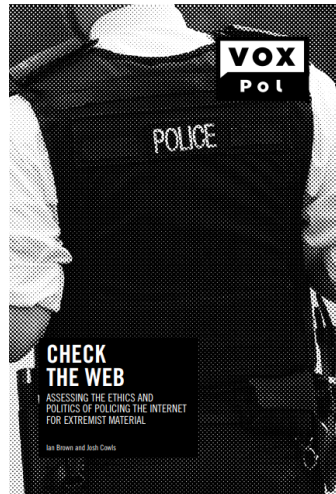
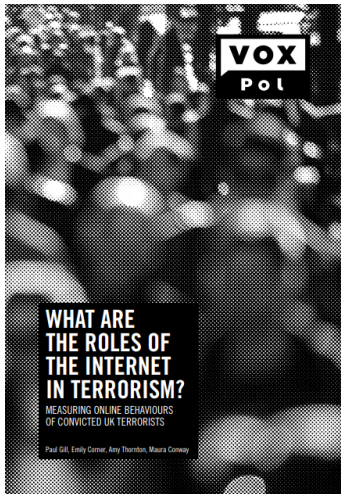




NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM



Final Summary Report

Overall Project Summary

1.1. Background

VOX-Pol (Violent Online Political Extremism) was a 72-month, €5.13 million Network of Excellence that integrated the world's leading researchers and research groups in Violent Online Political Extremism (VOPE), to include those researching the intersection of terrorism and the Internet (including, violent jihadists, violent separatists, etc.), the online activities of the extreme right, the potential for violent online radicalisation, and related topics, in order to:

1. Create a sustainable critical mass of innovative activity among what was at the project's outset a burgeoning but fragmented group of researchers and research topics; and
2. Ensure that EU and Member State strategies and policies targeting violent online political extremism were based on concrete evidence, experience, and knowledge about the contours and workings of violent online political extremism thus increasing the likelihood of their success.

VOX-Pol was led by Dublin City University (DCU) and had eight additional partner institutions: King's College London (KCL), University of Oxford (UOXF), University of Amsterdam (UvA), Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), Central European University (CEU), Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology—Delhi (IIITD), and University College London (UCL).

The VOX-Pol team was multidisciplinary, drawing on communications, computer science, criminology, ethics, international relations, and politics, among others.

From the project's kick-off in January 2014, VOX-Pol worked to:

- Integrate and network the research activities of those working in the area of violent online extremism within the EU and globally;

- Create and develop long-term relationships between established national research groups, new researchers and research groups, security practitioners, the Internet industry, civil society, and policymakers;
- Produce new analytical tools and methodologies for research into the prevalence, contours, functions, and impacts of violent online political extremism;
- Raise awareness of the challenges of research and decision-making in this area by exploring the interplay of e-research ethics, privacy, surveillance, freedom of speech, and the practices of and responses to violent online extremism and terrorism; and
- Influence research and policy agendas on the European and world stages in key aspects of violent online extremism and responses to it.

VOX-Pol conducted a wide range of activities over its six-year duration to achieve these aims, an overview of which is supplied below.

1.1.1. Integration and Networking

One of the project's core aims was to integrate and network research activities and researchers, including PhD students and early career researchers (ECRs), working on the intersections of extremism, terrorism, and the Internet across disciplinary boundaries within the EU and globally. We took four major steps to make this happen: the holding of three Summer Schools aimed directly at PhD students and ECRs; the (co-)hosting of 3 conferences and 14 workshops, with a majority having an open call for papers; encouraging additional activity via our Researcher Mobility Programme, including not just our Researcher Fellowship Programme, but also shorter research trips (i.e. Researcher Exchange Programme); generating connections via social media, especially Twitter.

The week-long Summer Schools got excellent feedback, including in response to the question 'What did you find most enjoyable [about the Summer School]?:' "Socialising / networking / meeting peers in the field." Our three conferences, in London, Dublin, and Amsterdam, each of which drew between 112 (2014) and 192 (2018) participants from around the world and grew the Network further, were acknowledged as being the standout events in the online terrorism research community in 2014, 2016, and 2018 respectively. In addition to our scheduled workshops, we also collaborated with colleagues we became familiar with through VOX-Pol to host other workshops, including a 2016 workshop in

Brussels jointly hosted with the EU-funded projects INFOCORE and MeCoDEM, NATO-sponsored workshop in Dublin on 'Terrorist use of the Internet: Assessment and Response' and a 2018 ethics workshop at Swansea University.

Besides our official reports, the RMP and other activity and events resulted in 14 journal articles, 2 edited books, 1 report (for ICCT, The Hague), and a book chapter, with 2 journal special issues and 2 journal articles forthcoming. Connections made in our conferences and workshops doubtless also resulted in many other research collaborations and publications that have not been counted here.

1.1.2. Creation and Development of Relationships Between Academics and Non-academics

Another successful feature of VOX-Pol was the creation and development over the last 6 years of long-term relationships between both new and established researchers and research groups with security practitioners, the Internet industry, policymakers, and civil society. Our interactions with the latter took place most obviously during our two Training Academies and three Lunch Briefing Series, which were practitioner-focused, but also via our conferences and workshops and follow-up interactions, including a large number of briefings and presentations delivered at various groups' headquarters.

Our 2015 Training Academy was hosted by the Valencia Local Police and had 22 attendees from eight countries, including from local and national law enforcement agencies, representatives of national ministries (e.g. Social Affairs, Justice and Security) and representatives of social media companies (e.g. Ask.fm), while our 2017 Training Academy was hosted by Europol at their Hague headquarters and, in addition to Europol staff, was attended by 28 participants from nine countries, including local and national law enforcement agencies, representatives from international and European institutions (e.g. Council of Europe, European Commission, International Criminal Court), and social media companies (e.g. Facebook). While our first Lunch Briefing Series, hosted by ICSR at King's College London had practitioner involvement, it was dominated by students and researchers. Our 2018 and 2019 Briefing Series, on the other hand, were organised jointly with the Representation of the European Commission in Belgium, took place at the Brussels Press Club, and drew a largely practitioner audience, including from the European

Commission, law enforcement, public policy, NGOs, news media, and social media companies. Our conferences and workshops also drew significant practitioner interest, with our Amsterdam conference drawing representatives of social media companies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter; representatives from government departments and law enforcement in Europe and North America; as well as think tanks and policy research institutes. These interactions resulted in the building of closer relationships between those involved in our Network and all types of practitioners, as evidenced by the large number of briefings and presentations undertaken by VOX-Pol partners in the wake of these events, including at the Australian Attorney General's Office, Europol, Facebook, Google, Interpol, the Irish Department of Justice, the London Metropolitan Police, Twitter, the UK Home Office, and YouTube.

Our open access VOX-Pol reports and our other publications have also been widely utilised by law enforcement agents, social media company representatives, and policymakers. Our *3 Year in Review* reports were, for example, circulated to all attendees at the annual EU Internet Forum ministerial-level meetings, while our *Disrupting Daesh* report was quoted from by Facebook's Counterterrorism Policy Manager in an interview.¹

1.1.2.1. Dissemination and Outreach

Both our work creating and developing relationships between academics and security practitioners, the Internet industry, policymakers, and civil society and our integration and networking activity was heavily aided by our online presence.

In March 2014, VOX-Pol launched a website (www.voxpol.eu) to disseminate information about the Network and its activities, and provide visitors access to resources related to the field. In October 2014, a weekly Blog was added to the site, to which over 249 (cross-)posts were made by graduate students, faculty, independent, and other researchers in Periods 2, 3 and 4. The Blog has become one of the most popular features on the website, with total views of all Blog posts reaching just under 40,000.

In December 2015, VOX-Pol's Online Library went live as a component of the site, providing visitors with an easily accessible and searchable collection of currently just under 1,000

¹ Cruickshank, P. (2017). 'A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Policy Manager, Facebook.' *CTC Sentinel*, 10(8).



publications related to online extremism and terrorism, with new items added all the time. Entries include journal articles, book chapters, reports, and theses. In addition, the VOX-Pol YouTube channel hosts a collection of 125 videos related to research on violent online political extremism and terrorism, including videos of the live streams from many of our events, such as conference keynotes and lunch briefings, which have collectively been viewed over 33,262 times. VOX-Pol also has a strong Twitter presence, with over 4,600 followers.

The number of individuals accessing VOX-Pol publications runs into the tens of thousands. Our 14 official VOX-Pol reports have together reached 57,959 downloads directly from our website; many are also available on other websites. A further 3,200 printed versions of our reports were distributed at various events (e.g. SRE 2018 and 2019). More than—very conservatively—61,000 VOX-Pol reports were disseminated over the lifetime of the project.² This resulted in our research garnering 466 academic citations to-date and coverage of our work in a large number of traditional media outlets, including *The Atlantic*, *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *HuffPost*, *NBC News*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Vice*, *The Washington Post*, and *Wired*.

By the end of the project, 31 December 2019, the VOX-Pol website had 109,553 unique users from 181 countries, who had accessed VOX-Pol's website over 128,225 times for over 262,800 page views.

1.1.3. Production of New Analytical Tools and Methodologies

The production of new analytical tools and methodologies for research into the prevalence, contours, functions, and impacts of online extremism and terrorism was a particularly innovative aspect of VOX-Pol. It required close cooperation between computer scientists and social scientists, both from within and outside the Network. Together we collected extensive data on a variety of extremists and terrorists—particularly the so-called 'Islamic State' (IS) and the extreme right—active in a wide variety of online spaces, including

² The total of 61,159 should be taken as very conservative because, for example, *Disrupting Daesh* was directly downloaded from voxpol.eu 9,325 times, but was also published as a peer reviewed article in the journal *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, which has a further 3,234 downloads from the publisher website, and another 483 downloads from DCU's Doras institutional repository, so additional aggregated downloads of 3,720 for a revised total, that we are aware of, of 13,045. Other VOX-Pol publications have similar download histories.

dedicated online discussion forums (e.g. Stormfront), Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. We also developed and deployed tools for text analysis, image analysis, and social network analysis. Our mid-project and final conferences, along with our Summer Schools and Training Academies, all had sessions—many of them hands-on—devoted to our available data collection and analysis tools and their uses. In addition to a selection of technical papers produced by our computer science colleagues, published research produced by the Network that deployed tools and/or methods developed by us or in conjunction with us include 'Down the (White) Rabbit Hole The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems' (2014), *Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and its Impacts* (2017), 'Echo Chambers Exist! (But They're Full of Opposing Views)' (2020).

1.1.4. Raise Awareness of the Challenges of Research and Decision-making in the Area

We worked assiduously over the years to raise awareness of the challenges of research and decision-making in this area by exploring the interplay of e-research ethics, privacy, surveillance, freedom of speech, and the practices of and responses to online extremism and terrorism.

As regards privacy, surveillance, and freedom of speech, we engaged civil society organisations active in this space in our workshops, Summer Schools, and Training Academies. Groups that we heard from at these events included the Center for Democracy and Technology, Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), European Digital Rights (EDRI), and Global Voices. With respect to research, our second official report, *Check the Web: Assessing the Ethics and Politics of Policing the Internet for Extremist Material* (2015), explored the types of monitoring and blocking then being undertaken by government agencies and the private sector. We followed up in 2017 with a workshop on 'Countering Violent Extremism Online and the Impact on Civil Liberties,' which was co-hosted by the Berkman Klein Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University and took place at Harvard Law School. We have also cross-posted Blog entries by a variety of organisations championing freedom of speech online, including multiple posts by the EFF and Open Rights Group.

At the macro level, we made an ethical commitment from the outset not just to focus on IS and violent jihadi online activity, but to pay attention to other varieties of extremism and terrorism, including particularly the extreme right. This included ground-breaking work on YouTube's recommender system's role in extreme right radicalisation processes and equal attention to IS and extreme right online activity in our annual *Year in Review* reports, during a period when very little attention was being paid to any other than IS's online activity.

Having said all this, the majority of effort under this heading went into our work on the practical ethics-related issues arising on a day-to-day basis for online extremism and terrorism researchers. In terms of events, this included a co-hosted—with Swansea University—workshop on 'Ethics in Online Terrorism Research' in April 2018; a post-conference ethics workshop following our August 2018 Amsterdam conference; and a very well received session on ethics at our 2019 Summer School. We have also published a report entitled *Reconciling Impact and Ethics: An Ethnography of Research in Violent Online Political Extremism* (2019) and are contributing an article entitled 'Researching Online Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Ethics Issues' to a forthcoming special issue of *Terrorism and Political Violence*. VOX-Pol is also a part of the TASM-sponsored REASSURE project, which is focused on the welfare of online extremism and terrorism researchers. Finally, the currently under construction 'Researcher Resources' page of our website will contain links to resources on internet research ethics and researcher well-being.

1.1.5. Influence Research and Policy Agendas

Since its establishment, VOX-Pol has played a crucial role in shaping the research agenda in our field. We have produced influential research on a variety of topics that was then built upon by others; these include the role of YouTube's recommender system in online radicalisation processes, live streaming of terrorism, the role of gender in online extremism and terrorism, disruption by major social media companies of terrorist activity on their platforms, the shape of the contemporary online alt-right, and experimentation in online radicalisation research. Our Coordinator, Prof. Maura Conway's, VOX-Pol-funded article 'Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research' (2016) is not only *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism's* fourth most

read article ever, but has been very influential in our field in terms of others seeking to follow her 'six suggestions.'

VOX-Pol has played an important role in the European policy agenda in our area via, most obviously, our participation in the EU Internet Forum (EUIF). We were engaged with the EUIF, the EU's flagship process for dealing with hate and terrorism online, almost from its establishment in December 2015. We were invited to prepare a report on *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online: The Year in Review* for 2016, 2017, and 2018, which were circulated to member state, Internet company, and other representatives at the EUIF's annual ministerial-level plenary, which our Coordinator also attended and delivered prepared remarks at. Discussions at the EUIF fed directly into the EU's Directive on Combating Terrorism Content Online. We also worked closely with DG Home on other EUIF-related issues, including European extreme right online activity and the Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP).

As regards the global policy stage, VOX-Pol's research has been consumed by policymakers from countries worldwide. Representatives from government departments from countries globally have also attended at our events, including the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, and the US State Department. Other transnational bodies that we have engaged with include the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, the UN Security Council Counter-terrorism Committee (UNCTED), and Tech Against Terrorism, of which we are a board member.

1.1.6. Overall Project Summing-up and Next Steps

Over the course of the last six years we engaged, whether face-to-face or via the Internet, with thousands of researchers, policymakers, security practitioners, Internet companies, civil society groups, and others from around the world. Our research appeared as books, book chapters, journal articles, reports, Blog posts, and podcasts. It was widely cited by colleagues and was referred to in a diverse array of major media outlets. By the formal end of project funding, VOX-Pol had become recognised as a world leading 'centre' for the study of online extremism and terrorism.

It is hoped that the completion of our EU funding cycle will not result in the end of VOX-Pol. We are currently in discussion with UK colleagues to ensure its continuance; we envisage putting this transfer of leadership on a more formal footing by September 2020.