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Gardai trial system to detect extremist recruitment in online gaming

An AI tool developed at Trinity College Dublin can identify and intercept radicalisation attempts in real time across digital platforms

John Mooney
Saturday March 28 2026, 10:00pm GMT, The Sunday Times

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A European-funded project led by Trinity College Dublin (TCD) working in conjunction with gards has developed an AI system called the Watchtower platform to detect extremism within the diverse world of gaming, which is expected to be used by law enforcement agencies across the world.

The tool was developed by the Gesta (Gaming Ecosystem as a Multilayered Security Threat) project at TCD, which brings together experts from various sectors to tackle extremist recruitment on gaming, video streaming services and online forums.

Watchtower is designed to assist law enforcement analysts in monitoring public online chat platforms such as YouTube Live, Twitch, Reddit, Discord and certain gaming chats.

The system is currently being tested and refined in operational conditions with Irish and other European law enforcement partners, including regular live monitoring of public Twitch streams. A dedicated hands-on workshop with Gards Headquarters is scheduled in the coming weeks so officers can evaluate the tool directly on real-world public data.

Professor Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic, a principal investigator on the GEMS project, said Watchtower was capable of recognising extremist presence in the gaming ecosystem and intercepting recruitment attempts in real-time.

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Professor Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic.

"We don't see direct radicalisation in gaming, but we see an environment of toxicity, homophobia and misogynism," she said.

The academic said gaming platforms provided an avenue for "off-ramping" to other online spaces where the environment can be toxic.

Gaming websites have become the unlikely location for recruitment into violent extremist groups. Some of the world's most popular video games such as Minecraft are being used as recruitment tools by the far right to radicalise children.

Neo-Nazis use Minecraft, a game famed for its creativity, to depict Jewish people being burned alive at concentration camps, according to a report by the Royal United Services Institute last year.

Although the majority of platforms enforce strict moderation rules, there are weaknesses in many systems.

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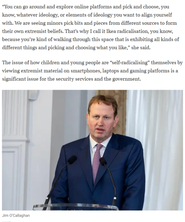
Halilovic-Pastuovic said the process of radicalisation was complex. Young people, she explained, in the modern era, often adopted a salad bar approach to violent ideologies.

"You can go around and explore online platforms and pick and choose, you know, whatever ideology, or elements of ideology you want to align yourself with. We are seeing minors pick bits and pieces from different sources to form their own extremist beliefs. That's why I call it Beta radicalisation, you know, because you're kind of walking through this space that is exhibiting all kinds of different things and picking and choosing what you like," she said.

The issue of how children and young people are "self-radicalising" themselves by viewing extremist material on smartphones, laptops and gaming platforms is a significant issue for the security services and the government.


Jim O'Callaghan
ALAMY

Jim O'Callaghan, the justice minister, yesterday said the proliferation of harmful material online and the echo chamber effect that can be created by digital algorithms was a sinister contemporary problem, which requires a whole of government and societal response.

"I am concerned about the emerging trend across the EU of young people in particular 'self-radicalising' online through repeated exposure to and engagement with harmful and extreme material online. I am briefed regularly by the gards commissioner on the work of An Garda Síochana in keeping such threats and trends relating to radicalisation, extremism and terrorism under constant and active review. Their work in respect of countering these threats is part of the wider government response for addressing it," he said.

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While the state has decades of experience monitoring violent republicanism and paramilitarism, new and evolving forms of violent ideologies now represent a new type of threat.

Experts say the internet is effectively dissolving the barriers of entry into violent organisations. In bygone years, people were radicalised by their close proximity to people who harboured extremist views, but now they can be influenced by what they see and hear on the internet in the privacy of their bedroom.

The process is likely to be turbo-charged by algorithms and generative AI.

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"This problem is likely to worsen in the coming years. We are seeing evidence coming from the UK that shows kids as young as 13 years old being radicalised by right-wing extremists online," said Dr Kevin Sweeney of University College Cork.

"And we still don't have a policy in this country to identify and help people who are at risk of being radicalised. The only response as things stand is a criminal justice response as opposed to harm reduction," he added.

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The problem is deeply complex as teenagers and young people, who have been exposed to extremist material online, can and do commit serious crimes. Young people with mental health difficulties are especially vulnerable.

Moign Khawaja, an expert in counterterrorism at Dublin City University, said extremist groups were always adapting and looking for new ways to attract supporters. "Only a small number of people get radicalised by watching online material but there's always was a danger that one attack can prompt other attacks even though they serve no purpose," he said.

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Maja Halilovic-Pastuovic

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