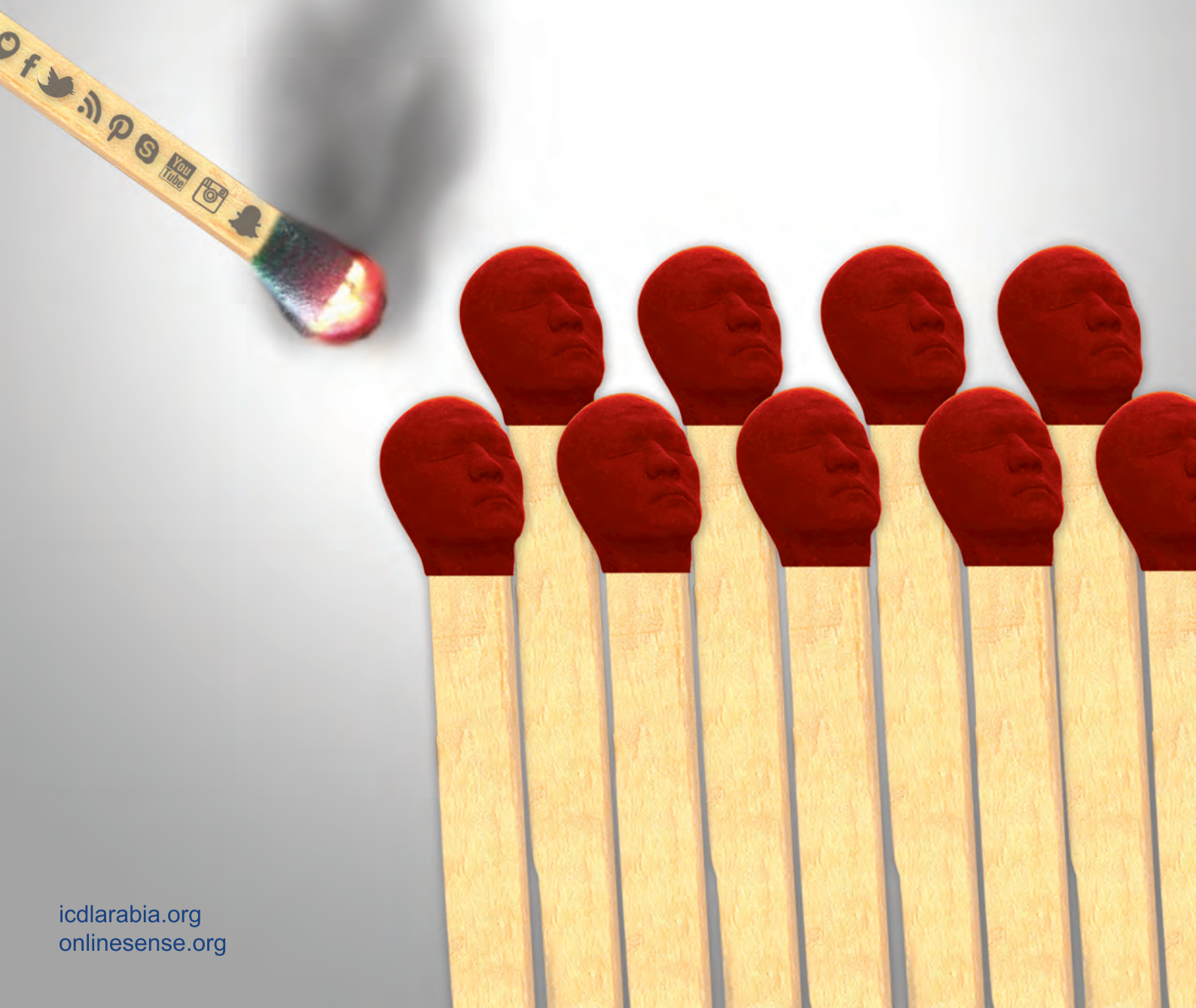
ICDL Arabia

Social Media: Influencing Young Minds

Research by ICDL Arabia 2015/2016



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Introduction

The internet has profoundly changed the way in which we communicate. The ability to connect and interact with people, regardless of geographical borders has immense benefits and will continue to drive progress in every area of life. In fact, the internet – particularly social media – is being used in ways that people never would have imagined when it began. Concepts that were thought could only take place in the real world are now integrated with the virtual world due to the vibrant, active creativity of virtual communities.

Whilst this should be applauded, it must also be acknowledged that a platform which facilitates such widespread reach for communication and ideas, would also offer negative ideologies the same benefits.

The use of social media platforms enables an exchange of ideas, promotion of causes and an expansion of networks through its advanced connectivity. Radical groups use the internet for the same reasons, however, often use more subversive tactics to achieve their aim.

Most people embrace social media platforms to engage with friends and family and network with like-minded people. Radicals however, use the platforms in order to promote very specific, narrow-minded, extremist ideas to as many people as possible. What is even more alarming is that they use their propaganda to 'groom' young people and gain their trust with the aim of getting them to join their cause often by promising an escape from domestic frustrations.

This disturbing trend will continue, and as a result, countering online radicalisation should become a major priority for all stakeholders that are entrusted with protecting our youth.

The purpose of this report is to equip policymakers, educators and parents with a better understanding of how the internet – particularly social media – facilitates and accelerates radicalisation, and how it will continue to impact young people within the GCC region if this issue is neglected.

It will investigate to what extent:

1) Youth access the internet and social media
2) Online radical groups exploit children
3) Policymakers, teachers and parents can help prevent online radicalisation

Study Methodology

ICDL Arabia commissions an annual cross sectional study using participants of its Summer Camps in the UAE as well as secondary school students throughout the GCC region. A survey, consisting of 25 multiple-choice questions designed by ICDL Arabia, was distributed to students aged range 12 to 18 in an effort to learn more about their personal experiences while using social media.

Respondents were assured that their identities shall remain confidential and were supervised by an ICDL Arabia quality assurance team as well as certified trainers for the purposes of clarifying questions.

The surveys were administered to the UAE's Summer Camp participants during August 2015, and GCC schools during the first quarter of 2016.

Key Findings at a Glance

Safety Online

- 81% believe that they are safe online.
- 56% do not make all their social media profiles private.

Risky Behaviour by Youth

- 31% have accepted WhatsApp requests or other IM messages from people they do not know personally.
- 23% have been asked to send pictures and/or personal information to someone they met online.
- Over 23% have agreed to meet someone face to face that they only met online.
- 65% have shared a password with a friend or family member.
- 37% have come across something worrying or upsetting online.
- 63% know all their social media connections personally.

Preparedness of Schools

- 42% of students do not feel confident that their school is prepared to help them if they face a problem online.
- 56% of students received lessons or partook in cyber safety discussions in school.
- 56% of students have access to a guidance counsellor if they face problems online.

Awareness of Parents

- 27% of teenagers' parents are unaware of all their social media accounts.
- 29% of parents do not monitor their children's use of the internet at all.
- Over 25% of parents do not talk to their kids about how to stay safe online.
- Only 63% of teenagers know all of their social media connections personally.

Definitions

- **Dark Net:** The network of websites within the Deep Web that are accessed via special routers and which often contain extremist or illegal information, marketplaces and chat forums.

- **Deep Web:** A term that describes the websites hosted on networks that you cannot access with a regular internet connection without using specific software, configuration and/or authorisation. These sites are not indexed by Google and other search engines.

- **Digital Literacy:** The ability to use information and technology to find, evaluate, create and communicate information online.

- **Dynamic Web Page:** A web page that can display different information to different viewers which can vary by language, geo-location and/or browser being viewed, from the same source code.

- **Extremism:** Political, social or religious ideologies that oppose a society's mainstream core values and principles.

- **GCC Countries:** The GCC member states include: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

- **Lone Wolf:** A person inspired by an ideology – as opposed to being a formal part of any radicalised group, organisation or network – and decides to independently carry out a real-life attack in the name of that ideology.

- **MENA:** Geographical region covering the Middle East and North Africa.

- **Online Predator:** Any person (male or female) using the internet for the express purpose of targeting a minor for child exploitation.

- **Onion Routing:** A technique for anonymous communication over a computer network that repeatedly encrypts data and sends it through multiple network nodes. The process is comparable to peeling an onion, each node removes a layer of encryption uncovering routing instructions for the following layer. Used for accessing sites on the Dark Net.

- **Radicalisation:** The process whereby individuals or groups come to approve and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political or social or religious aims.

- **Static Web Page:** A web page that is delivered to the user exactly as stored, and contains the same information for all users.

- **Tor Network:** One of the most popular browsers used to access the Deep Web/Dark Net.

• **User-generated Content:** Published information that an unpaid contributor has provided to a website; it comes in a variety of forms, including (but not limited to): blogs, discussion forums, social media posts, chats, tweets, podcasts, digital images, videos, audio files and other forms of media.

• **Web 2.0:** (two point oh) A term used to describe a second generation of the internet which focuses on the ability for people to collaborate and independently share information online; this is characterised by the change from static web pages to interactive dynamic web pages with user-generated content and social media.

Disclaimer

Radicalisation is all relative to the topic at hand. It is always important to ask the question, “This piece of content is radical or extreme in relation to what?” The term is very dependent on the context from which the ideas are presented.

For the purposes of this report, radicalisation is in relation to what the majority of the MENA region consider mainstream at a given point in time.

Why is social media so powerful?

Today's youth, having only experienced life with access to the internet, have no idea of the dangers that it can possess. Internet penetration rates continue to rise in every GCC country, with Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE having penetration rates of over 90%.(1) Social media, in particular, has become almost synonymous with internet usage. In fact, according to Middle East Media, 95% of all internet users use social media or direct messaging with eight in ten people using social media on a daily basis; seven out of ten using it multiple times a day.(2)

Social media platforms dominate the internet to the point where everyone has multiple social media accounts. Each platform has a different purpose, information medium and demographic, necessitating in most people having multiple accounts in order to maximise gathering and sharing information and networking. Time spent on each platform is determined by their perception of that network identity or culture.

This is no different from how teens use social media. With a myriad of platforms to choose from, young people's choice of platform continuously evolves. According to several studies, many teens around the world have migrated from the platforms where their parents have a presence, like Facebook and Twitter to newer platforms that are perceived to be more 'safe' such as WhatsApp or Snapchat. In essence, they can exchange views and information with their friends without parental censorship. Most parents have not adopted these new platforms, or if they have, they visit less frequently.

According to ICDL Arabia's survey, the most popular social networks among the youth in the GCC are WhatsApp (74.5%), Instagram (70.3%), YouTube (65.2%), and Snapchat (60.9%). Only 45.8% said they are active on Facebook and only 27.0% said the same for Twitter.

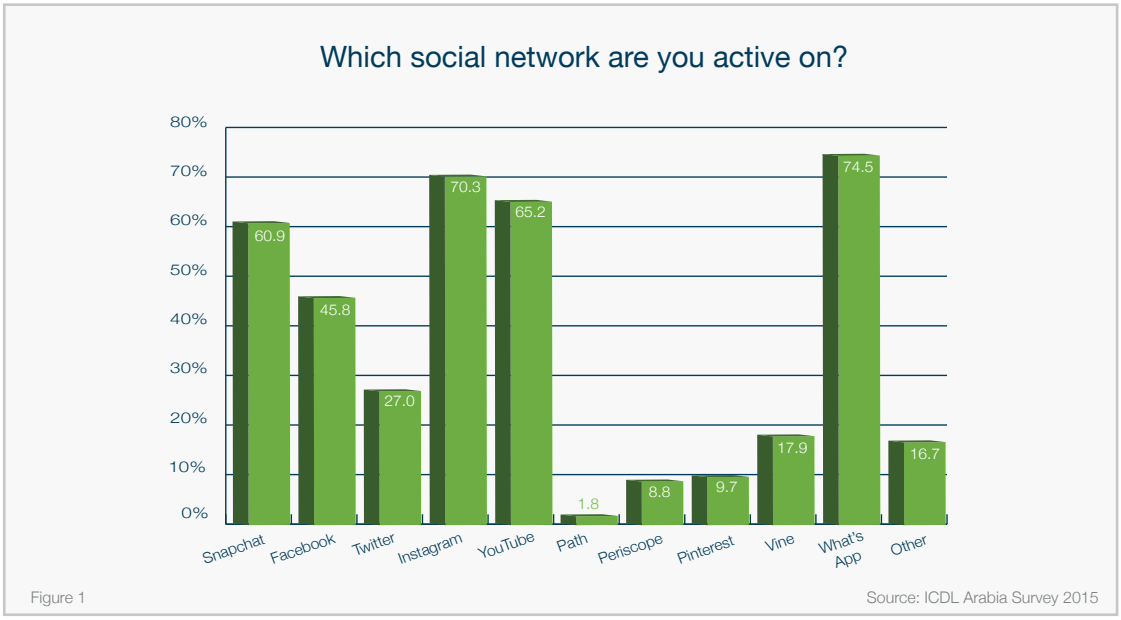

Figure 1

Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

In addition to this, having such a fluency with social media has meant that it is inevitable that youth feel unrestricted by geographical borders, and have no concerns about communicating with their social media 'friends' that are unknown to them both locally, or globally. They feel that they are safe and protected in their virtual world and are naïve in their trust of others. The ICDL Arabia survey correlates this with 81% responding that they felt 'safe' online.

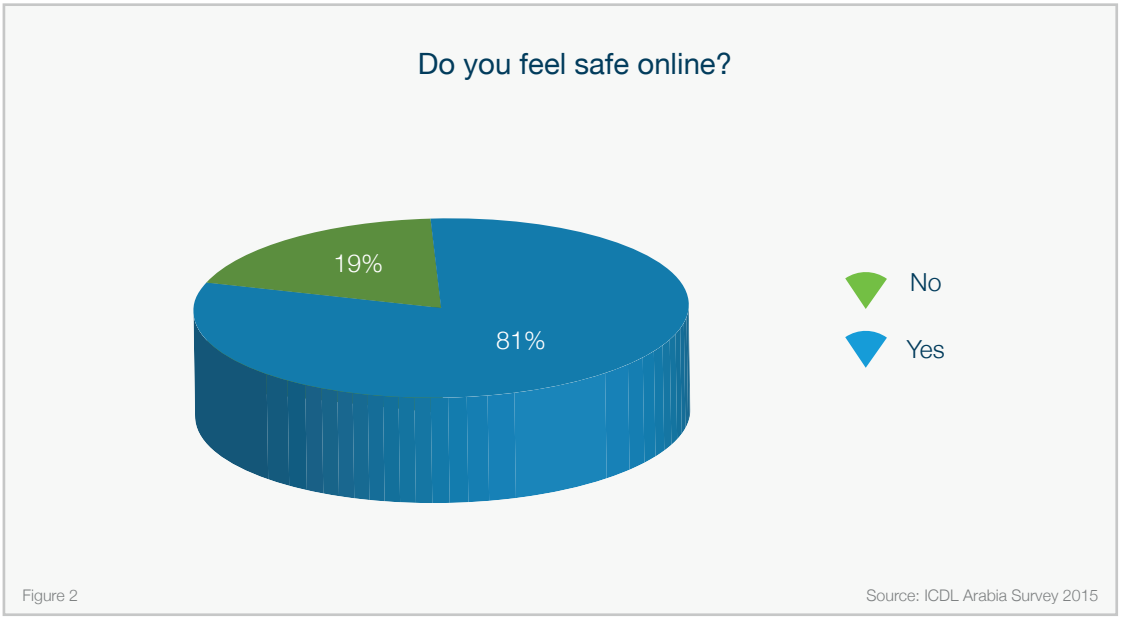

Figure 2 Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

Social media can be addictive. For youth especially, checking social media status updates, texting and communicating with peers is often a constant activity, due in part to their increased accessibility to smartphones combined with 24/7 internet connection. These young social media users are constantly bombarded with information; social media channels. However, often integrate with each other, allowing a user's post or status update on one network to be automatically updated on many other networks simultaneously, creating a domino effect, which can accelerate influence, attitudes and behaviours globally.

Given that social media increases user awareness, connects a multitude of users at a global level, and disseminates information to those users quickly and efficiently, it should come as no surprise that it would be embraced by extremists looking to achieve the same for their radical views.

How does social media provide the perfect platform for a radical voice?

Online communities are not just created for the sake of generating support from people who already have the same beliefs and values. Social media networks offer online radicals the ability to directly communicate with minors who feel disenfranchised from their real-life communities, putting them in a vulnerable position to condone extremists' thoughts and actions. Commentators cite online spaces as a primary concern, noting how sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram function as 'radicalising milieus'.(3)

Social media posts are created across all platforms to present the idea that they can find a sense of belonging to a vibrant, virtual community where they will not feel judged but, instead, feel welcomed. Certain social media apps allow online radicals to reach out to adolescents in a more private setting. They can have one-on-one conversations with minors and groom their targets by making them believe that they can join their group and live a more fulfilling and exciting life.

These points create a very dangerous combination, as it evident that extremists' recruitment strategies can be very multifaceted. They can use radical interpretations of religion, politics or any group of people to polarise young minds. To quote Saul Alinsky's last rule in his book, Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals, radicals "Pick the target […] personalise it, and polarise it."(4) In other words, online radicals attempt to cut off adolescents' support network and isolate them from any sympathy they can get from family, friends, or institutions.

Thus, as discussed by Stevens and Neumann, instead of thinking about the role of the internet and, in particular, the accessibility of radicalizing content on social media sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Instagram, in terms of direct effects, it is perhaps more useful to think of the ways in which online radical milieus normalize political violence through messages that promote pro-terrorist ideology to audiences who may be susceptible.(5)

As all of these thoughts about online radicalisation resonate with us, it begs us to really ask the question, "How safe are adolescents when they use social media?" This is precisely why it is vital for people within the MENA region to be aware of these online threats, understand how and why they are happening, and find how to prevent them from happening to teenagers within our communities as much as possible.

In fact in January 2009, the Director General of the Security Services (MI5) told reporters that 'terrorist's use of the internet as an instrument for grooming vulnerable children was one of his organisation's main concerns'.(6)

What are the origins of online radicalisation

Online radicalisation is not a recent concept, but in fact has origins as early as 1983 when the first website was created by 'Aryan Nations' in order to create a network allowing their community members to interact with each other and pool resources among those committed to furthering the cause.(7)

Little did anyone know that "linking together" would change the entire movement's dynamic. Regardless of what the organisation's intentions were, young people with similar values and opinions flocked to the network. Eventually, the majority of users on the platform were not people committed to the cause. They were young, naïve impressionable people fallen to the organisation's propaganda.

Soon thereafter, others with radical beliefs embraced the idea of being online and created websites of their own, in order to provide an alternative platform to post about controversial issues and news items that mainstream media would not cover. Eventually, several radical websites generated a huge following.

As a result, virtual communities created both a space in which extremist behaviours were displayed as well as platforms in which young people would rely on content and be influenced by extremists beliefs and values. The internet enabled young individuals to explore their identity in unprecedented ways. Not only were they able to share ideas with people they did not interact with on a face-to-face basis, but they could also establish identities online that would have normally remained hidden because of societal disapproval. Because people had the privilege of posting anonymously, they could say freely what they wanted without feeling isolated, while gaining emotional and motivational support in the process.

According to the ICDL Arabia survey, 56% of youths did not make all of their social media profiles private, additionally, 18% did not make any social media profiles private, opening them up to attention from would be 'groomers' whose role is to seek out recruits for online radicalisation.

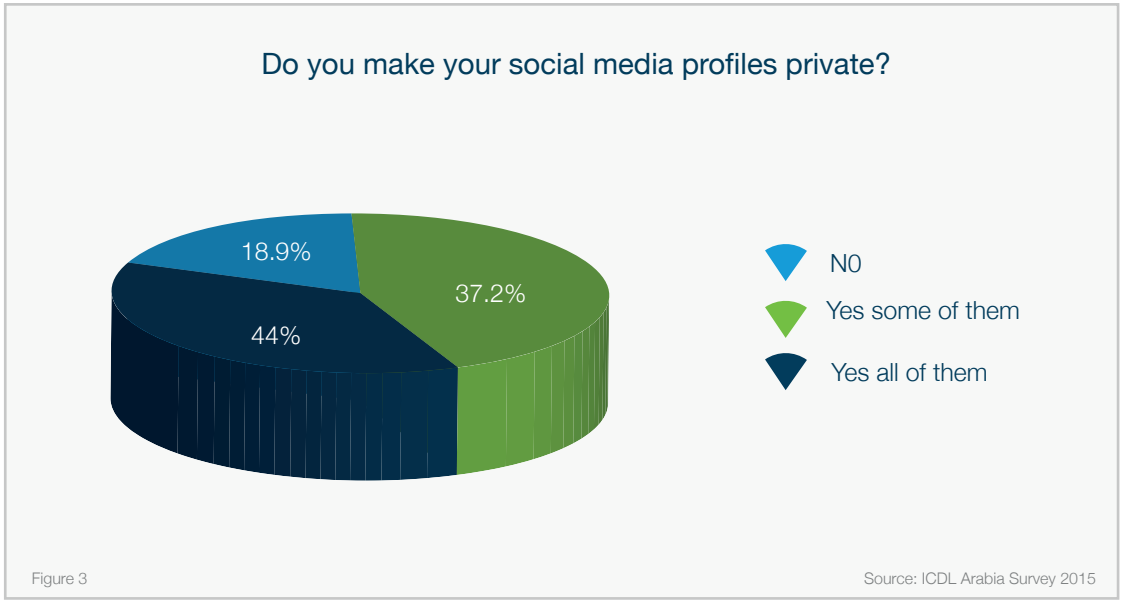

Figure 3

Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

How Online Radicals Target Our Youth?

Who's most at risk?

In the GCC, there used to be certain stereotypes attached to the term 'extremist'. To name a few: uneducated, financially disadvantaged, local, adult and male. The traditional assumption by academics, policymakers, analysts and the general population is that extremism – and eventually terrorism – comes from the fringes within communities. However in recent times, the world has come across stories about how social networks have broken those stereotypes and are now more often educated, rich, expatriate, young teenager, female. Because people can now be a part of an enormous, vibrant, active virtual community on social media, online radicalisation is turning around a few long-held social assumptions.

Many reports have been published on the new demographics of radicals recruited online, particularly from Western nations. One report by New America found that one in seven militants in Syria and Iraq are women and young girls, and their average age is 21; the youngest is 15. Also, nearly one-third of all foreign fighters in the data were active in online extremist communities.(8) Another report by the Council of Europe stated that the proportion of women and young girls who travel to Iraq and Syria now represents 40% in some countries.(9)

That said, there are reasons why teenagers and young adults in particular are at risk of being radicalised apart from simply having access to the internet.

In most cases, a teen who is subject to online radicalisation almost always feels like he/she is in a minority who is disenfranchised, or suffering an identity crisis and does not feel fully accepted by their own community or society.

As former extremist and undercover informant Mubin Shaikh explained in an interview, young teens in certain countries are trying to navigate through non-Islamic culture and continuously ask the questions, "How Muslim am I supposed to be?" and "How much will that contradict with [my identity with another culture]?" In the context of the GCC, some teens appear to turn to Islam as a 'badge of cultural identity' and are then radicalised by extremist clerics.(10)

In the Middle East, unemployment and the lack of opportunities for youth appear to be major factors driving young people to extremism. Add to this the sectarian divide which is increasing in many Arab countries, and it creates a young mind ripe for picking as a target for online radicalisation.

But another important reason is that they are also digitally naïve. Although they are thought of as digital natives, growing up with social media throughout their entire lives, they are still digitally naïve in the sense that they do not know who to trust and who not to trust. For instance, two young women from Tunisia on Facebook (19 and 21 years old) were lured by the fantasy of providing humanitarian aid in Syria.(11)

Earlier it was shown that 81% of youth in the survey believe that they are safe online. Combine that with the fact that 31.2% (all the time + often + sometimes) of this report those same respondents have accepted WhatsApp or other IM messages from people they do not know personally.

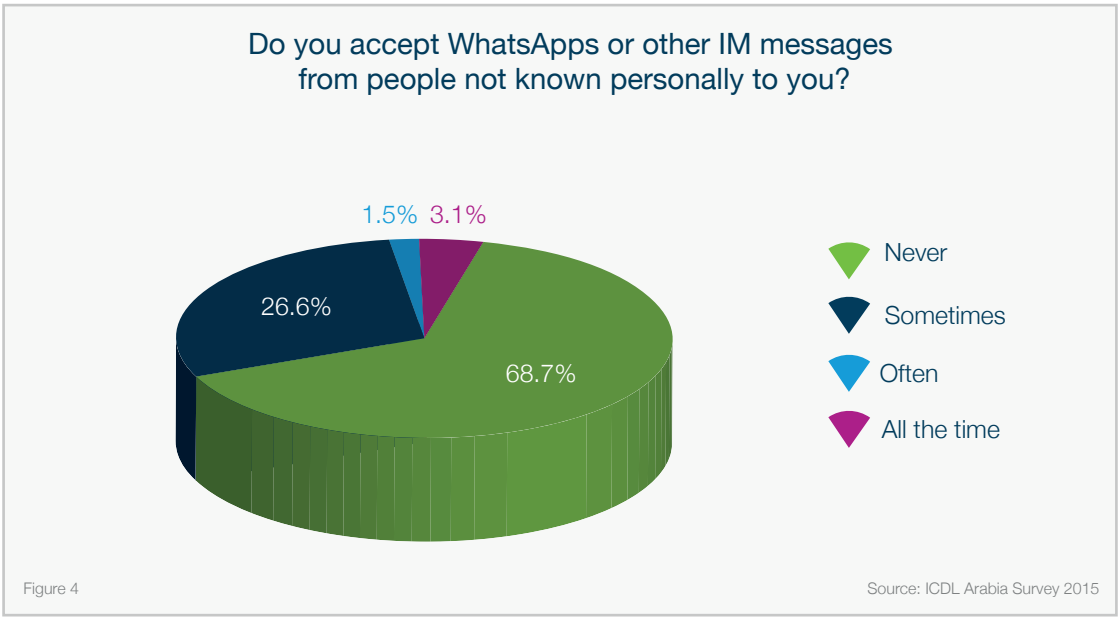

Figure 4 Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

Along with that, this year's ICDL Arabia survey also calculates that 23% of teens have been asked to send pictures and/or personal information to someone they met online. According to FBI statistics, 46% of 10 to 17 year-olds admit to giving personal information to someone they do not know.(12) What's worse is that it actually increases with age: the number increases to 56% if you only count 16 and 17-year-olds.

How does online radicalisation work?

Studies have shown that it takes more than a single item of extremist propaganda to transform young people into extremists. Rather, in most cases, online radicalisation results from individuals being immersed in communication with online extremists for extended periods of time. As discussed earlier, teenagers spend most of their time on emerging mobile applications and instant-messaging systems like WhatsApp and Snapchat.

These messaging apps can allow young people to spend more private time with complete strangers, potentially creating stronger bonds. They are used as peer-to-peer networking systems to share sensitive information privately. At the final stages of radicalisation, this can even include procedures for travel, what to pack, and who to contact when they arrive. Of course, Snapchat and WhatsApp are not the only messaging apps being used. There have been reported cases of other messaging apps like Kik(13) and Telegram(14) used as well. As more people become aware of the apps, new ones will be used.

When teens talk online with extremists for extended periods of time, they are often given content to consume. This includes images, videos, and even reading material like online magazines, to learn more about a radical group's mission. For example, *Inspire magazine* (15) is a resource targeted towards English speakers. Based on the front cover (shown in figure 5) nothing appears to be alarming. However, you will find some very disturbing articles that express radical viewpoints.

Figure 5

Graphic content will likely not be shown to a teen at first. The 'groomer' needs to ensure that the 'target' has been isolated and also that they have their victims' full trust that they will not disclose this radical information or raise alarm bells within their support system or raise alarm bells as this online bond, such as a parent, a teacher, or the police.

Once this trust is gained, they may share powerful and emotionally arousing incidents in video or image format that rhetorically 'show what opposing forces are doing' to locals in the MENA region. This induces a polarising effect and a sense of moral outrage, which triggers an effect in teenagers who identify with the victims of these atrocities. Furthermore, it gives them a skewed sense of reality in that they no longer find these extremist attitudes taboo; instead they are perceived as justifiable, and even desirable.

> Within minutes after it is published, the people exposed to that content will not only have access to it, but they also have the ability to re-post it in even more places, making it even more difficult for governments to regulate.

The extent of this content also has a profound effect on impressionable teens. Typically, when a piece of online content is released – be it an eMagazine, a YouTube video or a blog post – there is not just one place where one can access, download or watch that piece of content. The promotional content is simultaneously published in dozens of places. Within minutes after it is published, the people exposed to that content will not only have access to it, but they also have the ability to re-post it in even more places, making it even more difficult for governments to regulate especially as these places also include websites on the 'Deep Web'. Furthermore, the original user perpetrator can re-upload the content multiple times using 'dummy accounts'.

What strategies are used for radicalisation?

Although online radicalisation is on the rise, there continues to be little evidence to support the contention that the internet plays a dominant role in the process of self-radicalisation. Very rarely does someone of any age go online and become an online radical after reading a few articles or watching a few videos about the subject. The minority that do self-radicalise without human intervention are known as 'Lone Wolves'.

The reason for the absence of self-radicalisation and self-recruitment online is that virtual-world social relationships are becoming just as pivotal as the ones in the real world. Similar to any other form of social networking, human connection continues to be an important factor, because the very core of maintaining and strengthening one's beliefs is through constant communication and networking with people who have similar extremist beliefs.

A tactic that is often used by extremist groups is to attempt to 'normalise' their organisation by posting content which is aligned with the interest or content that minors are posting themselves. For instance, on Instagram, a female representative of an extremist group posted a photo of her eating Chinese takeout food.(16)

Radical groups have also done well with using subversive computer techniques. When uploading YouTube videos, for example, online radicals are manipulating Meta tags, which are the pieces of text that computers read and categorise or describe the video or page. They change the tags of their extremist content to make it seem as if the content is about a trending topic or content that teens are searching for, thereby gaining exposure and the ability to spread their propaganda.

Another method used especially on social media platforms is by hijacking hashtags (#), which are the specific and (more well-known) Meta tags that are visible on social media websites. People have the ability to search for content based on their interests by using specific hashtags. Radical groups have taken advantage of this by falsely adding popular hashtags to radical content. For example, on Twitter, online extremist groups have projected their imagery into popular hashtags like the #2014WorldCup hashtag(17) and, more recently, the #JustinBieber hashtag in 2016.(18) These radicals seek out what is popular at the time and also in the location, and they use multi-lingual hashtags too as they adopt these strategies in English, Arabic and other languages.

Figure 6 Source: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast

These tactics are extremely dangerous, as this data can lure the youth without an adult even knowing how or when their children came across such content. Children navigate quickly on social media, and if they are not conscious of how people can hijack metadata and the fact that they do not read the title and description of the video before clicking on it, there could be some serious consequences.

It was discussed earlier that, there is nothing new about extremist groups using social media, nor is there anything innovative about how they are using it. Like everyone else, they are simply using the internet to share their ideologies, raise awareness about events, search for information and connect and communicate with like-minded individuals. What makes them different from the general online public is not how they use the internet, but rather it is their distinctive purpose for which they use social media.

Where else do teens get extremist content?

The visible web, or surface web is the internet we are all familiar with and which contains all the websites and platforms that are indexed through standard search engines, such as Google. However, this only makes up around 4% of the World Wide Web.

Underneath the 1 trillion+ pages a teenager can find on the surface web, lies an excessive amount of content in the 'Deep Web' which is not indexed by the regular search engines. It contains information locked by libraries or databases, and has many uses such as web mail, online banking etc.

However, within the 'Deep Web', lies an overlay network of about 50,000 websites that require specific browsers by which to access. This network is referred to as the Dark Net. The content posted here is often illegal and extreme. Its most frequent users include criminals, extremists and anyone who wants to post illegal content for people to see which includes pornography, drugs for sale and of course extreme content used in online radicalisation.

These websites are accessed by using The Onion Router (TOR). To provide a quick explanation of the onion router, it is the technique for anonymous communication where messages are encapsulated in layers of encryption and passed through numerous 'nodes' before the message being delivered. The sender remains anonymous as each receiver only knows the preceding and following node. Sites on the dark net are suffixed with .onion, in the same way that sites on the surface web are suffixed with, for example, .com and .org.

> This digital underworld allows online extremists to lure teenagers who innocently (or deliberately) befriend them to join these websites where they can interact with each other without being tracked by law enforcement.

These 'onion' sites also contain chat forums, blogs and marketplaces and it is this anonymous nature of the dark net sites that enables anyone to speak freely or purchase illegal goods without fear of legal repercussions.

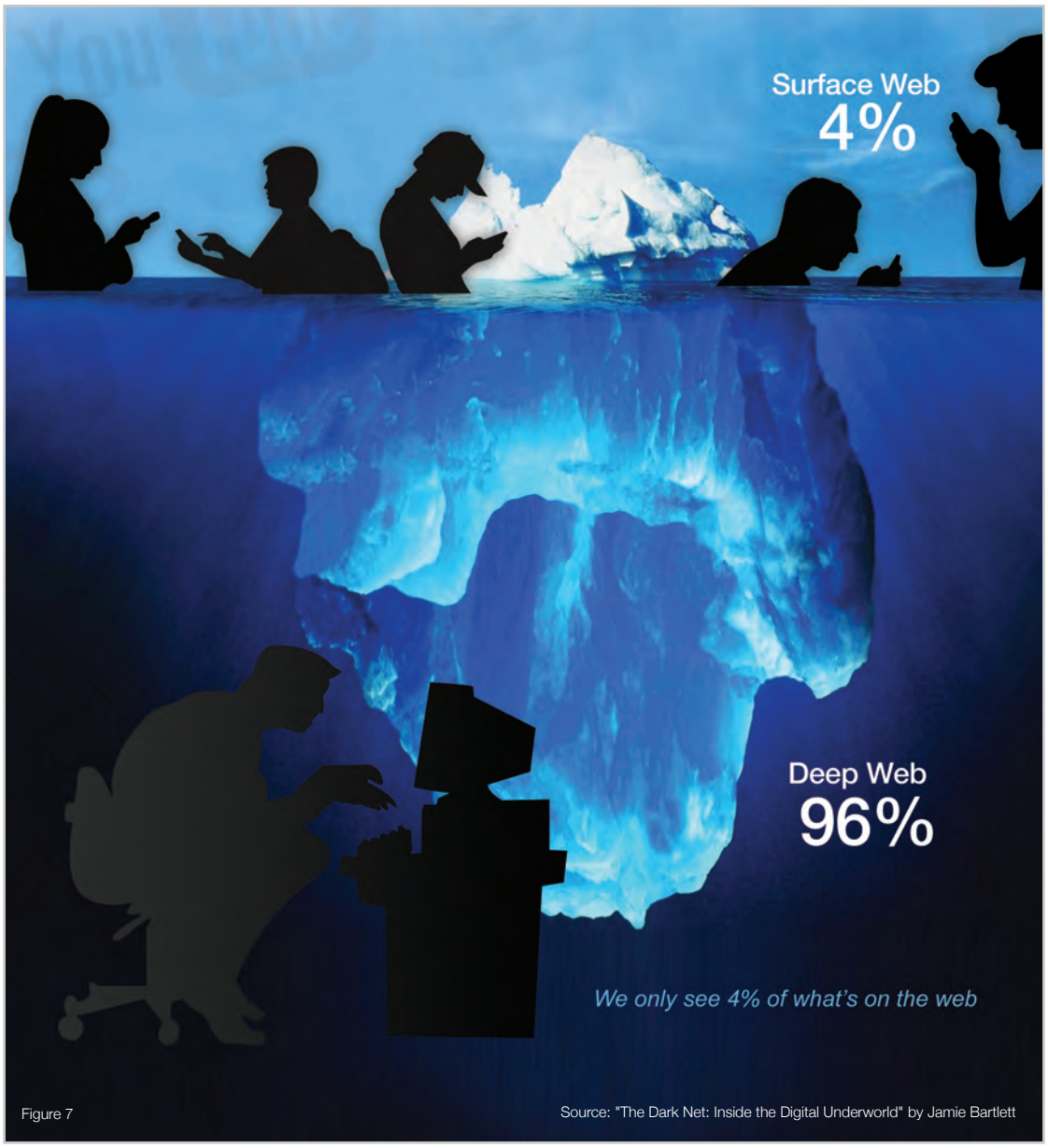

Figure 7

Source: "The Dark Net: Inside the Digital Underworld" by Jamie Bartlett

How is the world tackling Online Radicalisation?

Initially, some governments throughout the world thought that by simply blocking certain websites or attempting to remove content would go far in eradicating this online threat. But these negative measures do very little to stop extremists, rather the emphasis should not be on censorship, but on challenging and discrediting the extremist narratives.

Authorities can enlist the assistance of respected community leaders. Singapore, for example, has partnered with moderate imams to great effect. Singapore's Islamic Religious Council (MUIS) has developed websites for youth, to include a site that responds to religious queries and a site devoted to rebutting extremist ideologies (19)

There have been some small efforts being made to limit the supply of online extremist content through social media platforms. Several of the major platforms have worked with governments and non-profit organisations dedicated to enhancing cyber safety for children with some of the more established companies taking action to devote a significant amount of resources to 'moderating' user-generated content.

Although they are striving towards the same goal of reducing offensive content on their platform, each company has a different perspective on how to do this. For example, Twitter recently launched a 'Trust & Safety Council' in February 2016 dedicated to monitoring content and making it easier for people to report information they feel inappropriate.(20) It is comprised of safety advocates, academic scholars, and researchers whose primary focus is to creating a greater tolerance, compassion and empathy on the internet.

Google (the parent company of YouTube and Google+) has argued that it would be impossible for the company to pre-screen all 400 hours of content uploaded onto YouTube every minute. Instead, YouTube re-structured and re-launched its Abuse and Safety Centre, making it easier for users to bring hateful content to the attention of the company's takedown team.(21) It updated its centre after forming a partnership with the Anti-Defamation League, which has trained members of its takedown team to understand the nature of hateful content and to distinguish among videos that are legitimate, or hateful and illegal.(22)

Nevertheless, it should be recognised that even with these efforts, it is virtually impossible to eliminate this large amount of extremist content from very large user-driven platforms. Furthermore, even if the content was removed the nature of sharing on these platforms means that any piece of content can potentially reach massive amounts of active social media users by the time it is blocked or taken down. Moreover the majority of violent extremist content is now embedded in privately owned platforms.

Figure 8 Source: From the Anti-Defamation League's YouTube video: "Imagine a World without Hate"

While efforts should be made to make technology and internet accessible and affordable to all, governments in the region may want to consider introducing a tax or surcharge on internet subscribers and allocate such funds to raise awareness among teacher parents and students.

These procedures operate on the principle that users police and shape their own online environments in conjunction with the platform providers. Although the vast majority of complaints are dealt with swiftly and positively these systems are imperfect in that – ultimately – users rely on internet companies' goodwill and have no recourse to an external body should companies fail to deal with complaints adequately, or do not respond at all.

Governments in the region may want to consider introducing a tax or surcharge on internet subscribers and allocate such funds to raise awareness.

As a result, the only option that seems available to users is to contact the authorities if they believe that such communications constitute harassment, online grooming, fraud or any other criminal offense online. However, reporting such a crime is something which some users most likely feel reluctant to do, unless it is threatening to people within their community. As an alternative, policymakers and government entities ought to play a more proactive role by conducting awareness campaigns or funding such activities in order to create opportunities for schools, communities and residents to provide customised information about how to counter online radicalisation.

Tech companies that have a presence in the GCC should also be encouraged to play an active role by publicising online safety and media literacy issues and providing adequate funding for online initiatives within the GCC dedicated to countering online radicalisation. They can ultimately capitalise on the goodwill of communities throughout the region who might be willing to invest time and commitment but need financial support in order to promote their positive ideas online and across different social media platforms.

What else needs to be done?

The first step to address the problem is to admit openly that the problem exists. Parents as well as schools rely heavily on the authorities to monitor and pursue wrongdoers. However it is vital that parents and teachers are aware of the online dangers to establish clear guidelines for children to follow while engaging in online activities and notify an adult when they encounter suspicious websites and / or communication.

The first step to address the problem is to admit openly that the problem exists.

Reduce appeal

Instead of taking negative measures such as attempting to eliminate extremist content, which only raises more curiosity encouraging kids to find means to access such content, Governments need to take a more balanced and sophisticated approach to protect children from illegal user-generated content: one that reduces the appeal for radicalisation and violent extremist messages. This can be done by discrediting, countering, and confronting extremist narratives and educating young people to question the messages they see online.

There are three main 'gaps' which have been identified as intensifying radicalisation of youth, and which if 'closed' could contribute to reducing appeal or demand:

1. **Enthusiasm Gap:** Social media and user-generated content have actually amplified extremist's voices and whether on major social media platforms, forums or private chat applications, extremists now seem to be everywhere. Their enthusiasm and energy are unmatched by the political mainstream and they are able to dominate discussions and convey the message that they are the majority. This amplification is making it easier to persuade minors that the extremist way is the 'normal' way.

2. **Skills Gap:** Young people are said to be digital natives that feel comfortable using information technology. However, they often lack the experience or skills to evaluate and contextualise online content – whether because some parents are intimidated by the online environment and take a hands-off approach or because schools are not teaching analytical skills sufficiently. According to this year's ICDL Arabia survey, 42% of students do not feel confident that their school is prepared to help them if they face an online problem, and over 25% of parents do not talk to their kids about how to stay safe online.

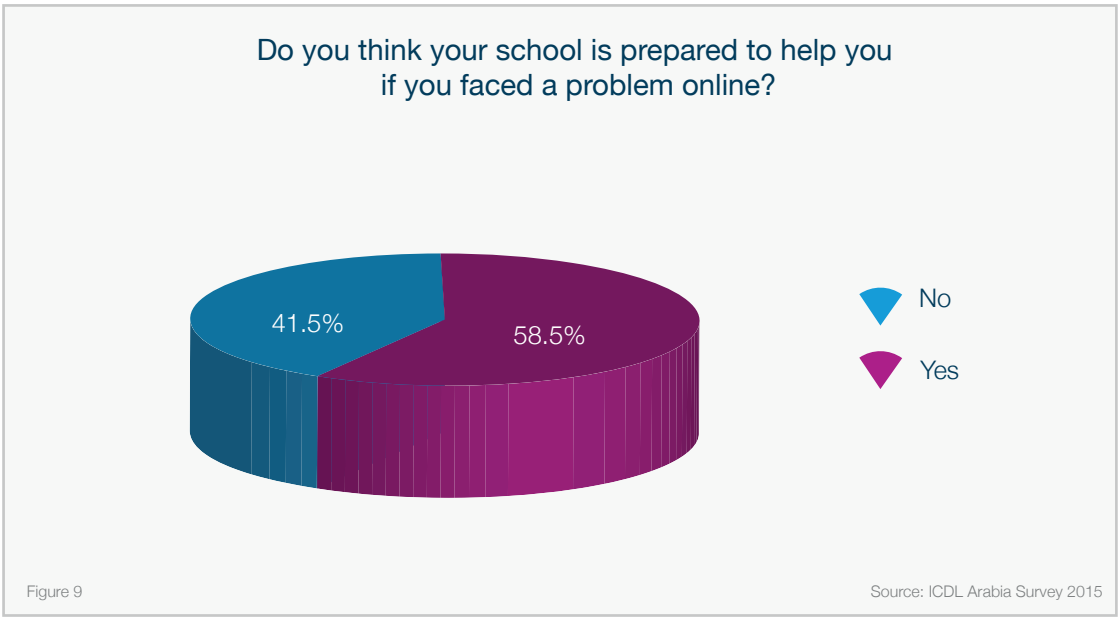

Figure 9

Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

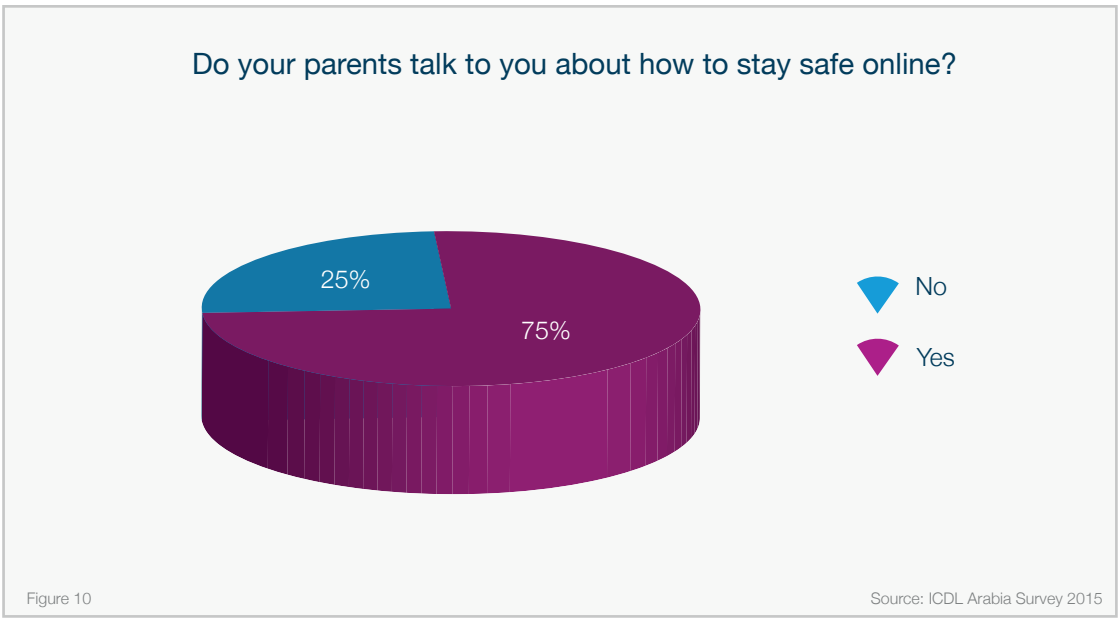

Figure 10

Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

3. **Polarisation Gap:** The traditional way that cyber safety pundits advise teenagers is to simply ignore messages from strangers, especially those who are dedicated to online radicalisation. However, many teens are looking for acceptance from a group or to be perceived in a favourable way, which has allowed radical groups to continue to generate more of a following, both in the virtual world and in the real world. Teens observe and evaluate the group values and then take a position that is similar to everyone else, but often a little more extreme. Because these 'echo chambers' exist, there are now virtual communities that share their views with one other without being challenged to think critically about their beliefs.

How can the 'Enthusiasm Gap' be closed?

Many institutions don't recognise the power of the online user, but studies show that many of the most successful instances of user-driven internet strategies have aimed to activate the collective wisdom and power of online communities. One primary method in how this is done is through crowdsourcing: obtaining ideas and content from large groups of online volunteers rather than employees. Rather than getting paid financially, they get rewarded with recognition for their contribution to the online knowledge base community they are part of.

Governmental and educational institutions can leverage internet and social media users to engage in sites that counter violent extremism and online radicalisation.(23) They can come together to discuss radicalisation issues, exchange best practise and experiences from different national contexts and agree on what has and has not worked.

Figure 11 Source: thedrum.com

An example of a social network that has provided an arena for moderate political discussion on these issues is Parlio. Founded in by the well-known Egyptian internet activist Wael Ghonim(24) along with his partners Osman Osman and Karim Fateem – this online community is committed to giving people a space for meaningful conversations within a civil and intellectual setting.

Governments and schools can invest in platforms such as Parlio in order to promote insightful discussions where responsible adults discuss how to protect adolescents online. Features such as the 'upvote feature' included on Parlio encourage online discussions on subjects that can empower adolescents in the long run. There is also the option of giving people the opportunity to 'follow' discussions and receive notifications when another user responds to the question.

Figure 12 Source: Parlio's online forum on de-radicalisation

Features such as these incentivise and empower people with good intentions to self-regulate webpages that tackle concepts like online extremism. Using these user-driven models, responsible adults will have the tools available to incorporate user-generated solutions fit for the Web 2.0 era. However, even with the introduction of this, the fact still remains that the battle against online radicalisation is not just about reducing the availability of extremist materials but also – and more importantly – about lessening their appeal.

Tacking the online problem offline

Tackling online radicalisation shouldn't only happen online. Obviously, the teenagers who are at risk of being exploited by radical ideas online also live life offline. They interact with their parents, fellow students, and friends; they go to school, attend community events and do all sorts of recreational activities.

In order to combat the efforts made by online radical groups, civic challenges need to be prevalent and educational and local communities need to know they exist. This means that governments need to partner with institutions, both within the public and private sectors. Giving community leaders, teachers and parents access to updated resources and promoting workshops can keep adults informed, engaged and help form a de-radicalisation movement.

Those responsible in schools (including teachers, principals and other administrators) play an important role in the offline world because they spend an immense amount of time planning what is important to be included in the curriculum and spending time with students. Moreover, families hold teachers accountable as they are trained to inform students about important matters in an educational setting. Including these topics in relevant lesson plans, holding student assemblies, parent-teacher conferences and counsellor sessions about social media and cyber safety are just a few ways schools can provide a safe environment for students to learn about how to protect themselves from being exploited by online radicals.

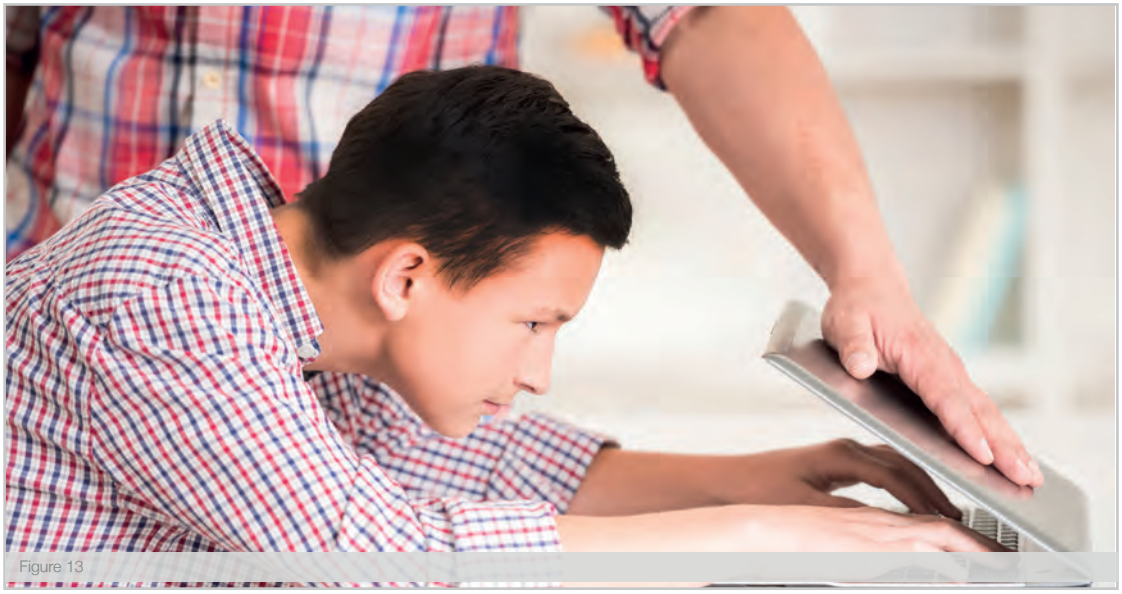

Figure 13

Parents also have to be proactive in their children's lives. Understanding that these issues are very real and happening today, and that this could be happening with their own child living in their own home or anywhere away from home with an internet connection is frightening to think about. Therefore, it is critical for parents to understand the issues, and then continuously engage in dialogue with their children about online safety issues.

Government-sponsored events and parent-teacher conferences focused on online radicalisation are considered an opportunity for parents to stay informed about what their children are learning. Actively engaging parents in those conversations enables them to reinforce through the family setting, what students learn in the classroom.

How can the Skills Gap be reduced?

The internet has given people an instant communication platform and has challenged traditional methods of who can produce, consume, and regulate content. Some of these developments are unquestionably positive. However, a challenge arises when there may be differences of opinion with the general public in determining what is considered offensive and/or extremist, particularly with regards to adolescents. These challenges might pertain to how information ought to be processed and evaluated.

In particular, the internet makes it far more difficult to assess the context, origins and credibility of information. Online radicals take advantage of this in their propaganda by providing reasoning that relates to their cause. So it can be said that in order to reduce the potential appeal of extremist messages, it is vital to strengthen the general public's ability to critically evaluate online content critically, especially when they are at a young age.

- **Broadening the Scope**

Most efforts around the world to promote media literacy have narrowly focused on issues related to child safety and online abuse. Online radicalisation is correlated with these issues, as well, so these initiatives can be expanded and applied for teenagers to understand how to protect themselves with the help of other stakeholders. These stakeholders includes parents, teachers, professors, internet companies and anyone who can contribute to strengthening media literacy as a means to counter online radicalisation.

Additionally, most activities in the fields of media literacy and 'child online safety' generally continue to be seen through the prism of strangers abusing children – despite the clear differences between the two problems. While the latter is mostly about protecting children from online predators in chat rooms and web forums, improving media literacy focusing on online extremism must be heightened as one of the more critical issues. In addition to teaching children to be cautious about whom they meet in chat rooms, they have to be equipped with the critical thinking skills to question and compare sources of information; engage in independent online research as well as evaluate text, audio and visual information.

- **The Role of Schools**

Although media literacy is not wholly a formal educational issue, it falls on schools to help children understand a wide range of interpretive issues.

In the UK, for example, London's Department of Education has standardised goals based on the age of the child.(25) For example, from ages 5 to 11, there is an emphasis on how to search and find information from a variety of reliable sources. At ages 11 to 14, the curriculum focuses on 'Reading and Meaning', and ages 14 to 16 year-olds concentrate on 'Critical Understanding'.

In addition, their Department for Children, Schools and Families published a toolkit titled *Learning Together to Be Safe*.(26) It explicitly calls on teachers to raise awareness on online extremism with emphasises on the importance of developing critical thinking skills and managing harmful media and internet information.

Figure 14

Source: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/

• The Role of Parents

In last year's ICDL Arabia report, some recommendations were made on how to bridge the gap between children and parents: the digital natives and the digitally naïve. This report continues to debunk one myth about digital natives.

Parents often – and incorrectly – assume that their children are 'digital natives', and that it makes no sense to get involved in their online activities. Despite the fact that a child is a digital native, it doesn't does not mean that he/she is digitally safe. Lack of digital skills could pose a barrier to parent's involvement in a child's online and social media activities.

Lack of digital skills could pose a barrier to parent's involvement in a child's online and social media activities.

It is important for parents to avoid being intimidated by the complexities of social media. Never assume that a child cannot view inappropriate content just because a filtering software is installed on his/her computer; not to mention the majority of teenagers in the GCC region own mobile phones and it is very easy to download apps that provide unfiltered access.

Parents should be encouraged to take an active interest in the various types of media being used by their children and make an effort to use them consistently to monitor their children and learn more about their online character and behaviour.

Figure 15

In the ICDL Arabia 2015 survey, over 28% of youths admitted that their parents never monitored their use of the internet. When combined with those that said that only sometimes were they monitored, the results are a staggering 70% of youth that can surf the internet and view content without their parents approval for its integrity or safety.

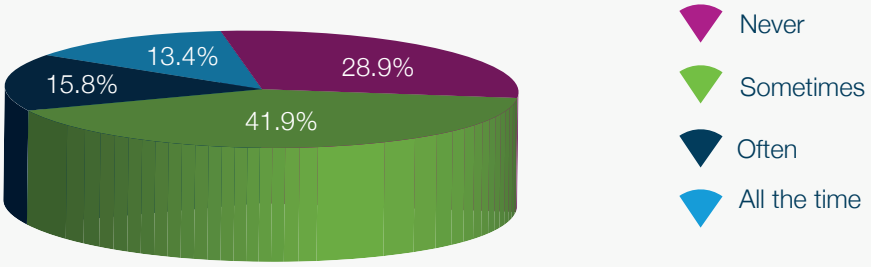

Figure 16 Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

Needless to say, while teachers must all be required to undergo some form of formal training in social media and cyber safety, parents should also, through their children's school, have access to non-technical advice, tips, check lists in order to ensure that they are aware of the child internet safety issues – including online radicalisation – so that they know how to monitor their kids' social media and internet usage and what red flags to look for.

How Can We Reduce the Polarisation Gap?

One of the core elements of the internet is the notion that all ideas can be written and gathered in one place, and only the best ones will prevail. Bad ideas will eventually be crowded out, while the truth will emerge as stronger and more robust.

The internet has certainly made the integration of ideas more effective. Before its creation, it was more difficult to exchange ideas. Access to mass media was expensive and controlled by gatekeepers – journalists, editors and proprietors – who had a tendency to filter out extremist views. Social media has now become mass media and has also integrated with traditional media; most traditional means of media also have an active online social media presence.

Therefore, not only does the majority have access to the internet and social media, but this unfiltered, offensive, user-generated propaganda from online radicals provides access to content which can distort people's minds.

To combat this, government entities need to play a more positive role in questioning certain content and stimulating an environment in which people feel empowered to challenge violent extremist propaganda. They should also help spread information, facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices and bring together stakeholders who can take positive actions. Strategies for preventing teens from becoming victims of online radicalisation and exploitation is a dynamic process which must change with the times. We need to examine what options are available to create an online environment in which the production and consumption of such materials is not just inappropriate, but less desirable on a social and educational level. People need to start being less reactive about the polarisation of the content itself and start being proactive by focusing on the individuals.

This includes the anti-extremists who could potentially provide an environment for people to have honest and open dialogues with both those at risk for viewing such content (i.e. teens), and also the people spreading the content and/or posting comments.

To quote David Warlick, recently named one of the 10 most influential people in educational technology:

> Today's class rooms should facilitate teaching and learning as a number of two way conversations – involving groups of teachers, learners, the home and the community.(27)

Critically evaluate the content you find online

Social media is not the only means extremist organisations manipulate. Due to the polarisation between online radicals and those in the mainstream, they also take advantage of the assumptions traditional media sources often make when a suspected terrorist attack happens around the world.

It should be acknowledged that not every act of terrorism is committed by someone who represents a radical organisation, and not everyone who holds extremist beliefs is associated with one either.

There are many 'lone wolves' – people inspired by radical ideologies and not necessarily representing an extremist group but independently carry out a real-life attack based on the same or similar ideologies – who hold a combination of personal and/or political grievances and choose to carry out attacks on their own. Although the end result of all forms of radicalisation are the same, the fact that mainstream media automatically suggests that these attacks are religiously motivated, and/or attributes these attacks to known radical groups indirectly strengthens the power and terror associated with radical organisations.

There is a reason why radical groups want to appear so powerful. Most media corporations present these tragic news stories in ways that trigger fear, anger, and hostility towards them. In ISIL's Dabiq magazine, they imply that they want the world split into two parts: their interpretation of Islam and everyone else's.

Their propagated narrative is that the values of both Islam and the West are not compatible, and that a human being with principles cannot be a good Muslim as well as a good Western citizen at the same time. This is not just maintained by violent extremists in the name of Islam, but this view is also being reinforced and replicated by anti-Muslim bigots. This phenomenon provides two different extremes that solidify the narrative of polarisation, potentially making Muslims feel more alienated in countries where Sharia law is not the principal law.

In essence, a primary strategy for these extremist groups is to create a war between Muslims and non-Muslims. This is why it is more important than ever for our society to maintain our social cohesion. Australia's Channel 10 news broadcaster Waleed Aly stated that if someone with a social media account is "firing off misguided missiles of hate, [they] are helping ISIL [because] they've told us that."(28)

Figure 17 Waleed Aly speaking on how ISIL is 'weak'

How Schools and Families Can De-Polarise Issues

Minors often develop certain behaviors while going through adolescence. In retrospect, many adults can look back at their own teenage years and they may feel like they were polarised themselves. In the adolescent's minds, they are too old to be treated like a child, yet too young to be treated like an adult. Eventually, they turn to social media and online gaming as a way to escape from reality, where they may feel less judged and freer online than in real life. The ICDL Arabia's 2015 Survey results confirm this, as over 42% of youth claim that they usually prefer the excitement of online gaming or other online activities more than face-to-face social interactions.

This dichotomy of 'online vs. offline' creates a discrepancy in the life of an adolescent, and according to U.S. governmental organisations like Youth.gov (29) and also stated by the Department of Homeland Security, Online gaming is an influential venue for youth (especially males) to communicate with others inside an entertainment venue.

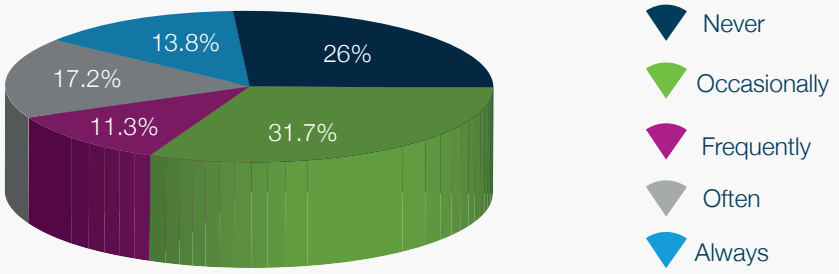

Figure 18

Source: ICDL Arabia Survey 2015

Whether your child is gaming online or interacting with people on social media networks, it is always important to stay engaged with your child and make sure there is an ongoing dialogue (both formally in the classroom and informally at home) about the dangers of online radicalisation and how to protect themselves from extremists. It is important that both teachers and parents monitor teenagers' online activity and check which the social media sites they are visiting.

If you, as a responsible adult, are worried that a child may be in contact with people who are trying to radicalise them and are looking for assistance on what to do, you can always call a child protection hotline. ICDL Arabia included an Appendix at the end of this report with hotline numbers for each country. You can also contact the police to prevent an incident from happening in your community. Teachers also have the opportunity to learn more and get certified in key subjects that directly relate to combatting online radicalisation: such as the safe use of social media and cyber safety.

The 'Camden Safeguarding Children's Board'(30), based out of the UK have created this handy list of 'signs' that a parent can look out for as possible signs of radicalisation.

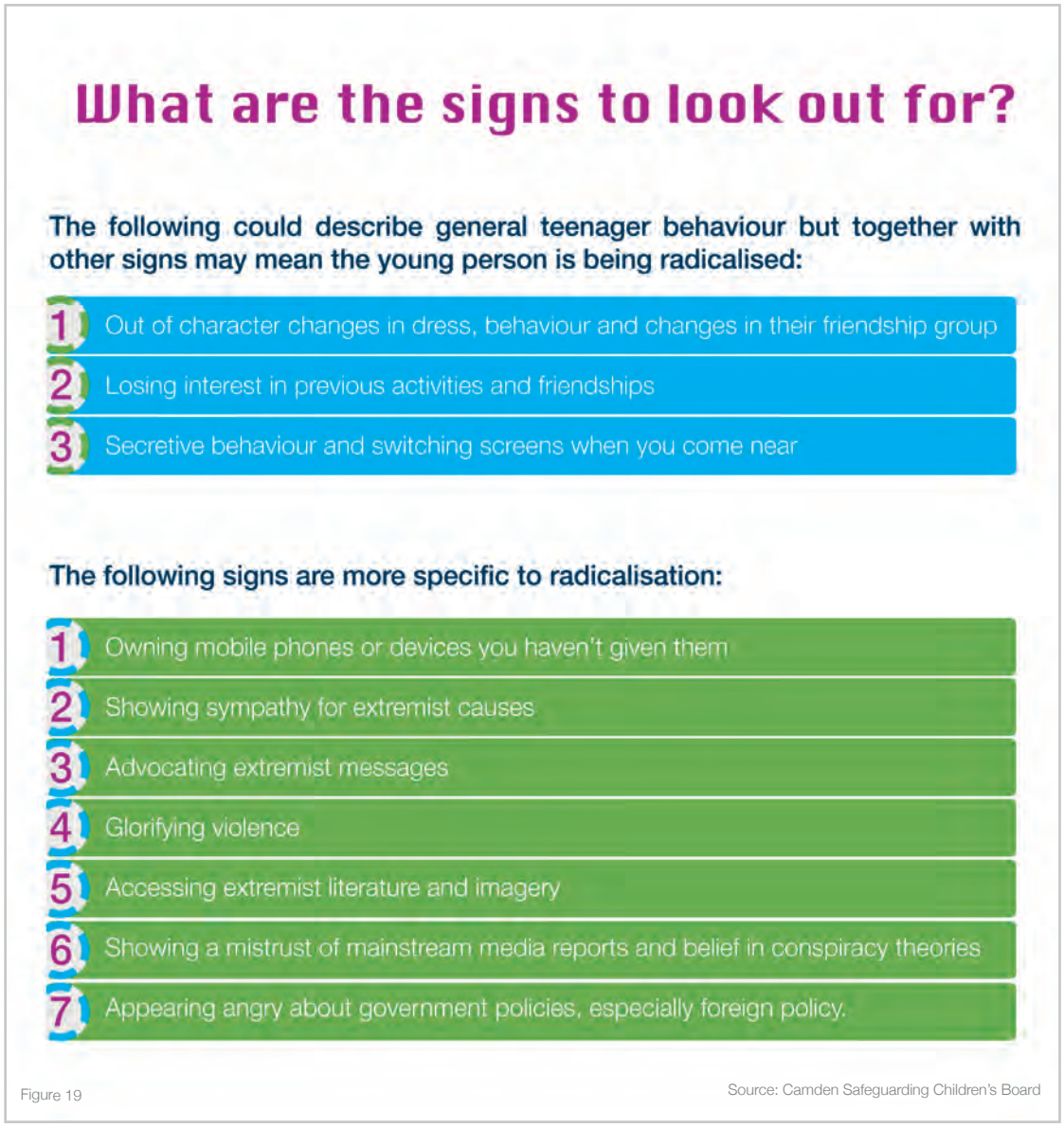

Figure 19

Source: Camden Safeguarding Children's Board

Conclusion

In an astonishingly short period of time, the internet – particularly social media – has become an essential part of our lives. 'Generation Z', our youth, has lived with it since they were born. Although this means that they are 'networked' with a plethora of information and many means of communication and entertainment at their fingertips, it also brings them closer to inappropriate content that could put them at risk online and could very well impact their lives offline. Social media networking by radical groups will continue, as it has shown to be an effective outreach and recruiting platform.

This report discussed how teenagers are on newer social media platforms and do not use traditional ones as often, making it easier for online radicals to exploit them without trusted adults being aware. It also recommends that, because the era of Web 2.0 focuses on user-generated content and share ability, our focus needs to shift from solely blocking content to challenging extremists with thought provoking but opposing content to provide balance.

That said, we will leave you with three more points:

1. **Knowledge is Power, Information is Liberation, and Education is the Premise of Progress:** It is really easy to neglect the problem of online radicalisation and say that these issues will not happen to the children in your lives. If you learned anything from this report, it is that online radicalisation is real, and all youth are at risk of being exposed to content that would be inappropriate for even adults to consume.

   This means that it is vital for us – as policymakers, as teachers, and as parents – to learn more about online radicalisation. Do your research to learn about the new trends, techniques, and social media platforms that radical groups are using to increase their outreach so that you can talk to your children, before they do.

2. **It Is Not Just about Numbers; It is about Impact:** Someone reading this report might look at the statistics in this report and be critical about them. People cite statistics all the time and the number of people being affected. It is not about – and it has never been about – the number of people traveling to fight for radical groups, or the number of teenagers killed because of online interactions with extremists. The amount of influence one person can have on social media is enormous.

   The amount of community polarisation that even a single controversial event can trigger can have a severe impact on teenagers and entire communities. This is precisely why challenging negative messages with positive messages is important: it helps moderate political debate.

3. **Both ethical and practical:** There have been several global reports examining the online activities of extremists, but most of their policy recommendations are either stating the obvious (i.e. promote the activities of those who speak out against online radicalisation) or provide only generalisations (i.e. create laws and indict those who radicalise teenagers).

   What ICDL Arabia hopes to achieve through this report is to provide stakeholders in the Arab world a full analysis of how online radicalisation is influencing teenagers around the world, debunk some myths about what we can do to reduce and prevent children from being exploited by radical groups, and provide ideas for various stakeholders – from policymakers and teachers, to parents and the media – as to what they can do to protect children from extremists online, especially social media.

   If this report can help us to save even just one life, through educating influential groups on possible action, and start a dialogue between government leaders, school leaderships and parent groups, it has done its job.

   We decided to dedicate this year's Cyber safety Report (2016) on the subject of Social Media Influencing Young Minds, with the intention to highlight the topic of online radicalisation.

   We trust the time and effort invested in this report whereby a lot of facts, research and analysis has been presented, shows the seriousness of online radicalisation and features some of the most important steps that we need to consider in combatting online extremism, which can only spread hate amongst our children and ultimately harm our children and other social beings.

Call to Action

What You Can Do to Protect Children from Online Radicalisation

A minor using the internet without being taught how to evaluate and correctly process the types of content he or she can come across is guaranteed to suffer immense consequences. It is essential for adults to stay conscious of what they are doing online. These problems happen in every region, including the GCC and on a daily basis, so it is necessary to research the strategies and action that stakeholders can do to reduce the enthusiasm, skills and polarisation gaps discussed in the report. All parents should ensure that they make themselves available in a supportive way and stay active in their online and offline lives.

We call on governments, educators and also parents to engage and play an active role in learning more about the cyber-related threats and techniques that online radicals are using. In doing so, we can collectively and synchronously apply even more powerful techniques that can impede kids from becoming influenced by immoral people online while also creating a more positive environment on social media as a whole.

Each stakeholder plays a different role based on their fundamental responsibilities and areas of expertise.

GOVERNMENTS CAN:

- Invest in de-radicalisation methods and encourage citizens and residents to use social media in a positive way.
- Establish and implement legal policies to protect citizens, both nationwide and regionally.
- Create and provide funding for organisations that empower teenagers and adults who want to counter violent extremism and other forms of cyber exploitation
- Offer rehabilitation programmes, hotlines and other resource for those who are (or have been) affected by online radicalisation.
- Collaborate with different authorities within the government and within the non-profit and private sectors to provide the most useful and up-to-date information about how to combat online radicalisation methods.

TEACHERS CAN:

- Work with administrators to develop school policies and awareness programmes that cater to students and parents within the schooling system.
- Request for training on issues related to cyber safety, online radicalisation and/or social media.
- Create a constructive learning environment for students to engage with you and/or other faculty members (i.e. counsellors) about online radicalisation.
- Organise school assemblies and information sessions with students; engage with students' parents about cyber-related issues during parent/teacher conferences.

PARENTS/GUARDIANS CAN:

- Monitor your child's online usage by following the recommendations set by professionals in the areas of cyber safety.
- Guide your children into believing responsible, ethical, and informed adults by being an active role model at home.
- Continue learning about the newest up-to-date social media platforms and applications your child might be using. Maintain an honest and open dialogue with your child about what they are doing online.

NEXT STEPS

If you are interested in learning more about protecting adolescents from online radicalisation or cyber safety for youth, please consider these additional resources, available in English or Arabic:

1. The ICDL Arabia Schools Roadshow can be booked for a qualified representative to speak at your school or university to present on cyber safety and/or online radicalisation, and is suitable for groups of students, teachers or parents.

2. An internationally accredited Social Media certification that caters to students and teachers, providing each group with the skills required to understand the risks of using social media and how to stay safe online. Students, in particular, will also learn how to protect themselves from predators by reading and doing exercises pertaining to how to engage online.

3. www.OnlineSense.org, is a website developed by ICDL Arabia and its supporters, and is a great resource dedicated to helping stakeholders and youth 'make sense' of the internet through information, advice, blogs and quizzes.

Appendix A

CHILD SAFETY HOTLINES

Country	Phone Number
Bahrain	998
Egypt	16000
Iraq / Kurdistan	116
Jordan	110
Kuwait	151
Oman	1100
Qatar	919
Saudi Arabia	800
Sudan	9696
United Arab Emirates	800 988 / 116 111

ICDL ARABIA LOCAL OFFICES

Country	Phone Number
ICDL Regional Headquarters (UAE, Bahrain, Iraq, Qatar)	+ 971 4 454 0420
ICDL Egypt	+ 20 2 3302 4235 (3302 ICDL)
ICDL Kuwait	+ 965 2 575 6272
ICDL Oman	+ 968 2 415 2380
ICDL Saudi Arabia	+ 966 11 200 8228

Acknowledgments

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We are forever indebted to our partners and sponsors in ICDL Summer Camp 2015 for their ongoing monetary and in-kind support. The generous contributions made by visionary leaders, concerned government organisations and responsible corporate citizens were instrumental to enrolling students across the GCC in a productive year filled with learning new skills as well as recreational and social networking activities.

Acknowledgement also goes to the ICDL Arabia team for gathering such valuable information and for putting this report together which will hopefully inspire qualification and educational regulators in their efforts to improve ICT skills and cyber safety awareness within our education system.

Last, but not least, we want to acknowledge and thank you, the reader, for taking the time to read this report which highlights a current and alarming issue. We hope that after reading this, you have a greater understanding of the issues at hand, and the desire to get actively involved in making our digital natives, digitally safe, both through involvement in education and society.

ICDL Arabia

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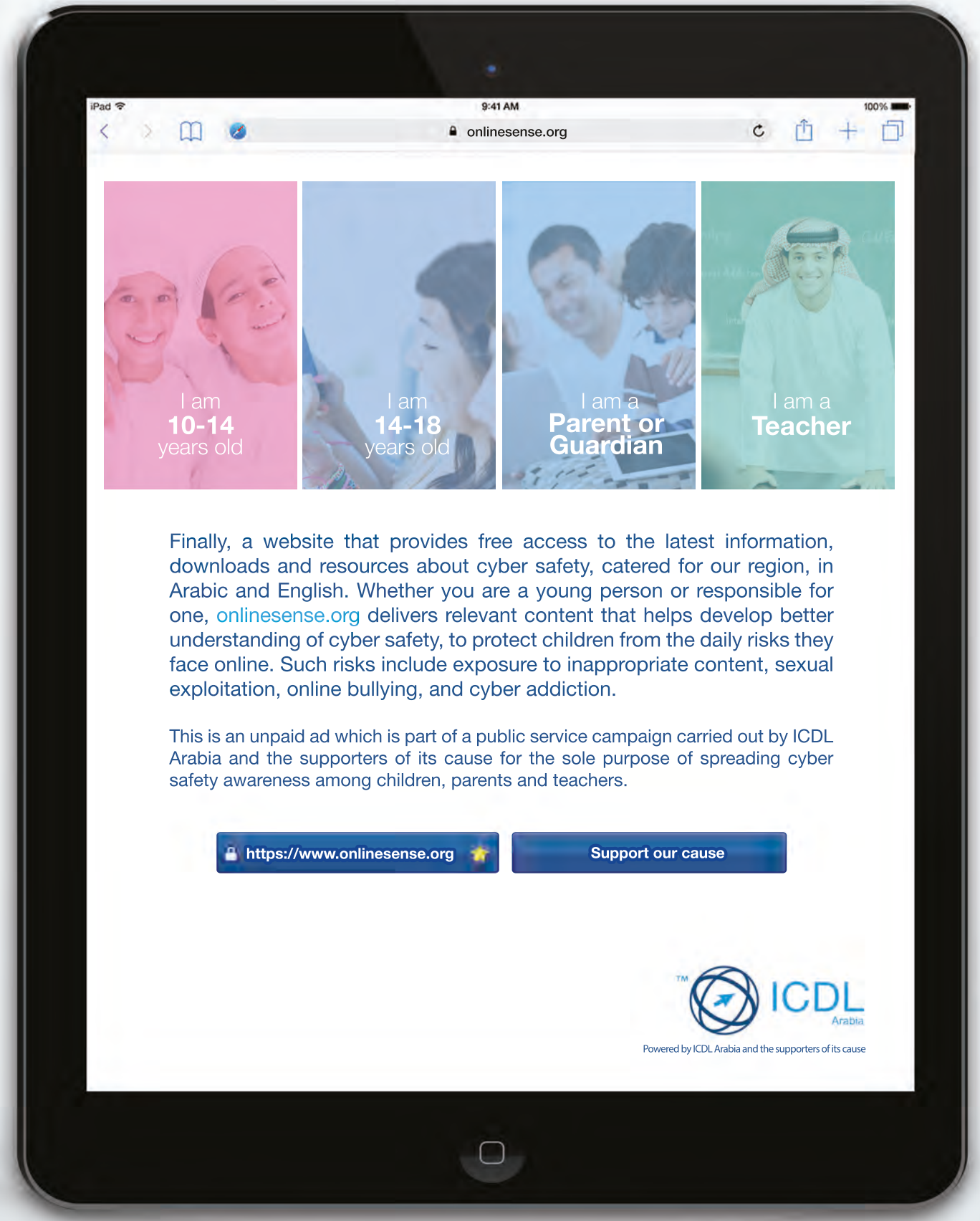
OnlineSense.org



Finally, a website that provides free access to the latest information, downloads and resources about cyber safety, catered for our region, in Arabic and English. Whether you are a young person or responsible for one, onlinesense.org delivers relevant content that helps develop better understanding of cyber safety, to protect children from the daily risks they face online. Such risks include exposure to inappropriate content, sexual exploitation, online bullying, and cyber addiction.

This is an unpaid ad which is part of a public service campaign carried out by ICDL Arabia and the supporters of its cause for the sole purpose of spreading cyber safety awareness among children, parents and teachers.

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