

(IN)FORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION,  
RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION:



THE ROLE OF MEDIA  
IN VIOLENT CONFLICT

# INFOCORE Definitions “Radicalization”

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## Definition: “Radicalization”

Radicalization<sup>1</sup> is a process by which individuals or groups adopt increasingly uncompromising interpretations and positions, which ignore, fundamentally challenge or even demand the abolition of the political order, including civil and human rights. Radicalization consists of two interrelated processes, which reinforce one another:

*Interpretative radicalization* is the semantic process by which individuals or groups construct their social environments in increasingly essentialist, Manichean, absolute terms (Sageman, 2007). Specifically, radical interpretations:

- state essentialist claims about the nature and causes of social reality, which derive from some higher insight and deny the legitimacy of other interpretations (van Stekelenburg et al., 2010)
- assume the identity of social/political interests within an ingroup, denying the legitimacy of dissent and particular interests (akin to Rousseau’s identity theory of democracy; Sartori, 1993)
- apply contrasting categorical evaluations to (good) ingroup and (bad) outgroup views

Radical interpretations typically involve the construction of normative absolutes (e.g., divine preordination, the needs of the nation, individual freedom, etc.), which justify the superiority of adherents to the interpretation vis-à-vis all others. Radicalization is often supported by the development of strong group identities or at least the strong identification with real or imagined collectives to whom these interpretations are ascribed (van Stekelenburg et al., 2010). Likewise, radicalization normally constructs a threat emanating from one or multiple outgroups (e.g., group-based deprivation of minorities, subversion/“pollution” of majority groups; Moghaddam, 2005).

*Positional radicalization* is the political process by which individuals or groups advocate increasingly fundamental, uncompromising evaluations and agendas. Specifically, radical positions:

- address imagined last causes of social conditions, preferably in an irreversible way
- deny the legitimacy of considering the demands of dissenters and striking compromises, and more generally, of political process per se (Sartori, 1993)
- generally assume that ends justify the means, including far reaching measures violating conventions of political and social order, civic, fundamental, and human rights

Radical positions typically do not credit outgroups with empathy or political rights, e.g., by questioning their ability to develop relevant political positions (e.g., ascribing immaturity or evil intent, dehumanizing outgroups; McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). Radical positions do not necessarily advocate undemocratic or extreme means (disenfranchisement, imprisonment, expropriation, use of lethal violence), but such means are generally accepted if necessary. They generally exclude the possibility of legitimate compromise and admit concessions and democratic process only, if at all, for tactical reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Most research on radicalization to date focuses on the social antecedents of radicalization in the context of terrorism. Only little of that research concerns constructions and interpretations, but what exists can be generally extrapolated to cover also much milder forms of radicalization in a debate. A related field of study is political extremism, which, however, neglects the process character and typically prejudices extremist positions as anti-democratic and illegitimate.

Positional radicalization is justified by a radicalization of interpretations, such that both variants support one another. “Radical” is understood here in absolute terms, and not relative to some social mainstream (as, for instance, in Ferree, 2003): Whether a position or interpretation is radical does not depend on social sanctioning or the presence of an opposing camp, but on its construction of an uncompromising, absolute view upon social reality. Radicalization is facilitated by exposure to radical ideas (and positive feedback on radical ideas), and potentially counteracted by exposure to counterarguments and conciliatory views (McCauley & Moskaleiko, 2008). Accordingly, radicalization often arises if ideologically homogenous social groups become increasingly disconnected from mainstream society, or under conditions of a polarized public.

Radicalization is often, but by no means necessarily accompanied by increasingly emotional forms of discourse – radical interpretations and demands can also be presented in a “cold” rational manner.

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