



[Sergeant Paul]

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This Christmas I'll be looking at terrorist material – and so might your children

Paul, a Met Police sergeant from the national Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, talks about his work investigating terrorist material online and how you can help keep your loved ones safe from radicalisation this Christmas:

Four days from now, families across the UK will be trying to chip out a little piece of normality and cheer at the end of what has been a challenging year.

But while most of us will try to relax and celebrate, a small minority will be

more intent on sowing discord and division online.

As you read this, these people are posting online graphic videos of executions, and posters calling for terrorist attacks. They're sharing ideas on how to kill innocent people in the name of a twisted, terrorist ideology.

Much of the material they are posting is inspired by Islamist extremism but increasingly it's motivated by right-wing extremism.

In other cases, the people posting material seem confused about exactly why they want hundreds of people to die, but they know the internet is the place to quickly spread their vitriol and calls for violence.

During the pandemic these people have had something of a captive audience.

Who are the people they are hoping will see this propaganda and act upon it? In their eyes, almost anyone will do but it's increasingly youngsters who are becoming radicalised.

The number of children arrested on suspicion of terrorism offences increased by 55 per cent in the 12 months ending September this year, while the number of adults arrested went down.

In the 18 months ending June 2020, 17 children nationally – some as young as 14 years old – were arrested for terrorism offences. All will have largely been radicalised online.

And in the same period, a further 1,500 children aged 15 and under were identified as potentially being at risk of radicalisation.

This disturbs me as an officer and also as a father.

It would be misguided to think that the youngsters finding terrorist propaganda online and being sucked in by its eye-catching graphics and false promises of martyrdom are archetypal terrorist "suspects".

They're not – they vary by gender and ethnic background; some are high-achievers at school, others not so; some are from impoverished backgrounds,

others more fortunate.

They're sons, daughters, siblings and friends - possibly yours, though you may not like to think it.

They're all susceptible to radicalisation for one reason or another – maybe they're unhappy with something in their life; perhaps they're feeling isolated; maybe there's an underlying mental health concern – and we all have a role to play in protecting them.

My team's contribution is to try and get rid of the online propaganda that may radicalise them, by finding it and finding the people behind its production.

Every year, the public sends my team thousands of links to suspected terrorist and extremist material that they've stumbled upon online and felt uneasy about. They act on their instinct and report it via www.gov.uk/act, and my team is there every single day – including Christmas Day – ready and waiting to assess each referral to identify whether the content breaks terrorism laws. If it does breach the law, we work hard to get it taken down from the internet.

This year, the referrals haven't let up – perhaps confirmation that people are spending more time online during the pandemic. In fact, by the end of last month, we'd received more referrals than for the whole of 2019 – 3,000 referrals in 11 months, compared with 2,796 in 2019.

That includes a 43 per cent increase in referrals relating to suspected right-wing extremist material.

Increasingly, my team is working with counter terrorism officers across the whole of the UK – and internationally – to identify and arrest the people who created the material, published it and shared it, with the ultimate aim of stopping them from spreading any more of their toxic rhetoric.

My team has assisted more than 500 investigations in the past two years, some of which have already resulted in people being charged and convicted.

This is where you have a role to play as a mother, a father, a sibling or a

friend. Because you know your loved one better than anyone and you know if something is not right. You can help them if you act early enough, before they cross the line into committing a terrorist offence. There is an opportunity to help that person choose a life path that doesn't end in injury, death (theirs or others') or prison.

Following almost a whole year of anxiety, isolation and unease, maybe you've noticed something concerning about your child or sibling, something that is playing on your mind.

There's no single clear, neon sign – it could be numerous small things. Perhaps they've become distanced; maybe they're saying extreme things that just don't sound like it's them speaking; or perhaps they're displaying an obsessive and angry desire for “something to be done”.

You might notice this over Christmas – a time when we typically spend more time with our loved ones.

If so, there is a new national advice line, staffed 24/7 – including across the whole of Christmas – for families and friends who are concerned about loved ones. So you can ring up and speak, anonymously or otherwise, to an expert. Someone who will listen and offer specialist advice.

If you'd prefer not to call, look at the new Act Early website where you'll find loads of advice, including what the signs of radicalisation are.

Whatever you do – act, and do it early.

If you are worried that someone you know is being radicalised, visit www.actearly.uk or call the national Police Prevent Advice Line on 0800 011 3764, in confidence. Our specially trained Prevent officers will listen carefully to your concerns.

If you have seen material online which you are concerned could be terrorist or extremist, please report it at www.gov.uk/act

You won't be wasting our time and you won't ruin lives, but you might save them.