Exposure to radical content over the internet has a salient relationship with both cognitive and behavioral outcomes of radicalization, compared to other media-related factors. However, the quality of this evidence is low and results should be interpreted in light of this.

What is this review about?
Exposure to and consumption of media has long been pointed to as a possible risk factor for radicalization. In recent years, the internet has come under increasing scrutiny, with a sub-field of research examining cyber-radicalization. Yet little is known about the magnitude of individual-level media-effects as risk factors for radicalization. In addition, it is not known if, and to what degree the internet has greater effects than other types of media, or whether and to what degree the nature of the content being consumed matters. There are therefore wide gaps in the body of knowledge concerning media effects and radicalization.

Media-related factors pertain to human-media interactions and relationships and therefore included a number of domains, including 1) the medium itself (e.g., TV, radio, internet), 2) platforms (e.g., Western vs non-Western TV, Facebook, Twitter, etc.), 3) content (e.g., violent, pro-social), 4) activities and behaviors (e.g., time spent engaged), and 5) attitudes (e.g., attachment). For the purposes of this review, all such media-related factors were considered for inclusion.

This review looked at individual-level media effects on two outcomes of radicalization, cognitive and behavioral, with cognitive radicalization being limited to support, justification of, or a willingness/intention towards the use of radical violence in the name of a cause or ideology, and behavioral radicalization pertaining to the actual involvement in such violence.

What studies were included?
This review includes 53 studies spanning the period 2002-2020, with most published between 2016-2020. The studies mostly used samples of respondents from Europe and North America, and several from Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Of the included studies, four were experimental (12 samples) and 49 were observational (64 samples).
What are the main findings of this review?
Results from experimental studies indicate that simple, one-time exposure to mediated content is associated with a small increase in the risk of radicalization. For individuals high in trait aggression, there is an equally small increase in risk.

The results from observational studies show that the magnitude of the relationship between simple usage of different media and radicalization is essentially inconsequential, with estimates close to zero. However, when usage of media was measured with reference to specific types of content or activities, such as the consumption of or posting of political content, small but potentially meaningful relationships are found.

For some attitudinal risk factors, such as perceptions of media bias, estimates indicate only small relationships with radicalization, whereas the estimates for others, such as attachment to online networks, point to more salient relationships. The largest estimates pertain to both passive and active forms of internet-based exposure to content defined as specifically radical.

The reliability of these results is tempered by multiple sources of bias inherent in the cross-sectional studies, as well as the experimental studies that give rise to these results, including the inability to establish temporal ordering. Additionally, alternative theoretical explanations suggest that the results may suffer from confounding with factors such as age, gender, and self-control.

What do the findings of the review mean?
Simple media consumption is unlikely to be associated with any significant risk of radicalization, including one-time exposures to radical content. Despite alternative hypotheses that increases in risk are a function of certain psychological traits, such as aggression, differences in the magnitude of estimates are negligible.

On the other hand, internet-mediated exposure to radical content, whether passive or active, is associated with a significantly stronger relationship with radicalization than other types of media-related risk factors. When compared to other known risk factors for cognitive radicalization (non-media), the relative magnitudes of the estimates are moderate. However, when compared to other known risk factors for behavioral radicalization, the relative sizes of the estimates are considerable.

The ability to draw conclusions from the results is limited by the fact that studies suffer from multiple sources of bias.