



INSTITUTE *for*
STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism

WHAT WORKS AND WHAT ARE
THE IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT?

Rachel Briggs
Sebastien Feve

This report outlines the findings of a research project conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) between December 2012 and March 2013. Commissioned by Public Safety Canada, it provides an overview of the efforts made to push back on extremist content online, or ‘counter-narratives’. It involved background research and interviews with former violent extremists, policy-makers and civil society activists. The report offers a framework for understanding counter-narratives, a series of case studies and recommendations for governments.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is now recognised that **violent extremists have made effective use of the Internet and social media to advance their aims**, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalisation or recruitment. While the quality of their output varies, a growing proportion is professional, well produced, contains compelling messages and is delivered by charismatic individuals. In short, it appeals to the new YouTube generation, which expects high-end products that are well-timed and effective. These extremist groups and networks are also transitioning from their own standalone websites and forums towards social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to take their messages to a much wider audience.

Governments are interested in understanding what can be done to counter this content, both illegal and legal, which can incite or glamorise the use of violence. **Much of the emphasis to date has been placed on restrictive measures**, such as takedowns and filtering. While it is important for governments to enforce the law – and be seen to be doing so – there are severe limitations on the effectiveness of this response, given the speed with which new data is uploaded and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies.

More recently, there has been growing interest in alternative approaches to the problem. One such potential solution is provided by ‘**counter-narratives**’; attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or

indirectly, through a range of online and offline means. Counter-narrative has become a catch-all term for a wide range of activities with different aims and tactics, everything from public diplomacy and strategic communications by government, to targeted campaigns to discredit the ideologies and actions of violent extremists.

In order to make sense of the complex range of actions and initiatives described as ‘counter-narratives’, the report sets out a ‘**counter-messaging spectrum**’, which is comprised of three main types of activities: **government strategic communications, alternative narratives and counter-narratives**. The counter-messaging spectrum is summarised in the table overleaf.

This report was commissioned by Public Safety Canada. It aims to **review the state of knowledge about efforts to counter narratives of violent extremism** and make recommendations for governments, such as the Canadian government, to guide their emerging work in this sensitive area of policy. **It is important to stress that counter-narrative work as an area of public policy is in its infancy.** While community and civil society groups have been conducting this work for many years, governments are new to the issue and the private sector is feeling its way with extreme caution. This means that there are only a small number of case studies to draw upon. For this reason, as well as the limited scope of the project, the recommendations for government are tentative.

What	Why	How	Who
Government Strategic Communications	Action to get the message out about what government is doing, including public awareness activities	Raise awareness, forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences and correct misinformation	Government
Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society or government
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humour	Civil society

Overall, governments must tread with caution in the area of counter-messaging – there is much they can do, however their efforts can be ineffective or even counter-productive when they act as the messenger, due to their credibility gap with target audiences, which often gets in the way of what they have to say.

The report highlights the following roles for government:

A) Government Strategic Communications

This is the area where government has the most natural and effective role to play, but this work is not risk-free and to be effective at responding to extremist messages requires some shifts in work patterns and bureaucratic routines. It also requires governments to move from the transmission of factual information towards an appeal to the emotional instincts of their target audiences.

Governments should devise a government strategic communications policy relating specifically to the challenge of countering extremist messages on the Internet and social media. They should also consider setting up a centralised unit to oversee and coordinate this work, able to draw on the full range of necessary expertise.

B) Alternative Narratives

Government has three roles in relation to the development and dissemination of alternative narratives: supporting and facilitating civil society efforts to design and deliver alternative narrative campaigns via direct funding, in-kind support, and the streamlining of private sector engagement with grass-roots civil society networks; delivering alternative narratives via politicians and public statements; and ensuring that messages are reinforced by government policies and practices.

Governments should continue to invest in this work, but ensure there is greater consistency between what they say and what they do; avoid the 'say-do' gap.

C) Counter-Narratives

Some governments have engaged directly in counter-narrative activities, but the emerging evidence points to the fact that governments are more effective when they play an indirect, facilitative role. In some cases, it will be appropriate for them to fund counter-narrative activities, where this does not impact on the credibility of the product, campaign or message, but there can be no general rules about when this will be the case because context is so important.

Governments should proceed with caution with regard to their direct role in counter-narrative efforts.

D) Capacity Building for Credible Messengers

One of the most important roles for government is in building capacity among those best suited to act as counter-narrative messengers and campaigners. These individuals and organisations often lack the technical, communications and strategic know-how to do this work effectively and at scale.

Governments should establish or help to seed training and development programmes at national and local levels focused on how to construct messages, develop products, apply marketing strategies and measure results. Governments should also fund the creation of centralised resource packages, such as 'how to' guides on the use of new technologies and social media platforms.

On another practical level, governments can fund the translation of key texts and multi-media products to widen the range of tools that counter-narrative messengers have at their disposal.

National governments should work together on translation to avoid duplication of very limited resources, and should be cautious about creating yet more new web platforms.

E) Investment in Monitoring and Evaluation

There is still limited understanding about what makes an effective counter-narrative campaign. Governments could make a highly valuable contribution by investing in large-scale research to plug this gap and work to disseminate the results to the most credible messengers in a way that is relevant to their operational needs.

Governments should work collaboratively with the private sector and research bodies to formulate a

standardised monitoring and evaluation framework so results from even small-scale counter-narrative campaigns can be compared.

F) Investment in Data Gathering and Analysis

Effective counter-messaging requires detailed analysis to understand the nature and extent of extremist messaging and its impact on target audiences.

Governments must invest in this kind of research, and where possible work collectively to pool resources and results. In doing so, they must also be mindful of the ethical challenges inherent in this work.

G) Brokering New Partnerships

Effective counter-narratives rely on bringing together a range of different skills and expertise that are rarely housed within one organisation or individual. Government is in a unique position to act as a convenor to bring together the various organisations, networks and individuals that need to play a role to facilitate joint working and the pooling of ideas and resources.

Governments should play a leading role in forging, streamlining and sustaining public-private partnerships, and unlocking funds to facilitate multi-disciplinary advisory networks to discuss ways of overcoming the core technical and technological challenges in counter-messaging.

1 INTRODUCTION

It is now recognised that **violent extremists have made effective use of the Internet and social media to advance their aims**, whether through engagement, propaganda, radicalisation or recruitment. While the quality of their output varies, a growing proportion is professional, well produced, contains compelling messages and is delivered by charismatic individuals. In short, it appeals to the new YouTube generation, which expects high-end products that are well-timed and effective. These groups and networks are also transitioning from their own standalone websites and forums towards social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to take their messages to a much wider audience.

Governments are interested in understanding what can be done to counter this content, both illegal and legal, which can incite or glamorise the use of violence. **Much of the emphasis to date has been placed on restrictive measures**, such as takedowns and filtering. While it is important for governments to enforce the law – and be seen to be doing so – there are severe limitations on the effectiveness of this response, given the speed with which new data is uploaded and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies.

More recently, there has been growing interest in alternative approaches to the problem. One such potential solution is provided by ‘**counter-narratives**’; attempts to challenge extremist and

violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly through a range of online and offline means. Counter-narrative has come to be a catch-all term for a wide range of activities with different aims and tactics and understanding about what works is still poor.

This report has been commissioned by Public Safety Canada. It aims to **review the state of knowledge about efforts to counter the narratives of violent extremism**, be they led by states, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, community groups or other relevant stakeholders. It draws on case studies that are publicly available, from Europe and North America, as well as other geographies, such as the Middle East and Asia. In consultation with Public Safety Canada, it was agreed that the paper should **focus on online counter-narrative efforts**, although there are clear links between on and offline activities. It has been prepared and written by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

It is important to stress that counter-narrative work as an area of public policy is in its infancy. While community and civil society groups have been conducting this work for many years, governments are new to the issue and the private sector is feeling its way with extreme caution. Given the sensitivities and challenges inherent in counter-narrative activities, this is sensible. This means that there are only a limited number of case studies to draw upon;

the paper has attempted to provide as much variety as possible in terms of the type of counter-narrative work, messengers, purpose, approach, and geography, but inevitably it is dominated by examples from the UK and US because this is where most counter-narrative activity has been conducted to date.

The paper is divided into the following sections.

Section Two provides a brief overview of the kinds of extremist narratives that we are trying to counter, with practical examples.

Section Three outlines the ‘counter-messaging spectrum’, a simplified framework to outline the wide range of activities that have come to be referred to as ‘counter-narratives’. It is divided into three main categories of counter-messaging, although there is often overlap between them and it can be difficult to target messages exclusively at one audience without reaching others:

- **Government strategic communications:** actions to get the message out about what government is doing, including public awareness activities.
- **Alternative narratives:** actions that aim to undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are ‘for’ rather than what we are ‘against’.
- **Counter-narratives:** actions to directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messages.

Section Four sets out in more detail the principles and practice of government strategic communications for the purpose of countering extremist messages. It explains the administrative

arrangements that some governments have put in place to streamline this work, including the establishment of centralised teams that are cross-departmental and multi-disciplinary. It also sets out the challenges for government, linked to complex bureaucracy, the need for real time responses, the imperative to move beyond the transmission of factual information towards an appeal to the emotional instincts of target audiences and the risk of getting into a negative cycle of responding to the accusations of violent extremists that results in their agenda dominating.

Section Five outlines the range of alternative narrative activities being conducted, which seek to unite the silent majority against violent extremism. These initiatives focus on promoting moderate centre-ground alternatives that work to undercut extremist messages and messengers, and that can help to create communities of interest and movements for positive change against violent extremism. **There are three roles for government** in relation to alternative narratives: **supporting and facilitating civil society efforts, delivering alternative narratives** via politicians and public statements, and **ensuring that messages are reinforced by government policies and practices.** Government involvement in alternative narratives can be subject to suspicion, but this risk is outweighed by the potential benefits.

Section Six outlines the range of counter-narrative activities by a wide range of actors, which aim to deconstruct, discredit and demystify extremist messaging and tend to do so in a more head-on way than alternative narratives. There are many different target audiences for these messages, from sympathisers and passive supporters to those at risk of radicalisation and recruitment or are already active within violent extremist networks. For this reason,

campaigns need to be targeted. They tend to aim to sow seeds of doubt rather than ‘win the argument’, which can be counter-productive if the target group is applying black and white thinking.

This section sets out some of the key types of counter-narratives, including government counter-narratives; the role of formers, survivors and other credible messengers; the development and dissemination of products; one-to-one counter-messaging for de-radicalisation and disengagement; digital disruption and offline interventions. It points to the difficulties for governments of playing too active and front-facing a role in counter-narratives beyond help and support for others.

Section Seven offers a series of conclusions and recommendations for government. It outlines the **role government can have within the counter-messaging spectrum:** government strategic communications; alternative narratives as both messenger and facilitator; capacity building for others delivering alternative and counter-narratives; the translation of texts and creation of web platforms; investing in monitoring and evaluation; data gathering and analysis; and convening, including bringing the private sector to the table. It also sets out a **number of changes that government should consider implementing** for their own bureaucracies, including the establishment of a centralised unit; greater cross-government working; a stronger emphasis on partnership working with those outside government; and a shift in working patterns to those more conducive to a responsive online media environment.

As the paper stresses throughout, **work to counter the narratives of violent extremists is at its very beginning.** Only a handful of governments are active,

and even those are proceeding with extreme caution. This work is complicated, easy to get wrong and fraught with challenges. This should not be a reason to do nothing, but it does mean that international cooperation, the sharing of good/bad practices and lessons learned, and the forging of new partnerships between the key players (government, former extremists, the survivors of extremist attacks, authoritative religious and political leaders, the private sector, community and civil society groups and networks, and educators) is essential. It is also important for governments to continue to support research and other efforts to systematise this learning and innovation process. It is hoped that this report will make a valuable contribution to this process.

2 EXTREMIST MESSAGING

It is widely recognised that extremist networks have capitalised on the advantages offered by modern communication technologies to further their ideological reach.¹ Particularly sophisticated in their use of new media, **some extremist movements are leveraging the Internet and social media as powerful delivery and dissemination mediums.** Whether through audio, visual or in text format, extremist groups create and share an increasingly wide array of products to engage, proselytise and recruit individuals to their cause:

- The Al-Qaeda affiliated terrorist network, **Al-Shabaab**, has adopted the micro-blogging platform Twitter to broadcast real-time battlefield updates and media commentary.²
- The far-right ‘counter-Jihad’ **English Defence League (EDL)** uses Facebook to coordinate real-world activism, issue press releases and leadership statements.³
- The white supremacist community, **Stormfront**, hosts over 10 million user-posts and has over 250,000 registered members on its messaging board.⁴

The investment in new media capabilities has meant that a **relatively small number of Internet-savvy extremists are able to wield an inordinate amount**

of influence. While products and strategies may differ in terms of content and delivery, such messaging increasingly tends to share **high production value, creative use of textual and audio-visual techniques and compelling messages delivered by charismatic individuals.** This sophistication is no more apparent than in the productions of the deceased radical cleric and ‘**jihadist rock star**’, Anwar al-Awlaki, which continue to inspire a new YouTube-generation of partly ‘self-radicalised’ terrorists.⁵

The messaging embedded in extremist products layers together a mix of **ideological, political, moral, religious and social narratives based on a range of real or imagined grievances.** Mixing historical and political facts with half-truths, lies and conspiracy theories, these messages often convey simplistic argumentation which promotes thought-processes that include black and white thinking, de-sensitisation, de-humanisation, distancing of the other, victimisation and calls to activism and militancy.

Extremist messaging not only aims to radicalise the vulnerable, but to **inspire those further along the radical path into real-world violence.** While it is important not to overemphasise the threat, growing evidence suggests that a number of violent extremists have - to a great or lesser extent - been influenced by the narratives of extremist messengers online. For example:

- The Boston bomber **Tamerlan Tsarnaev** was suspected to have viewed and shared audio-visual sermons of radical preachers.⁶
- The Norwegian far-right extremist **Anders Breivik**, responsible for the Oslo bombing and Utøya massacre, had been influenced by far-right bloggers.⁷
- **Arid Uka**, responsible for shooting US servicemen in Frankfurt, Germany, was reported to have been compelled to action through Jihadi propaganda videos.⁸

In recent years, the target audience for these products has broadened beyond the ‘hard core’ support base towards a more mainstream constituency. This has included attempts to justify their actions among neutral populations and manipulate passive sympathisers who might share similar grievances. It also partly explains the growth in extremist use of more mainstream platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, where they can not only gather their committed followers, but reach those not actively seeking out extremist content or networks.

In response, governments have looked to implement a range of policies to limit the reach of extremist messengers. They have **tended to concentrate on reactive law enforcement measures designed to restrict the supply of such content**, either through removal, filtering or hiding information.⁹

While it is important for governments to enforce the law and be seen to be doing so, such a **strategy has very limited effectiveness** given the scale of the challenge. For instance, there are 100 hours of content uploaded to YouTube every minute,¹⁰ and 300 million photos

up on Facebook every day.¹¹ The level of manpower needed to keep pace makes this approach unsustainable as a viable solution to the problem. It is also the case that **only a tiny fraction of extremist content is actually illegal**, and is therefore often not liable for removal under the terms and conditions of private sector industries, despite increasing government efforts to compel them to do so.¹²

Given these new communication realities and the difficulties with reactive approaches to counter extremist messaging, there is a need for a more proactive approach, which focuses on **reducing the demand for such content by undermining its appeal through offering credible alternatives**.¹³

3 THE COUNTER-MESSAGING SPECTRUM

The term ‘counter-messaging’ - whether on or offline - has come to be used in relation to a wide range of communications activities, everything from public diplomacy and strategic communications by government to targeted campaigns to discredit the ideologies and actions of violent extremists. Based on the review of existing governmental and non-governmental projects and programmes surveyed in this research, the counter-messaging spectrum can be said to constitute three main types of activities: **government strategic communications, alternative narratives and counter-narratives.**

Table 1 provides an overview of the counter-messaging spectrum. Each type of activity is **driven by different goals, which require tailored approaches, responsibilities and partnerships.** At

the tactical level, this is translated into different messages, messengers, products and dissemination pathways. It is intended as an aide for governments in understanding where they can be most effective in contributing to counter-messaging efforts, whether that be in a lead role, or as a facilitator and supporter.

Many other actors have vital contributions to make at different points along the spectrum, such as former violent extremists, survivors of extremist attacks, authoritative religious and political leaders, the private sector, community/civil society groups and frontline practitioners. Sections Four to Six in this report highlight the role that these various individuals, groups and networks can play in government strategic communications, alternative narratives, and counter-narratives.

Table 1: Counter-Messaging Spectrum

What	Why	How	Who
Government Strategic Communications	Action to get the message out about what government is doing, including public awareness activities	Raise awareness, forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences and correct misinformation	Government
Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are ‘for’ rather than ‘against’	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society or government
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humour	Civil society

Two caveats are in order. First, these **categories are not mutually exclusive, and there may be overlap between the different types of messaging activities.** Government strategic communications are likely to include counter-narrative elements, while counter-narratives will require the development of credible alternatives. Secondly, the spectrum **does not make the assumption that it is possible to communicate discretely with separate audiences;** it will not always be possible to find targeted routes in, and it is not usually possible to prevent others from seeing messages intended for a particular group. As a result, there will sometimes be unintended consequences stemming from certain activities that may not be possible to either foresee or prevent. It is also **important to understand how the three activities work together,** mutually reinforcing one another when coordinated and managed effectively.

In recent years, while much time has been dedicated to discussions and policy pronouncements on counter-messaging, very little has actually been done in practice, particularly online. In 2008, the United Nations Working Group on Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes reported that only 12 Member States of the 34 that responded to its information request had developed a programme to combat the use of the Internet for violent extremism and/or to counter violent ideology.¹⁴ Of those countries that responded, **only a fraction had developed strategies to counter violent extremist narratives,** with notable exceptions like the Netherlands, where webmasters of sites that attracted large numbers of Muslim youths had installed systems whereby radical expressions were countered by messages stating alternative views.¹⁵ Since 2008, **efforts have accelerated in only a handful of countries, notably the United Kingdom and the US,** with other

European and North American countries now considering how to implement their own counter-messaging strategies.

This means that extremists – a tiny minority of those active online – are able to punch above their weight because they are the most confident, vociferous and creative strategic communicators. Most importantly, they are dominating the marketplace of ideas because they have people active and doing ‘something’. By mobilising only a tiny minority of those willing to speak out against extremism, this balance could soon be redressed.

The following sections examine **the types of products, projects and programmes that have been initiated (overtly) by both government and non-governmental organisations** along the counter-messaging spectrum, drawing lessons learned and good practices, where appropriate.

The area where government has the most natural and effective role to play in the counter-messaging spectrum lies within the development and streamlining of its own strategic communications.

The aims of this work are to ensure that government positions and policies are clearly articulated and directed to the right audiences; that government actions that are especially helpful in building relationships with key constituencies are amplified; and in some cases directly challenging misinformation about government, while being careful to avoid being backed into a defensive stance of rebuttals that can serve to reinforce the extremist discourse.

A number of governments have set up specialist units designed to oversee strategic communications activities in the context of tackling violent extremism, notably the UK and US. These units have helped to **systematise once fragmented efforts of public diplomacy, strategic communications and information operations both on and offline** in a way that feeds into national counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policy objectives,¹⁶ and are marked by a number of characteristics:

- They are **cross-departmental**, involving a range of internal and external stakeholders.
- They are **multi-disciplinary**, including skills not traditionally held within national security

agencies, such as campaigners, film editors, language specialists etc.

- They have invested in **monitoring capabilities** to understand audiences and adversaries.
- They provide **consultancy services across government** departments and agencies.
- They are heavily **focused on the potential of the Internet and social media** for the direct and indirect delivery of government messaging to target audiences.
- They **often label government affiliation in their strategic communications**, although some governments might additionally be engaged in more covert activities.

One such body is the **Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU)**, established in 2007 and based within the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) at the UK Home Office. RICU draws on staff from three departments (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government), and was set up to streamline government research and communications linked to counter-terrorism. It has a number of areas of work, including the **Domestic and International**

Campaigns Team that implements strategic communications activities, including digital campaigns aimed at vulnerable communities; and the **Insight and Analysis Team**, which conducts research on target audiences on and offline.¹⁷

The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) is an interagency unit based in the US State Department. Established in 2010,¹⁸ the CSCC is divided into three core components.¹⁹ The **Intelligence and Analysis** work systematises intelligence gathering and research capabilities, the **Plans and Operations** strand designs and implements non-digital communications activities, while the **Digital Outreach Team** carries out direct engagement with audiences online to contrast objective facts and analysis with the often emotional, conspiracy laden arguments of US critics.²⁰

These units tend to work behind the scenes, providing a range of services, toolkits and programmes that inform, streamline and facilitate government communications to counter violent extremism. This includes systematising **research and analysis capabilities to better understand the strategic communications of violent extremist groups and their impacts on target audiences**. RICU has invested in this research, including studies on the online behaviour of young Muslims, media consumption patterns, the role of blogs in radicalisation, in addition to broader efforts to understand how language used by government is received and understood by target audience groups.²¹

They also support government departments and agencies - as and where appropriate - in the **longer-term development of their own strategic communications activities, streamlining**

institutional processes and equipping government communicators with the tools and services they need in this sensitive area of communications. For example, the CSCC contributes to the development of communications toolkits that are made available to government communicators through their Open Source Center,²² and RICU has published communications guides including advice, ideas and templates to aid local Prevent delivery partners to better develop, articulate and implement strategic communications.²³

It is in the area of direct communication that these units come under the most intense scrutiny. For example, the case study box overleaf details the work of the **Digital Outreach Team (DOT)** within the CSCC. It is also worth noting that the US Central Command (CENTCOM) established its own **Digital Engagement Team** in 2008, which has been reported to include 20 native speakers of Arabic, Dari, Persian, Pashto, Urdu and Russian. It conducts similar online engagement work as that carried out by the DOT.²⁴

Government strategic communications is not risk-free, and it is important to be aware of the limitations associated with overt government communications to counter extremism.

The extent and impact of government **efforts is limited by finite resources, both financial and human**. Although this work has become much better resourced over the last few years in some countries, governments are up against the well-oiled communications machines of extremist networks, which are able to draw on the enthusiasm of activists with high digital proficiency **able to commit significant amounts of time and energy in pursuit**

Digital Outreach Team

Established in 2006, the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) had been initially activated to counter misinformation surrounding US foreign policies through direct online engagement.

Since its incorporation into the activities of the CSCC, the initiative has combined public diplomacy communications with more direct efforts to counter the propaganda of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates, through the dissemination of text, still images and audio-visual content.

The DOT is made up of approximately 20 staff, including 10 Arabic, five Urdu and two Somali-speaking writer-analysts, who work mainly on mainstream platforms through overt engagement that is clearly branded as State Department communications. The DOT designs its engagement strategy based on the new media consumption patterns of its foreign target audiences.

Previous reports have indicated that its messaging has aimed to do such things as challenge negative perceptions of US involvement in the Middle East; advocate for a multicultural society and religious tolerance; state the desire to withdraw from Iraq; undermine myths or conspiracy theories; and stressing that the US is not at war with the Muslim world.²⁵

The DOT often operates through targeted campaigns, and has recorded 17,000 separate engagements since its creation in 2006, 7,000 of those since joining the CSCC.²⁶

of their ideological cause. Pre-existing bureaucratic constraints and the need for institutional sign-off on communications often means that governments are slow to respond and unable to make the kinds of bold statements that are more likely to have an impact with the intended target audiences. As one former extremist noted, “**you can’t just have a 10-man team working nine-to-five**”.²⁷

As a result, effective counter-messaging by government (particularly at the engagement-level practised by the US State Department), **requires a shift in work patterns** to enable them to respond 24/7 and without associated bureaucratic constraints. **Streamlining these institutional processes should, in theory, allow for more proactive and responsive messaging following key events** which, if not addressed in a well-timed manner, may risk feeding into the single narratives of extremist movements.²⁸

Another challenge for governments is to **balance the need to transmit factual information with the imperative to appeal to the emotional instincts of target audiences.** Most state-led messaging approaches have tended to be ‘logic-focused’, explaining government positions and policies, correcting facts, busting myths, and applying superior logic to refute and counter misinformation. A content analysis of US State Department messaging confirms this observation, noting that **93.92% of their messages used logical rhetoric.**²⁹ **Superior arguments alone are often not enough,** particularly when directly undermining propaganda. Government strategic communications need to respond to a dual requirement; to appeal through logic but also on the senses. The US State Department has begun to respond; its video productions combine **factual information with emotional appeal through the creative and dynamic use of music and imagery,**³⁰ but there is still much work to do to develop and refine this content.

Government must also guard against inadvertently **reinforcing the extremists' messages by amplifying them through their actions**, avoiding what has been termed the 'say-do' gap. As it has been observed; "Views of people, whether positive or negative, are, in spite of temporary successes of spin doctors, at the end of the day based upon real experiences".³¹ As a result, **government approaches to countering the appeal of violent extremist ideologies should focus as much on what they as governments do as on what they say**. As retired Adm. Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it, "most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems".³²

It is also worth noting that governments have an important role to play in simply **raising awareness of the threats from violent extremism** in order to ensure they are properly understood by key partners, and to underline why government responses are necessary and proportionate. The US National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) has developed interactive materials as part of its **Community Awareness Briefing** aimed to inform audiences of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda and its global affiliates, highlighting their online efforts to recruit and radicalise Americans while exploring what governments and communities can do to counter them.³³

Aside from raising awareness of the threat of extremism, government messaging **must ensure that its positions and policies are clearly articulated** and directed to the right audiences; that **government actions that are especially helpful in building relationships with key constituencies are amplified**; and in some cases directly challenging misinformation about government. In countering extremist discourses, government must be careful to

avoid being backed into a defensive stance of rebuttals that can serve to reinforce the extremist discourse, and needs to focus its attention on **undermining myths and conspiracy theories related to its activities**, while making sure these do not contradict real-world actions on the ground.

5 ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Alternative narratives play an important role in countering the appeal of violent extremism. They do not tend to challenge extremist messaging directly, but instead attempt to **influence those who might be sympathetic towards (but not actively supportive of) extremist causes**, or help to unite the silent majority against extremism by **emphasising solidarity, common causes and shared values**.

There are three roles for government in the alternative narrative domain: **supporting and facilitating civil society efforts** to design and deliver alternative narrative campaigns; delivering alternative narratives via politicians and public statements; and through **ensuring that messages are reinforced by government policies and practices**. This report will focus on the first of these roles for government, although there are many examples – good and bad – of government actions in the second and third categories.

There are many examples of alternative narratives activities, some directly funded by government, but many community-initiated and supported at both local and national levels. There are also some examples of transnational programmes. These programmes tend to share a number of characteristics:

- They mostly focus on the promotion of **moderate centre-ground alternatives** that undercut, rather than directly engage, extremist messages and messengers.
- These initiatives create not only a community of interest but **movements for positive change through community outreach, education and mass mobilisation**.
- While government has a role to play, it has **reduced credibility as enactor and it is best suited to facilitate** grass-roots campaigning initiatives.
- Many existing **community-led activities surveyed benefit from government support**, both in terms of financial assistance, in-kind backing, convening and capacity building.
- Government institutions are playing an increasingly important role in **streamlining private-sector engagement with grass-roots civil society networks**, but more could be done in this regard.

Alternative **narratives come in a variety of forms, and have been activated by a wide range of actors**. From inter-faith and inter-community networks of influential grass-roots activists, opinion and community-leaders (both religious and secular), to entrepreneurs, sports personalities and even pop artists, they have provided powerful **avenues through which to engineer more moderate and inclusive discourses through social action and public outreach**.

5.1 Seeding new platforms

In the US and UK, where large-scale government support for alternative narrative projects is most pronounced, there have been a **number of attempts to build online platforms through which these messages can be channelled and promoted**. As the 2013 Annual Report of the UK Government's CONTEST strategy stated, "We want to see more websites established to refute claims made by terrorist and extremist organisations", with a recognition that these are best delivered by communities rather than the government.³⁴ One example of a government-backed initiative is the **Radical Middle Way**, whose work includes the provision of faith-inspired guidance and safe spaces fostering open debate through both on and offline channels.³⁵

Platforms such as **Sabahi**³⁶ and **Magharebia**³⁷ have been seeded to reframe perspectives on geopolitics and current affairs. Funded by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), the platforms are run by local freelance journalists, and offer "**accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments**",³⁸ to influence target audiences in Somalia and North Africa respectively. As an AFRICOM statement puts it, "The Internet is a big place, and we are one of many websites out there. Our site aims to provide a moderate voice in contrast to the numerous violent extremist websites."³⁹

While it is important to ensure there are spaces online for debate, such platforms can have limited and self-selecting readership. By setting up new websites, moderates can simply divide the audience, and risk having little or no impact on those potentially susceptible to extremist messaging. Greater effectiveness would be achieved by disseminating good content into existing social networks, going to where the audiences already are

rather than trying to pull them to new locations. With this in mind, governments should be cautious about **funding a plethora of websites that merely 'preach to the converted'**.

5.2 Galvanising the silent majority

While extremist voices are undoubtedly in the minority online, they are able to punch above their weight because they are determined, vociferous and dedicated to their cause. **Those seeking to promote alternative narratives, in contrast, are often dogged by an 'enthusiasm gap'**; activists are dedicated but have full-time jobs to hold down and family commitments to honour. This has resulted in a situation where, instead of having extremist views drowned out by opposing views, the Internet has amplified extremists' voices.

One of the key roles that governments can play is in identifying the next generation of leaders, increasing their awareness of the challenge of tackling violent extremism and inspiring them to play an active role. The US State Department has helped to raise awareness through its **Office of the Special Representative to Muslim Communities**, which aims to "**scout out talented, creative 'change-makers' who positively impact their communities**", through building online and offline global action networks of like-minded leaders.⁴⁰ Its Hours Against Hate initiative is a social media campaign aimed at motivating "young people around the world to pledge their time to stop hate - to do something for someone who doesn't look like you, pray like you, or live like you".⁴¹

Such campaigns are especially powerful when they raise awareness through target audience participation. In other words, where they encourage

individuals to become part of the campaign by making a personal contribution. For example, **My Fellow American** is an awareness-raising project designed to change perceptions from Muslims as the other, to Muslims as fellow Americans.⁴² It encourages individuals to participate in three ways, from passive to active: watch the campaign video; record a brief video about a Muslim American that they would like to share with the rest of America; and take a pledge to the cause, shared across social media channels.⁴³

Another campaign, **MyJihad**, seeks to reclaim the concept of 'Jihad' from 'both Muslim and anti-Muslim' extremists in order to promote voices from the mainstream.⁴⁴ Although not the first attempt to reframe perceptions of the term,⁴⁵ it solicits and compiles user statements about individuals' understanding and practice of 'Jihad' through engaging moderates on social media.⁴⁶ However, experiences from this campaign have suggested that **galvanising 'moderates' to provide credible alternatives over the long-term remains a major challenge**, with some critics arguing that its efforts have been overrun - even leveraged - by the very extremists the initiative was supposed to drown-out.⁴⁷

5.3 Capacity building

One of the greatest challenges in mobilising the majority to act against the minority of extremists is one of basic skills and expertise; those who are the most credible messengers so often lack technical, communications and strategic know-how, whether in the alternative or counter-narrative domains. This is an area where there is considerable scope for government to plug the gaps. As Shahed Amanullah, Senior Advisor for Technology at the US State Department commented on the challenge for

government, "How do you empower these communities, give them the same level of passion, excitement and creativity as on the other side? How do you equip them with tools in the way that pushes the extremists back?"⁴⁸

'Muslim Youth Canada' or **MY CANADA** is an initiative seeded by the Canadian Council of Muslim Women and supported financially by the Citizenship and Immigration Canada's Multiculturalism Program.⁴⁹ It aims to strengthen plural identities and increase civic engagement among young Canadian Muslims, through activities, such as increasing leadership skills and enabling more effective communication skills and confident use of web 2.0. In so doing, the initiative hopes to "improve strategies to address discrimination and radicalization" within these communities, through promoting greater self-expression.⁵⁰

Viral Peace is an offline capacity building programme supported and staffed by members of the US State Department, which aims to enhance the capabilities of activists around the world to create mobile, social media and online communications tools that drive organic efforts to stand up against hate and violence, as well as connect bridge builders to needed resources, partners and community audiences.⁵¹ The initiative recruits regional activists enrolled on the programme with the assistance of US Embassies, and is planning to expand the programme's reach into new target geographies, such as Europe. It is often delivered in conjunction with its sister programme, **Generation Change**.⁵²

There are a number of initiatives where governments have supported social media and communications training for civil society groups. For example, the UK government has recruited

Viral Peace

Supported by the US State Department, Viral Peace aims to assist community activists in undermining the appeal of violent extremism through strategising their campaigning while increasing their motivation, influence and reach on the Internet and social media.

It has delivered frontline training through a series of one or two-day offline workshops in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with further sessions scheduled in Nepal, India and Pakistan. The initiative offers training and guidance but encourages participants enrolled on the program to design and deliver their own campaigns, restricting its follow-up involvement to monitoring progress and offering encouragement.

Through the delivery of seminars on social media strategies and related topics such as identity and vulnerability online, participants are invited to learn about the types of tools and techniques that are relevant to both the content and delivery of online campaigning, such as how to craft compelling narratives and the basics of using social media for social good.

Viral Peace is often delivered in conjunction with Generation Change, a global network of young leaders to inspire change and positive community impacts at a local and international level.⁵³

digital communications experts to support fifteen organisations in exploiting the potential of the Internet.⁵⁴ There is also private sector support for this capacity building. In the US, the **New America Foundation** has hosted online workshops for Muslim community leaders in cities across the country, financed by technology companies, such as Microsoft, Google, Facebook and Twitter. They teach participants how to use information technology more effectively, including social media.⁵⁵

More broadly, it should not be forgotten that **government is unique in having the power to convene a wide range of actors**, from civil society and academics to the private sector and international organisations. This is especially important in counter-messaging, given the need to combine a range of types of expertise that are rarely found together in one group, from technical and communications skills, to accurate messaging and authenticity of voice.

5.4 Challenges for government

Distrust of the government by key target audiences can limit the effectiveness of state-backed alternative narrative initiatives.⁵⁶ While this is more of a pronounced challenge in the realm of counter rather than alternative-narrative, it has still impacted on organisations, such as the Radical Middle Way and the Quilliam Foundation,⁵⁷ which at various times have had their motives and impact questioned due to the fact that they have been in receipt of government funding for their activities.⁵⁸ **There is also a challenge of scale**, which is more pronounced in relation to alternative narratives, where such a large number of individuals and organisations have the potential to play a role. **Governments need to find ways to roll out training and capacity building programmes** in a cascade system to produce a cadre of trained trainers who can then go on to roll out the courses at a local level.

6 COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Counter-narratives are aimed at individuals, groups and networks further along the path to radicalisation, whether they be sympathisers, passive supporters or those more active within extremist movements. These more targeted programmes explicitly deconstruct, delegitimise and de-mystify extremist propaganda in order to achieve a number of aims, from de-radicalisation of those already radicalised to sowing the seeds of doubt among ‘at risk’ audiences potentially being exposed to or seeking out extremist content. They share a number of attributes:

- These activities **deconstruct, discredit and de-mystify extremist messaging** and tend to do so in a more head-on way than alternative narratives.
- There are **many distinct target audiences for counter-narrative messaging**, which require different types of campaigns, tactics and approaches.
- These activities work best when they are **targeted campaigns appealing to a specific target group, which means that ‘going viral’ is not realistic or even necessary.**
- Credibility of message and messenger is paramount, and while governments have conducted counter-narrative operations, they tend to be better suited to **facilitating other credible messengers** to do this work.

- These types of campaigns often attempt to **plant seeds of doubt rather than just ‘win the argument’** because the latter can prove counterproductive when the target audience is applying black and white thinking.
- Successful counter-narrative initiatives will incorporate **effective branding and high-end production quality**, just like some of the products and campaigns of extremist groups that are becoming more professional.

Counter-narratives cover a **broad range of strategies with different aims and messages**, including picking apart violent extremist ideologies through **eroding their intellectual framework**; attempting to **mock, ridicule, or undermine the credibility/legitimacy** of violent extremist messengers; highlighting how extremist activities **negatively impact on the constituencies they claim to represent**; **demonstrating how the means they adopt are inconsistent with their own beliefs**; or **questioning their overall effectiveness** in achieving their stated goals.⁵⁹

This section outlines a number of different approaches, including government efforts; the role of formers, survivors and other credible messengers; the development and dissemination of counter-narrative products; counter-narrative for de-radicalisation or disengagement; digital disruptions; and offline interventions.

6.1 Government counter-narratives

Some governments have tried to operate within the counter-narrative space, notably the US and UK. Their efforts have often focused on **playing up internal divisions and defections within extremist networks while highlighting the ineffectiveness and counter-productive nature of violence as a means to bring about their aims**. For example, the DOT in the US State Department has **expanded its remit from addressing misinformation and grievances surrounding US foreign policy to also seeking to tarnish the image of Al-Qaeda and its global affiliates**. As former Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, put it, “If they put up a video which talks about how terrible Americans are, we put up a video which talks about, you know, how terrible they are”. She was referring to web ads purchased by the State Department to highlight the impact of attacks by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on Yemeni citizens in response to advertisements the group had bought criticising US foreign policy.⁶⁰ More recently, the DOT produced a spoof video ridiculing the Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁶¹ In the UK, RICU also works on counter-narrative activities through the “road-testing” of “innovative approaches to counter-ideological messages”.⁶²

However, there is a **limited role for governments in producing and disseminating counter-narratives because of their credibility gap**, which limits the effectiveness of government efforts. As UK Home Secretary, Theresa May observed, “Often it is more effective to be working through groups that are recognised as having a voice and having an impact with that voice, rather than it being seen to be government trying to give a message”.⁶³ There is also the risk that **government activities can be counter-productive**. Early evaluations of the DOT’s activities have raised this possibility, with their messages

seemingly generating increased negativity towards both US foreign policy and the DOT itself.⁶⁴ As a former recruiter of the **White Aryan Resistance** observed; ‘... we would have eagerly awaited their [government] counter-narrative campaign so that we could have a good laugh!’.⁶⁵

6.2 The role of formers, survivors and other credible messengers

The identity of the counter-narrative messenger is critical; those at risk of radicalisation or already radicalised will only listen to those with credibility, authority and authenticity. There are a number of types of messengers who possess these qualities due to their personal circumstances, and this makes them prime change agents in counter-narrative campaigning.

Former violent extremists who have ‘been there and done that’ are credible with those at risk of radicalisation,⁶⁶ although they might be viewed with suspicion or anger by those still in extremist movements. These individuals are able to talk to the futility and flaws of violence and extremism, describe the grim day-to-day reality of such networks, and delegitimise violence-promoting narratives.⁶⁷ There are scores of former extremists who work within their local communities to keep young people away from radicalisers and recruiters, and act as an embodiment of the counter-narrative message themselves.

There are a number of **notable examples of former extremists speaking out, which anecdotally appear to have had an impact within extremist circles**. Former radical Islamist Hofstad Network member, Jason Walters, wrote an open letter from his Dutch prison cell in 2010 chronicling how “... a once lofty ‘struggle for freedom’... turned into a bloody escalation of violence, sectarianism and religious

mania". He went on to note, "The image that the world only exists of believers and infidels, in which the latter are motivated only to destroy the former, is a childish and coarse simplification of reality".⁶⁸

Such denouncements have also come from further up the extremist hierarchy. For example, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi criticised his former pupil, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in a text, which was translated into Indonesian.⁶⁹ Similarly, **Sayyid Imam al-Sharif** (alias Dr. Fadl), former senior member of Al-Qaeda, wrote a rejection of Al-Qaeda violence from his cell in Tora Prison, Egypt.⁷⁰ Such open letters have also been prevalent within extreme right-wing movements. **There is scope for governments to help increase the impact of such statements by funding their translation into other languages to expand their reach.**

The **survivors of violent extremism** are also powerful counter-narrative messengers. Offering a reminder of the real impact of violence, their testimonies serve to de-glamorise and de-legitimise terrorist acts perpetrated against ordinary civilians. Organisations such as the **Global Survivors Network (GSN)** have been set up precisely to leverage survivor testimonies, stories and insights as counter-narratives.⁷¹ Another example is provided by the **Network of Associations of Victims of Terrorism (NAVT)**, which has been designed to stimulate more effective trans-national co-operation between associations of victims of terrorism and promote the increased representation of victims' voices at a European level.⁷²

There are also efforts to amplify the **voices of women in countering extremist narratives**. For example, **Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE)** was set up to network women who want to work together to push back on violent extremism and helps them to create and deliver the capacities and tools they need to

challenge critical extremist thinking and develop alternative strategies for countering terrorism.⁷³ It includes women with a range of personal connections to violent extremism, either as formers themselves, related to violent extremists or as the survivors of attacks, along with a range of other women with a professional interest in the subject matter.

Authoritative religious, political or community leaders are also well positioned to counter extremist messages. This might happen on a one-to-one level both on and offline, or via carefully crafted messages and texts. One such example is the Islamic decree pronounced by scholar Dr Tahir ul-Qadri, designed to refute "...the theological arguments advanced by terrorists in prisons, on websites, videos and their literature". Translated into English, French, German and Norwegian, the challenge with such theological rebuttals remains to balance comprehensiveness with accessibility (the original text is more than 500 pages long). As a result, campaigners have sought to increase the initiative's reach through a recent revamp of its online platform, including key extracts and audio-visual materials.⁷⁴

There is often a mismatch between those who have the credibility and those with the capacity to act effectively in the counter-narrative sphere. The most credible messengers tend to lack the networks, support and specialist expertise that would allow them to scale up their work and its impact. The global **Against Violent Extremism (AVE)** network helps to plug this gap, facilitating and streamlining engagement between individuals and organisations working to counter extremist messages. It also pairs them with professionals with specialist expertise to offer, brokers pro bono support for them on things such as social media marketing, and helps them to share good practices and lessons learned. As Ross

Against Violent Extremism (AVE)

AVE is a global network of former extremists, survivors of extremism and others (academics, private sector and community leaders), run by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) with support from Google Ideas and the Gen Next Foundation.

The platform enables members to connect directly with one another in order to create high-impact projects that will articulate and amplify effective counter-messages to those at risk of radicalisation. As a result, those countering Al-Qaeda affiliates in Pakistan are now able to connect with those countering the appeal of radical Islamist movements in the United Kingdom.

The project also aims to serve as a one-stop-shop hub to connect members to the tools, technology, policy makers, practitioners and resources (financial and in-kind), that will enable these credible voices to have an impact at scale, while fostering collaboration to enable these members to seed innovative counter-narrative projects at the grass roots.⁷⁶

Frenett, AVE Manager at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, explained, “AVE brings together over 250 formers and survivors...Our job is to support these individuals to learn from each other, connecting them with private sector resources while advocating on their behalf to governments”.⁷⁵

AVE is one of the few counter-narrative projects to have attracted private sector support, with core funding provided by Google Ideas and the Gen Next Foundation. This allows it to **stand independent of governments, avoiding the usual political sensitivities that can follow state involvement in such initiatives**. It has also been successful at encouraging companies to give their time and expertise for AVE members to scale up and improve their work, helping them to widen and deepen their reach.

That is not to say that there is no role for government in relation to credible messengers, such as formers and survivors. **Governments can help through assisting individuals and organisations on an ad hoc basis**, including through the **provision of contacts** to expand their reach, help in **unlocking independent funds** for specific project-based activities, or **brokering offers of in-kind support**. This work is not risk-free for

governments as they need to make careful decisions about who to help.⁷⁷ In supporting or promoting particular formers, for example, governments need to be sure that the individual has renounced violence and is no longer connected with his or her violent extremist networks. Some governments, like the UK, take a firm line against those who have renounced violence but continue to hold non-violent extremist views. There can also be personal risks for those involved in this work, either to their physical safety as a result of threats from violent extremists, or from the risk of psychological damage brought about by reliving deeply traumatic experiences over and over again, whether as a former violent extremist or as a survivor of a violent extremist attack.

6.3 Development and dissemination of counter-narrative products

There is a wealth of extremist material and product that is slick and professionally produced, but the same often cannot be said for their counter-narrative equivalents. These products are often profoundly unappealing ‘cut-and-paste’ jobs that fail to reach a “computer savvy, media-saturated, video game-addicted generation”.⁷⁸ As one former violent

extremist noted, “If I was to say, ‘listen to this lecture by so-and-so scholar’. Well, I’ve listened to hundreds of lectures by scholars. Sitting there listening to this guy reading his words out in English or Arabic with an English translation - that is not so cool.”⁷⁹

There are a small number of promising initiatives, though. For example, in 2011 EXIT Deutschland combined music, clothing and social media in a campaign on the theme, ‘Get Out of the Scene’, devised by a task force of private sector companies, former neo-Nazis and social media experts.⁸⁰ It resulted in the ‘Trojan T-Shirt’ campaign, which distributed 250 white power t-shirts at a neo-Nazi music festival that, when washed, altered the logo to ‘What your T-shirt can do, so can you - we’ll help you break with right-wing extremism’, and included the EXIT brand. The initiative received widespread coverage in both mainstream media and far-right subcultures and increased overall awareness of the EXIT programme among right-wingers, trebling the number of self-referrals to its disengagement programme.⁸¹

The European Commission-funded Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) working group on the Internet and Social Media (RAN @), which is co-chaired by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and Google Ideas, has made its primary objective to connect credible messengers to private sector resources and to identify examples of good practice in counter-narratives.⁸² The group has garnered private sector in-kind support to help produce and disseminate a short animated mini counter-narrative graphic novel, Abdul X. This has involved advice on the design of the content and in-kind support to tailor the cartoon’s delivery.

These partnerships need to be sustained and underpinned by two types of capability: production skills and audience targeting expertise. Production

skills and techniques need to be boosted among credible messengers. From interactive content, to cartoons and even games, **new productions methodologies need to be encouraged, trialled and tested.** This could include the development of best-practice toolkits that provide low-cost assistance and know-how in filming, recording and editing of original audio-visual materials, made ever easier as software becomes cheaper and accessible. Campaigners should look to **advances made in other sectors for best practices and lessons learned in how to engage target audiences online.**⁸³

Effective messengers also need to develop expertise to allow them to target their counter-narratives and dissemination strategies to ensure they reach the right audience. This includes - but is not limited to - **systematic audience profiling research** to understand who needs to be reached and how; **communications know-how to understand how best to package key messages;** and **marketing advice** to advise on how to distribute products via a range of mediums. Private-sector stakeholders are in a unique position to help civil society to ‘fish where the fishes are’, providing technical guidance on how to influence those ‘at risk’, ranging from **basic guidance on search-engine optimisation techniques to more structured support in developing and delivering a marketing strategy.**

Google and YouTube have made some important advances in maximising the communicative reach of grass-roots activists, providing a variety of **free in-kind support and services to civil society organisations.** This includes offering industry-leading production end editing equipment and resources to non-profits in selected YouTube studios,⁸⁴ and free advertising grants worth \$10,000 per month.⁸⁵ YouTube also offers a broad range of services

through its **Nonprofit Program** available in Australia, Canada, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, the UK and US, to help grass-roots civil society organisations to **activate their cause, tell a compelling story, and launch an effective campaign.**⁸⁶

There are a number of ways that government can play a role in the counter-narrative domain without acting as the messenger. It can help to signpost schemes (such as those run by YouTube) to credible messengers, as well as encourage other companies to run similar initiatives by signalling its genuine commitment to working with service providers to counter the messaging of violence and extremism on their respective platforms. This will require broadening the scope of engagement with industry representatives, which for many countries is still limited to law enforcement approaches aimed at Internet censorship. Beyond awareness-raising activities, **governments should unlock funds to facilitate multi-disciplinary advisory networks** to offer practical support and help on technical and communication matters to those working to counter violent extremist messages. RAN@ offers an example of the difference that such networks can make.

6.4 One-to-one counter-narratives for de-radicalisation or disengagement

There are a number of more targeted initiatives designed to confront violent extremist messages and rhetoric within the spaces where they are created and repeated online with immediate challenge and argument, whether directly or for the purpose of sowing seeds of doubt among target audiences. It often involves **former extremists, religious scholars and other credible messengers joining online forums under a pseudonym, building up relationships with individual members and**

through sustained engagement drawing them into discussions about their extremist views.

The aim of this kind of work is not to ‘win the argument’ or cause the extremist to renounce their views; that would be unrealistic because extremists adopt black and white thinking and are well versed in counter-arguments. As Abd Al-Mun'im Al-Mushawwah, founder of Al-Sakina explains, “We did not demand that the people with whom we spoke renounce [their views] by 100% - this would have been a false hope...”⁸⁷ Rather, these engagement activities aim to **erode the intellectual framework adopted by extremists at their margins through planting ‘seeds of doubt’.** As one former extremist working on radical Islamist forums noted,

“Let’s say, they take an approach which is...‘You guys are bad because you are doing this’. They don’t care! They already know that you consider them to be bad so it doesn’t really have that much of an effect on them. When you use the same value system that they appeal to and you take away the authenticity with which they claim their position then you see they are far more likely to feel the need to respond.”⁸⁸

Such work is difficult and sensitive and requires considerable experience and expertise, and its success depends on **inter-personal bonds between the extremist supporters and the counter-messenger.** It would be easy to assume that such bonds are difficult to forge online between people who have no offline connection, but evidence suggests otherwise. The one-on-one method is designed to overcome in-group peer pressure, which can act as a significant barrier to meaningful intervention, both on and offline, and anecdotal evidence points to the fact that attempts to do this

work in a group setting do not work because dominant voices shut down the discussion. Al-Mushawwah observed that:

*“... our [real] work begins when we draw some people whom we sense hold particularly [extremist] views into side dialogues, on chat or messenger programs. [We do this] because, in side dialogues, there is a greater range of possibilities to persuade [them], and we are able to exchange views with them far from the hubbub of the public dialogues and without external influence...”*⁸⁹

While government agencies have been involved both overtly and covertly in these types of activities with mixed results, there is a wider role that government can play in systematising this kind of work without doing it itself. For example, it can fund others to do it. EXIT Sweden is a grass-roots organisation part-funded by the Swedish government that counts former violent extremists among its staff and supports the rehabilitation of individuals who identify with neo-Nazi movements. It has **recognised the importance of online community-bonding processes and has begun to explore the potential of online engagement strategies.**⁹⁰

The Al-Sakina (Tranquillity) initiative is an independent, non-governmental organisation supported by the Saudi Arabian government.⁹¹ In 2008, it was reported that the programme had 60-70 volunteers, including religious and academic scholars, sociologists, former violent extremists, psychiatrists and technology experts.⁹² The initiative has been known to **target audiences further along the path of radicalisation** found in online forums for adherents of the takfir ideology or Al-Qaeda forums in order to **conduct dialogue with those who express solidarity with the operations of violence and terror,**

but who have not participated in such activities in order to prevent them from doing so.⁹³

Organisations such as these have considerable experience of this one-on-one de-radicalisation and report being able to shift individuals in their thinking. **Some programmes report statistics to highlight their success, which should be read with caution as analysing success remains problematic.** Perhaps the most powerful evidence of their effectiveness comes from personal testimonies, such as this excerpt from a former high-ranking female member of Al-Qaeda engaged by scholars of the Al-Sakina programme:

*“In the forums, there were various speakers. There were those who spoke rudely to us or to [the organization’s] commanders, and who made curse-filled accusations. Their tone was harsh and angry. We were not afraid of these people, no matter what they said or how numerous they were in the forums - on the contrary, they made people identify with the Al-Qaeda organisation and its members [even more]. We began to fear those who spoke pleasantly and with well-based religious knowledge... These [people] raised in me, and in many other women I know, serious doubts and questions regarding the beliefs that we held so deeply.... After many discussions we found - or at least I found - that the religious rules that had been dictated to us [by our commanders] were mistaken....”*⁹⁴

6.5 Counter-narratives through digital disruption

As well as producing messages and products, **counter-narrative activity also extends to a range of digital disruptions** that can make it more difficult to find extremist content online and via social media or poke fun at that which does exist. These activities **involve the**

use of tools or smart technological fixes and go with the grain of the essential characteristics of the Internet, such as user-generated content, the push towards big data, the low barriers to entry, legitimacy via connectivity rather than hierarchical status and navigation via nodes and networks.

There have been more technical attempts to obscure extremist messaging on the Internet and social media. This work is in its infancy but has the potential to scale up fastest because it does not generally require detailed technical expertise for normal Internet users, although there are more technically advanced ways that Internet service providers, social media platforms and government can play a role. In 2011, the ‘hacktivist’ collective, Anonymous, called on Internet users to upload altered copies of Anders Breivik’s manifesto in an attempt to prevent the Norwegian terrorists’ political ideas influence future acts of violence and extremism.⁹⁵ The UK government has also attempted to obscure the messaging of violent extremists, notably through ‘Operation Cupcake’, which saw MI6 replace virtual copies of Al-Qaeda’s flagship magazine, Inspire, with a popular recipe for cupcakes.⁹⁶

While these efforts often cross the line into law enforcement measures, the **English Disco Lovers** have provided a powerful example of disruptive counter-narrative campaigning strategy implemented simply through the mass mobilisation of Internet users. Using the ‘EDL’ acronym, the movement has aimed to subvert the far-right group’s messaging by replacing it as a top search results on sites such as Google and Facebook and hijacking its Twitter hashtag.⁹⁷ **These types of (often humorous) mass-mobilised counter-messaging activities have also been seeded organically**, such as against the extreme right-wing figurehead Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (alias Tommy Robinson).⁹⁸

This work plays to the fact that those battling extremism have size and scale on their side; violent and non-violent extremists are in the minority, so mobilising just a tiny proportion of those seeking to combat them would reverse the balance away from their favour. **RAN@ is working with private sector industries to identify the crowd-sourcing tools and techniques through which these types of targeted campaigns can be engineered longer-term.** While these are in the early stages of development, the activities of RAN@ highlight the need to pilot more innovative approaches in countering the appeal of violent extremist messengers, particularly online. As Yasmin Dolatabadi, Principal at Google Ideas and co-chair of RAN@ explained:

“When you consider the vastness of the social media landscape and the enormous number of Internet users, it is easy to describe... extremists as a ‘needle in a haystack’. What we are interested in exploring through the European Commission’s Working Group on this topic is spotlighting the tools that can be used by the masses to challenge the ‘hate’ speech coming from a tiny minority... We are also exploring innovations that allow the actions of individuals to challenge hate speech to be scaled.”⁹⁹

There are concerns about the potential for this work to have the opposite effect to the intended impact. Some have suggested that such engagement could be ineffectual or perhaps even counterproductive by inflaming tensions. There are also concerns that it risks undermining existing engagement and intelligence gathering by security services, as counter-messengers may force extremist constituencies to move deeper underground. There is also an imperative to protect the personal safety of those conducting these engagement activities that may become the target of extremist aggression.

6.6 Offline interventions

There are also a considerable number of **offline counter-narrative interventions**, whether exclusively offline or as part of an online activity. Some of these programmes are linked to referral programmes that identify vulnerable individuals and groups, and seek to provide a **more in-depth analysis of extremist products for these people by intensively deconstructing how extremist arguments are formulated, packaged and delivered online**. They are delivered either one-on-one or in a group setting. They tend to be **labour-intensive and require sustained face-to-face engagement** with knowledgeable and credible experts on hand to answer follow-up questions. Their overriding aim is to equip vulnerable individuals to **critically engage with the content they consume, create and share online**. As a result, they tend to focus on introducing counter-messaging within a broader **digital, information and media literacy framework**.

One such project has been the **‘Deconstruct Programme’**. Based in South London, it works with at risk youth in the local area,¹⁰⁰ and has designed activities specifically aimed to counter the online messaging of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Recognising the sophistication of these media products, the project aims to **“identify the various messages being encoded...and the subtleties at play that are deliberately put together for effect and impact upon the viewer”**. This process is demonstrated in the deconstruction of a video released by Al-Qaeda’s media wing, as-Sahab.¹⁰¹

Following this, **“a counter-narrative [is introduced] to repel the justifications offered by the producers of the said video**. These justifications are aimed at devaluing the arguments put forth by highlighting the weaknesses of these arguments in the light of the Qur’an and Sunnah.”¹⁰² In order to do so, mentors possess a wide

range of knowledge of Islamic education in addition to considerable understanding of violent extremist ideologies, enabling them to provide **refutation and clarification of distorted or misunderstood interpretations** related to the theological, ideological and political narratives advanced by violent extremist groups in their audio-visual productions.¹⁰³

The creative design agency **Bold Creative** has taken another, more subtle approach to countering the messaging of violent extremism. With support from local government funding, the organisation piloted its **‘Digital Disruption’ workshops aimed at inoculating vulnerable youth against online propaganda**.¹⁰⁴ The workshops consisted of a team of digital media specialists, youth workers and filmmakers working with groups of young people considered at risk of radicalisation **to investigate the ways misinformation online is affecting them and their peers, and to co-produce films to promote critical, independent thinking in relation to the Internet**.¹⁰⁵

Receivers of the programme were invited to perform **hands-on filming, production and editing**, culminating in the production of their own conspiracy campaign, which was then spread through social networks both on and offline. A follow-up production, ‘What you need to know’, then revealed that viewers of the video had been tricked, to show how easy it is to manipulate audiences through new media. The video outlines some key techniques used in propaganda campaigns intended to influence target audiences. A further video, ‘Techniques of Propaganda’, sees offline receivers of the programme give audiences their own tips about how to be more digitally savvy when engaging with content online. **There is a role for the private sector in these initiatives, especially those involved in media, communications, branding and campaigning**.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

This report has provided an overview of the efforts being conducted by government and non-government actors to counter the messages of violent extremists on the Internet and social media. It is important to develop and deliver a comprehensive package of counter-messaging interventions across all three parts of the spectrum. Counter-messaging strategies should be multi-layered, integrating the use of **messages that erode the intellectual framework of violent extremist ideologies, combined with more constructive approaches aimed at providing credible alternatives to those susceptible to such messaging.** These should be deployed alongside government strategic communications to ‘set the record straight’ and ensure that positive messages about policy are received by the people that need to hear them.

There are many examples highlighted, but it should be stressed that this is a very new area of activity and few governments have policies in place. The report has relied on existing secondary data and evidence, so is not able to offer clear pronouncements on what constitutes good practice, but points to a number of conclusions and recommendations for governments, such as the Canadian government. Overall, governments must tread with caution in the area of counter-narratives – there is much they can do, but their efforts can be ineffective or even counter-productive when they act as the messenger because of their credibility gap with target audiences.

The report highlights the following roles for government.

A) Government Strategic Communications

The area where government has the most natural and effective role to play in the counter-messaging spectrum lies within the development and streamlining of its own strategic communications. This work is not risk-free and to be effective at responding to extremist messages requires some shifts in work patterns and bureaucratic routines. It also requires governments to move from the transmission of factual information towards an appeal to the emotional instincts of their target audiences.

Governments should devise a government strategic communications policy relating specifically to the challenge of countering extremist messages on the Internet and social media.

Some governments have established new central units to coordinate this work, made up of multi-disciplinary teams and working across government. These units are also able to produce toolkits and guidance for others working on strategic communications within government, or partners outside government.

Governments should explore the possibility of establishing similar units.

B) Government Role in Alternative Narratives

Government has three roles in relation to the development and dissemination of alternative narratives: supporting and facilitating civil society efforts to design and deliver alternative narrative campaigns via direct funding, in-kind support, and the streamlining of private sector engagement with grass-roots civil society networks; delivering alternative narratives via politicians and public statements; and ensuring that messages are reinforced by government policies and practices. Many governments are already active within this domain, whether explicitly for the purpose of countering extremist messages, or with broader aims in mind, such as cohesion, integration or civic education.

Governments should continue to invest in this work, but ensure there is greater consistency between what they say and what they do; avoid the 'say-do' gap.

C) Government Role in Counter-narratives

Some governments have engaged directly in counter-narrative activities, but the emerging evidence points to the fact that governments are more effective when they play an indirect, facilitative role. In some cases, it will be appropriate for them to fund counter-narrative activities, where this does not impact on the credibility of the product, campaign or message. There can be no general rules about when this will be the case because context is so important. There is emerging evidence to suggest that government counter-narrative campaigns can be counter-productive when poorly designed.

Governments should proceed with caution with regard to their direct role in counter-narrative efforts.

Counter-narrative strategies will require government institutions to refine their engagement with credible messengers. Given the risks associated with government engagement in this space, its institutions must have the necessary checks and balances and accountability mechanisms when deciding who to overtly promote, support and fund. In its search for credibility, there is a need for government to be explicit in its criteria for engagement - whether with formers, religious scholars or community groups.

D) Government Role in Capacity Building for Credible Messengers

One of the most important roles for government is in building capacity among those best suited to act as counter-narrative messengers and campaigners, who often lack the basic skills and competencies to do this work effectively and at scale. This would focus on technical, communications and strategic know-how to ensure they understand how to construct their messages, can develop the kinds of products and vehicles that will be well received by an increasingly digitally-savvy generation used to high production values, apply smart marketing strategies and have the right networks to generate communication economies of scale. Where possible, these programmes should be delivered by civil society organisations to ensure the training is bespoke to grass roots needs.

Governments should establish or help to seed training and development programmes at national and local levels, involving private sector companies able to offer in-kind support.

Governments should also fund the creation of a centralised resource package including regularly updated 'how to' guides on the use of new

technologies and social media platforms for the purpose of countering extremist messages online. By bringing a wider circle of formers, survivors, community activists and other credible messengers into their inner circle of trust, governments would benefit from the insights they could offer.

On another practical level, governments can fund the translation of key texts and multi-media products to widen the tools that counter-narrative messengers have at their disposal.

Governments should work together to have key items translated to relevant languages and share these systematically between one another to avoid duplication of very limited resources.

Governments should be cautious about creating yet more web platforms to house such documents and materials, instead prioritising dissemination activities to get these products to where the intended audiences are to be found already.

E) Government Investment in Monitoring and Evaluation

There is still little understood about what makes an effective counter-narrative campaign. Governments could make a highly valuable contribution by investing in large-scale research to plug this gap and work to disseminate the results to the most credible messengers in a way that is relevant to their operational needs. There is a need for new and innovative approaches to measuring the impact these communications activities have on attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of target audiences.

Governments should work collaboratively with the private sector and research bodies to formulate a

standardised monitoring and evaluation framework so results from even small-scale counter-narrative campaigns can be compared.

F) Government Investment in Data Gathering and Analysis

Effective counter-messaging requires detailed analysis to understand the nature and extent of extremist messaging and its impact on target audiences. There is a need for long-term investment in innovative research capabilities - particularly online - where new data collection and analysis methodologies are offering both social scientists and intelligence agencies new means of understanding violent extremist networks and their messaging. While there is a need to develop and systematise these monitoring capabilities, government must be mindful of the ethical implications. This is particularly the case in relation to online monitoring, and the concerns surrounding the retention and analysis of open-source user-data. Government must ensure that its efforts to increase its understanding of extremist messaging does not erode the personal and civil liberties of citizens.

Governments must invest in this kind of research, and where possible work collectively to pool resources and results.

G) Government Role in Brokering New Partnerships

As this report has shown, effective counter-narratives rely on bringing together a range of different skills and expertise that are rarely housed within one organisation or individual. Government is in a unique position to act as a convenor to bring together the various organisations, networks and

individuals that need to play a role to facilitate joint working and the pooling of ideas and resources.

While this report has pointed to a handful of examples of this kind of partnership working, **private-public sector collaboration needs to become more institutionalised, and government has a role to play in forging, streamlining and sustaining such partnerships.** This includes advocating the need for the provision of such services among a variety of domestic and international private sector industries, including within the marketing, advertising, public relations and communications sectors. In relation to the online domain, achieving buy-in from Internet and social media giants will require government to signal its genuine commitment to working with (and not against) these service providers to counter the messaging of violence and extremism on their respective platforms.

Beyond awareness-raising activities, **governments should look to unlock funds to facilitate multi-disciplinary advisory networks** to discuss ways of overcoming the core technical and technological challenges in counter-messaging; enabling the disseminating of expert knowledge and relevant best practices; while providing a forum through which to motivate industry to pilot innovative solutions to address the practical challenges faced by campaigners on the ground.

8.1 GOVERNMENT STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) United States

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Coordinate, orient and inform government strategic communications activities directed at audiences abroad, designed to counter the appeal of violent extremism.

Description:

Established in 2010, the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) is an interagency unit based at the US State Department.¹⁰⁶ Under the policy direction of the White House, the CSCC steering committee is chaired by the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy.¹⁰⁷ The CSCC's primary objective is to systematise US strategic communications to counter the appeal of violent extremist ideologies among foreign populations, particularly as related to Al-Qaeda and its global affiliates.

The core priorities of the organisation include; monitoring and evaluating extremist narratives both on and offline; developing and disseminating strategic communications throughout the executive branch; identifying trends in extremist messaging providing thematic guidance to government agencies and departments; facilitating the use of a wide range of communications technologies; collecting relevant information and data from other US agencies and identifying gaps in capabilities in any areas relevant to the CSCC and its priorities.¹⁰⁸

The CSCC is composed of three streams of work. The Intelligence and Analysis work stream systematises intelligence gathering through leveraging analytical and operational capabilities, guiding strategic communications activities through intelligence and academic insights of target audiences. This has included an 'analysis project to codify al-Qa'ida master narratives as perceived by different local audiences... particularly...in Yemen and Algeria', and an 'opinion survey in Somalia seeking to understand local perceptions of al-Shabaab'.¹⁰⁹

The Plans and Operations component designs and implements non-digital communications activities. As part of this, it designs toolkits and templates used by US government officials. This has included 'A Plague of Locusts: CT Messaging Against AQIM and Ansar al-Din'; 'One Path to Address CT Concerns in Syria without Helping the Regime or Alienating the Opposition'; and 'Al-Qa'ida and Al-Shabaab Merger: A Counter-Messaging Opportunity'.

Meanwhile, the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) performs direct engagement through the Internet and social media to counter extremist propaganda and misinformation. Composed of over 20 staff, and including Somali, Urdu and Arabic speakers, the DOT has performed 17,000 separate digital engagement since 2006 (when it was originally created), and 7,000 since its incorporation into the CSCC, using a range of text, still images and video content.¹¹⁰ Reports have indicated that the activities of the DOT and the CSCC more broadly are supported by technical and technological expertise of private-sector entities.¹¹¹

Key points

- (i) Aims to co-ordinate United States' strategic communications activities designed to counter the appeal of violent extremism and terrorism among foreign populations.
- (ii) Intelligence and Analysis work stream systematises intelligence gathering and research through leveraging analytical and operational skills of internal and external experts.
- (iii) Plans and Operations component designs and implements non-digital strategic communications activities, including designing toolkits and templates for US officials.
- (iv) Digital Outreach Team (DOT) performs direct engagement through the Internet and social media to counter extremist propaganda and misinformation online.

Digital Outreach Team (DOT) United States

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Engage with extremist content online through articulating government positions, countering misinformation and undermining extremist propaganda through digital communications.

Description:

Established in 2006, the Digital Outreach Team (DOT) had been initially designed to counter misinformation and explain government positions surrounding US foreign policies through direct engagement on the Internet and social media. Since its incorporation into the activities of the CSCC in 2010, the initiative has combined traditional public diplomacy communications with more direct efforts to counter the propaganda of Al-Qaeda and global affiliates. Ambassador Fernandez, Coordinator of the CSCC, describes the activities of the DOT as threefold; "contest the space, redirect the conversation and confound the adversary".¹¹²

The DOT is composed of approximately 20 staff, including 10 Arabic, five Urdu and two Somali-speaking writer-analysts, who aim to proactively contrast "objective facts and analysis with the often emotional, conspiracy laden arguments of US critics in hopes that online readers will take a fresh look at their opinions

of the US".¹¹³ The DOT uses a multi-platform approach, operating on a variety of mainstream news platforms, social networking and micro-blogging platforms through overt engagements that are clearly branded as State Department communications. This approach remains unique, as most government-led counter-messaging engagements are performed covertly.

The team designs its engagement strategy based on the new media consumption patterns of its various target audiences. This includes the dissemination of a wide-range of audio-visual content (three staff-members are video producers), through its official YouTube channel.¹¹⁴ The DOT also disseminates textual content on news websites, and engages users on other platforms such as through its Somali-dedicated Facebook page.¹¹⁵ In 2009, it had been reported that staff posted several dozen comments on 25-30 Internet sites per week.¹¹⁶ The team has recorded 17,000 separate engagements since its creation in 2006, 7,000 since joining the CSCC.¹¹⁷

Content tackled by the Digital Outreach Team has - amongst other issues - included challenging negative perceptions of US involvement in the Middle East; advocating a multicultural society and religious tolerance, stating a desire to withdraw from Iraq; undermining myths or conspiracy theories related to the US; expressing support for the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹¹⁸ Demonstrating its operational shift to more targeted counter-terrorism engagements, the DOT recently responded to pictures of coffins

draped in US flags posted by Al-Qaeda supporters on a Yemeni websites by posting pictures of coffins draped with the Yemen flag, alongside an Arabic message stating the human toll inflicted on Yemen by Al-Qaeda.¹¹⁹

The Digital Outreach Team often operates through targeted campaigns. This has included a campaign initiated in late 2011 to counter the advances made by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Southern Yemen, consisting of over 600 engagements, including audio-visual content and still images highlighting Al-Qaeda's

destructive methods, particularly through engagement on local Yemeni tribal platforms. In 2012, the DOT launched a campaign to influence its Urdu-speaking audiences in Pakistan highlighting examples of US-funded grass-roots aid projects in the region. This resulted in a 30-day campaign in which staff performed 255 engagements using 10 videos and 10 still images on 29 online platforms, reaching nearly 50,000 people through Facebook and forums while generating over 400 comments.¹²⁰

Key points

- (i) Established in 2006, the Digital Outreach Team had been initially designed primarily to counter misinformation surrounding US foreign policies.
- (ii) Since its incorporation into the CSCC, the initiative has combined public diplomacy communications with efforts to counter the propaganda of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates.
- (iii) The DOT is composed of over 20 staff, including 10 Arabic, five Urdu and two Somali-speaking writer-analysts. Also includes three video content producers.
- (iv) Recent suggestions has indicated that since its creation, the Digital Outreach Team has recorded 17,000 engagements, 7,000 since the team's incorporation into the CSCC.
- (v) Works proactively through accessing extremist blogs and websites to challenge statements and by posting YouTube videos in a range of target languages.

Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) United Kingdom

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Coordinate government-wide communication activities to counter the appeal of violent extremism while promoting stronger grass-roots inter-community relations.

Description:

Established in 2007, the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) is a cross-departmental strategic communications body based at the Office for Security and Counter-terrorism (OSCT) at the Home Office. It is a trilateral unit owned jointly by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO), Home Office and the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). RICU aims to coordinate government-wide strategic and crisis communications activities - both domestic and foreign - to counter the appeal of violent extremism and to strengthen inter-community relations at the grass-roots level.

One of the most developed cross-departmental strategic communications units in Europe; it is composed of research and communications specialists and divided into a number of areas of focus. The Monitoring and Coordination Team is responsible for providing analysis and insights of media and audience reactions. A Domestic and International Campaigns Team is charged with the implementation of strategic

communications activities - including digital campaigns - targeted at vulnerable communities; and an Insights and Analysis Team conducts research and analysis of target audiences both on and offline.¹²¹

Designed to coordinate, support and implement strategic communications activities, RICU had initially been tasked with advising government partners on their counter-terrorism-related communications (at home and overseas), exposing the weaknesses of violent extremist ideologies and brands, while supporting credible alternatives at the grass roots.¹²² This has included the production of communications guides and toolkits.¹²³ RICU has also invested in audience research, commissioning analysis looking at the online behaviors of young Muslims, media consumption patterns, the role of blogs in radicalisation, in addition to broader efforts to understand how language used by government is received and understood by target audiences.¹²⁴

In 2010, reports indicated that existing or projected activities within RICU included expansion into digital communications and social media, the development and dissemination of documentary materials on British Islam to overseas audiences, the maintenance of links with conventional media outlets to inform and advise on reporting that will impact on the counter-terrorism agenda, communications support and capacity building.¹²⁵ The traditional activities of RICU have recently been supplemented with a more targeted focus on the direct challenge of extremist narratives online through the 'road-testing' of 'innovative approaches to counter-ideological messages'.¹²⁶

Key points

- (i) Cross-departmental body designed to coordinate government-wide communication activities, including strategic and crisis communications.
- (ii) Seeks to influence audiences overseas and domestically away from extremist ideologies and promote stronger grass-roots inter-community relations.
- (iii) Composed of research and communications specialists and divided into three streams; Monitoring and Coordination, Domestic and International Campaigns, and Insights and Analysis.
- (iv) Disseminates own strategic communications, provides consultancy services to other departments and institutional partners, including local authorities and the police.

8.2 ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE PROJECTS

Radical Middle Way (RMW) United Kingdom

Category:
Non-governmental

Objectives:
Network of moderate Islamic scholars and credible community leaders designed to promote a vocal and confident middle-ground to meet the challenge of extremism.

Description:
Founded in the wake of the 7/7 attacks on London,¹²⁷ Radical Middle Way (RMW) aims to promote more open, responsible and cohesive communities. Designed to articulate a moderate, mainstream understanding of religion, faith and politics, the organisation engages hard-to-reach groups - especially young Muslims - providing them with faith-inspired guidance and safe spaces fostering open debate through both on and offline channels.

In doing so, RMW brings together religious scholars, community groups, sports personalities and creative

artists together to articulate a confident centre-ground. The initiative has organised over 170 offline events, ranging from panel debates to poetry and Islamic hip-hop to deliver a message that is not only authoritative, informed and legitimate but also disseminated in an entertaining and engaging way. The group also works internationally, with engagement activities in countries such as Mali, Pakistan, Sudan and Indonesia. In its landmark summit in Timbuktu, Mali in 2009 - attended by leading religious scholars and community leaders - RMW worked to undermine the growing support for Islamist extremism in Africa.¹²⁸

Radical Middle Way supplements this offline engagement with a high-visibility online presence designed to “foster an online community for young Muslims and others to safely ask questions and find answers”.¹²⁹ To achieve this, the initiative has disseminated a wide-range of audio-visual content.¹³⁰ RMW also leverage social media to maximise the project’s reach. This was notably the case for its ‘Dangerous Ideas Tour’,¹³¹ which featured hip-hop and rap artists and spoken word poetry from the UK and US designed to inspire young people to become agents of positive change in their communities.

Key points

- (i) Large network of moderate, mainstream Islamic scholars and civil society activists aiming to promote a center-ground narrative both on and offline.
- (ii) Designed to articulate a moderate, mainstream understanding of religion, faith and politics, the organisation engages hard-to-reach groups.
- (iii) Events and outreach designed as authoritative, informed and legitimate but disseminated in an entertaining and engaging way that will appeal to younger audiences.
- (iv) Most activities conducted in the United Kingdom, but conducts outreach work overseas, including Mali, Pakistan, Sudan and Indonesia.

Sabahi/Magharebia United States

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Provide alternative news sources to counter misinformation.

Description:

Launched in February 2012 and sponsored by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), Sabahi¹³² and Magharebia¹³³ provide independent and impartial coverage on news and current affairs. Through providing “accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments in the region”,¹³⁴ the platforms have been designed to counter misinformation - particularly on geopolitical developments - that risk feeding into the single narrative of extremist movements. The platforms cater to two distinct regional target audiences. While Sabahi covers Kenya, Tanzania, Djibouti and Somalia, Magharebia targets audiences predominantly in North and West Africa, including Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania.

Content on both platforms is diverse, but news reporting is heavily dominated by reports related to extremism, terrorism and counter-terrorism. This has included opinion pieces on how “Mauritanians react to new AQIM leader” or reports highlighting “a climate of fear and uncertainty” in Hudur after al-Shabaab takeover, and spotlights such as “Somalis condemn al-Shabaab’s arrest of Qur’an teachers”. It also carries out polls, asking readers such questions as “Do recent Al-Qaeda losses in ranks spell better security for the Maghreb region?”

Both platforms synthesise international and regional news reporting relevant to their target regions, and employ local journalists to write local opinion pieces. Both platforms promote its regional news resources through web ads, including on YouTube, and reports have indicated that Sabahi receives around 4,000 visitors and 10,000 article views daily.¹³⁵ It has been reported that both Sabahi and Magharebia form part of a broader project costing \$3 million annually, which includes reporting, editing, translating, publishing and IT costs.¹³⁶

Key points

- (i) Launched in February 2012 and sponsored by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), provides independent and impartial coverage on news and current affairs.
- (ii) Through accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments in the region, the platforms aim to counter misinformation in relatively closed media environments.
- (iii) Both platforms synthesise international and regional news reporting relevant to their target regions, and employ local journalists to write local opinion pieces.
- (iv) Content on the platforms is diverse, but news reporting is heavily dominated by reports related to violent extremism, terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Hours Against Hate International

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Stop bigotry and promote pluralism and respect across lines of culture, religion, tradition, class, and gender.

Description:

Initiated by Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith, and former Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal, Hours Against Hate aims to campaign against bigotry and promote pluralism and respect across lines of culture, religion, tradition, class, and gender.¹³⁷ Launched through an introductory campaign video¹³⁸ featuring both Pandith and Rosenthal, the campaign was based around the themes ‘Stand Up and Speak Out’, and ‘Hate is Hate, No Matter Who the Target Is’, aiming to get young people to pledge time ‘to do something for someone who doesn’t look like you, pray like you, or live like you’.¹³⁹

To achieve its goals of mobilising young people to volunteer their time for others, the campaign has leveraged social media as a go-to resource for those seeking to get involved, including inviting users to ‘Make a Pledge’ and highlighting how to donate volunteer time to fight hatred. The initiative has posted audio-visual content highlighting messages of support for themes of the campaign, including from sports personalities, community leaders and policy-makers.

Following interest by civil society in the United Kingdom, including organisations such as Three Faiths Forum, Rene Cassin, CEDAR, London Boroughs Faiths Network, Phoenix Inter-Community Initiative and the Football Association, the London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOGOC) granted Hours Against Hate the London 2012 ‘Inspire Mark’ for the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. The campaign featured sports personalities such as US Paralympics gold medallist Josh George.¹⁴⁰

Key points

- (i) Launched in 2011 by Special Representative to Muslim Communities, Farah Pandith and former Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism, Hannah Rosenthal.
- (ii) Aims to get young people across the world to pledge time “to do something for someone who doesn’t look like you, pray like you, or live like you”.
- (iii) The campaign has leveraged social media as a go-to resource for those seeking to get involved, including inviting users to ‘Make a Pledge’ about how they intend to volunteer.
- (iv) The London Organizing Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOGOC) to grant Hours Against Hate the London 2012 ‘Inspire Mark’.

My Fellow American United States

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Calls upon concerned Americans to pledge and spread a message that Muslims are fellow Americans.

Description:

Launched in 2011 by the Unity Productions Foundation (UPF), 'My Fellow American' is an online film and social media project that calls upon concerned Americans to pledge and spread a message that Muslims are fellow Americans.¹⁴¹ It is designed to change perceptions "from Muslims as the other, to Muslims as our fellow Americans".¹⁴²

As it has been observed by the initiative, "most Americans have never met an American Muslim. Many only know Muslims through the way they are portrayed in the media.

American Muslims are so often vilified as 'the other' that it is possible not to recognise that most were born in the US. Or that those who immigrated here came seeking the same freedoms and opportunities that have always attracted people to America".¹⁴³

The campaign aims to encourage individuals to participate in three ways. Firstly, by watching the audio-visual production 'My Fellow American - Change the Narrative. Share Your Story'.¹⁴⁴ produced for the campaign. Secondly, the initiative invites users to "record a brief video about a Muslim American that you would like to share with the rest of America. Videos can be funny, heartfelt or serious but above all else, they should be genuine".¹⁴⁵ Third, individuals are urged to take a pledge to the cause, subsequently shared across social media channels.¹⁴⁶

Key points

- (i) Online film and social media project that calls upon concerned Americans to pledge and spread a message that Muslims are fellow Americans.
- (ii) Audiences may contribute in three ways. Firstly, by watching the audio-visual production 'My Fellow American - Change the Narrative. Share Your Story'.
- (iii) Secondly, to produce their own audio-visual production outlining their own personal stories or relationships with Muslim Americans.
- (iv) Individuals are also urged to take a pledge, which is then shared across social media to maximise the campaigns reach.

MyJihad United States

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Promote a moderate understanding of the term 'Jihad' and derive a new user-generated, centre-ground narrative on matters of religion and faith.

Description:

MyJihad aims to derive a more moderate understanding of the term 'jihad'. Designed to reclaim the concept from extremist constituencies - 'both Muslim and anti-Muslim' - the initiative aims to counter misinformation surrounding Islam and to "share the proper meaning of Jihad as believed and practiced by the majority of Muslims".¹⁴⁷

The initiative provides a platform of expression for users to share their individual 'struggles' online, and thereby contribute to the development of a user-generated centre-ground understanding of the term.¹⁴⁸ These expressions are aggregated on the MyJihad website. The campaign gained publicity through its offline advertising, on billboard and buses,¹⁴⁹ and it is using the Twitter hashtag #myjihad to involve users on social media. It also has a presence on Facebook and YouTube, which hosts

audio-visual content showcasing educational materials, interviews and campaigning videos. This included a video-competition inviting audiences to highlight their own personal Jihad.¹⁵⁰

MyJihad is in the process of developing materials and online toolkits that can be taught in schools and within communities. This includes a repository of audio-visual content exploring the true meaning of jihad from prominent religious scholars, and other texts such as 'Jihad against the Abuse of Jihad', 'US Muslims Religious Council's Fatwa Against Terrorism', 'Azhar-endorsed Fatwa on Terrorism', 'Prophet Muhammad's Rules of War'. As well as this, the initiative hopes to use its online spaces to generate interest to connect activists to hold offline events and community-engagement activities.¹⁵¹

While MyJihad was activated primarily to counter the narratives of prominent Islamophobic movements, such as Stop the Islamisation of America (SIOA), other similar campaigns have aimed to reclaim the concept of 'Jihad' within radical Islamist circles. This includes the 'The J Word', run by conservative cleric Yasir Qadhi, to undermine the use and abuse of the term by Al-Qaeda and other "extremist groups of our times...[that] attempt to manipulate the Qur'anic verses and classical legal rulings of military struggle type of jihad to substantiate their own perverted agenda and recruit innocent minds".¹⁵²

Key points

- (i) Aims to counter misinformation surrounding Islam and empower users to derive more moderate understanding of the concept of 'Jihad' on open social media platforms.
- (ii) Combines online user-generated activism with offline sponsoring of ads on buses and trains.
- (iii) The campaign includes a repository of audio-visual and textual content exploring the true, more moderate meaning of jihad from prominent religious sources.
- (iv) A similar initiative is the 'The J Word' campaign designed to counter the use and abuse of the term from violence-promoting radical Islamist movements.

Viral Peace United States

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Empower credible moderates to proactively counter violent extremist messages and messengers through the Internet and social media.

Description:

Supported and staffed by members of the US State Department, Viral Peace is a capacity building programme that empowers local counter-voices to undermine the appeal of violent extremism through the Internet and social media.¹⁵³ Designed to empower and embolden the silent majority of moderates to 'occupy the virtual space that extremists fill',¹⁵⁴ the programme aims to assist credible community-leaders in proactively challenging violent extremists online in order to diminish the attractiveness of their message.

The project is not prescriptive, and does not tell how participants should counter the appeal of violent extremist rhetoric, or even which type of extremism to counter. Rather, the programme promotes a decentralised approach, offering training and guidance, encouraging participants with the right cultural and linguistic credibility enrolled on the program to determine which messengers to take-on. This includes the use of 'logic, humor, satire, [and] religious arguments, not just to confront [extremists], but to undermine and demoralize them'.¹⁵⁵

The project has delivered a series of one to two-day offline workshops in Malaysia,¹⁵⁶ Indonesia,¹⁵⁷ the Philippines¹⁵⁸

Sri Lanka and the Maldives,¹⁵⁹ with further sessions scheduled in Nepal, India and Pakistan. Workshop participants are invited to learn about the types of tools and techniques that are relevant to both the content and delivery of counter-messaging campaigning, designed to increase their motivation, influence and reach.¹⁶⁰ This includes the delivery of seminars on social media strategies and identity and vulnerability online.

Receivers of the programme are also given advice on how to craft compelling narratives and optimal messages that are likely to resonate with their target audiences, including discussions on content, messenger and medium. They are also provided with media training, in which users create and record their own 'personal mission statement', designed to inspire local actors to implement their training in practice. Viral Peace is often delivered in conjunction with its sister programme, Generation Change, a global network of young leaders to inspire change and positive community impacts at a local and international level.¹⁶¹

The project has restricted its follow-up involvement to monitoring progress and successful examples of counter-messaging campaigning initiated by receivers of the programme are often incorporated as best practices in future workshops. Viral Peace encourages those enrolled to pass on the skills learnt to their peers, and has developed an online platform which centralises reference material used during the offline workshop,¹⁶² this also consolidates its two-day training programme designed as a go-to resource for users. Viral Peace also carries-out 'Train-the-Trainer' workshops designed to enable local receivers of the programme to implement the project further afield.

Key points

- (i) Capacity building programme empowering the silent majority to counter extremist messengers to diminish the attractiveness of their message through the Internet and social media.
- (ii) Provides a series of on and offline toolkits through its one to two-day workshops, including advice on crafting narratives, staying safe online and maintaining motivation.
- (iii) Promotes a decentralised approach, encouraging local counter-voices to train their peers through online toolkits while determining which messages and messengers to counter and how.
- (iv) Successful examples of counter-messaging campaigning initiated by receivers of the programme are often incorporated as best practices in future workshops.
- (v) Initiative is funded by the US State Department, and currently works from American Embassies abroad but plans to work more closely with local governments in future.

8.3 COUNTER-NARRATIVE PROJECTS

RAN Working Group on the Internet and Social Media (RAN@)

European

Category:

Government

Objectives:

Systematise the exchange of best practices and expertise in online counter-messaging to seed new and innovative campaigning strategies to counter the narratives of violent extremism.

Description:

The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) was established by European Commission in 2011 as an umbrella network of practitioners and local actors involved in countering violent radicalisation within the European Union. The RAN@ Working Group on the Internet and Social Media (RAN@) is focused specifically on the issue of online radicalisation.¹⁶³ Co-chaired by Google Ideas and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, the working group aims to exchange experiences, knowledge and best practices in countering violent extremism online and to inform European and Member State policy-development in the field.

The RAN@ Working Group aims to explore new positive civil society responses to counter the appeal of violent extremist messaging. In doing so, it is engaged in numerous activities which include facilitating the

exchange of good practices in relation to counter-narratives on the Internet and social media, 'why do they work, how can they be replicated, how can they be scaled up?'¹⁶⁴ The Working Group is also tasked with identifying the challenges faced by civil society campaigners, and the necessary partnerships that need to be activated between community groups, policy-makers and private sector organisations to enable effective campaigns.

By matching practitioner needs with private-sector technical solutions it is hoped that the Working Group will enable the formulation and dissemination of more effective counter and alternative-narrative strategies. This has included the production of original, targeted audio-visual content to counter the messaging of extremist movements online. Having launched a request for submissions from members of Against Violent Extremism (AVE) - a network of formers/survivors of violent extremism - RAN@ paired up with a grass-roots civil society group - Cypher 7.A.D - and social media giants to create and market a counter-narrative campaign.¹⁶⁵

The Working Group is also working with private sector industries to develop innovative tools to disrupt extremist messengers on social media. This includes the development of a 'crowd-out' strategy, designed to galvanise the silent majority of moderates against bad speech. This 'many-to-one' strategy aims to apply tools and techniques developed in marketing and campaigning industries to facilitate mass-mobilisation online.

Key points

- (i) Network which brings together experts and practitioners from across the European Union to facilitate the exchange of best practices in countering Internet radicalisation.
- (ii) Focus on positive responses to online radicalisation designed to counter the appeal of extremist content through designing and disseminating counter-messaging strategies.
- (iii) Facilitates partnership-building between private-sector and civil society, to assist credible community voices to be heard through both advisory and in-kind support.
- (iv) Aims to develop and streamline practical tools for community groups and individuals in order to facilitate social media campaigning by credible moderates.

Against Violent Extremism (AVE) International

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Amplify voices of credible actors, streamlining communications and collaboration to enable members to seed collaborative grass-roots projects.

Description:

The Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network is a global network of former extremists, survivors of extremism and others dedicated to the cause of countering violent extremism. AVE was seeded by Google Ideas at the Summit Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) in 2011.¹⁶⁶ Launched in April 2012,¹⁶⁷ the network is run by London's Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) with support from Google Ideas and the Gen Next Foundation. The AVE Network operates through its online platform,¹⁶⁸ and has been seeded to achieve three core objectives.

The Network aims to enable members to connect directly with one another and share best practices and experiences in order to create high-impact projects that will articulate and amplify effective counter-narratives to those at risk of radicalisation.¹⁶⁹ As a result, those countering Al-Qaeda affiliates in Pakistan are now able to connect with those countering the appeal of radical Islamist movements in the UK.¹⁷⁰

The second aim is to connect members to private sector resources, in an attempt to break down barriers that will sustain and multiply the impact of credible voices. Against Violent Extremism encourages business and private-sector entities to get involved through providing in-kind and financial support. Since the Network's launch a large US marketing firm, Buzz Mouth, has pledged \$100,000 dollars in support for AVE projects. Meanwhile, students and private citizens have built websites for member-projects, and the Network encourages scalable private sector involvement in the fight against extremism.

Finally, the Network aims to amplify the reach of credible messengers, including both formers and survivors. The Network has produced audio-visual content, such as charting the pathway of former Jihadist Usama Hasan¹⁷¹ or former radical Islamist Maajid Nawaz.¹⁷² The Network also encourages former gang members to share their experiences.¹⁷³ In addition to these three core areas of work, Against Violent Extremism is also working on the development of a number of strategic projects. This includes partnering with the European Union Radicalisation Awareness Network Working Group on the Internet and Social Media (RAN@) to build credible online counter-narrative strategies. The Network is also developing a prison de-radicalisation programme to be piloted in difficult-to-reach conflict zones.

Key points

- (i) Global network of former extremists, survivors of extremism and others dedicated to the cause of countering violent extremism.
- (ii) Aims to provide an interactive platform through which members can exchange and disseminate best practices and expertise.
- (iii) Seeks to connect members to private sector resources, in an attempt to break down barriers that will sustain and multiply the impact of credible voices.
- (iv) Designed to amplify the reach of credible messengers, including both formers and survivors, through both textual testimonies and high-quality audio-visual productions.
- (v) Also working on the development of a number of core international strategic projects.

Global Survivors Network (GSN) International

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Provide a platform for survivors of terrorism to share their experience in their own words, working to spread their message in vulnerable communities.

Description:

Seeded following the United Nations Symposium on Supporting Victims of Terrorism held in September 2008, the Global Survivors Network (GSN) aims to provide a platform to amplify the voices of victims and survivors of violent extremism.¹⁷⁴ The Network aims to systematise the construction and dissemination of counter-narratives designed to undermine the appeal of extremist messages within vulnerable communities.¹⁷⁵ As the Network observes “where incidents of terrorist activity have left emotional and physical scars on those citizens who remain, we hope to channel grief into actions for peace and understanding”.¹⁷⁶

In order to do so, the GSN has produced and disseminated a series of survivor testimonies through the Internet and social media. This includes the testimony of Michael Gallagher, who lost his 21-year old son Aidan during the 1998 Omagh bombing in Northern Ireland,¹⁷⁷ to highlighting the seven-year plight of Alan Jara, kidnapped by the violent extremist group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).¹⁷⁸ The Network has also produced five short productions specifically highlighting the testimonies of Pakistani survivors.¹⁷⁹

The Network has also produced an Oscar-nominated documentary film ‘Killing in the Name’,¹⁸⁰ exploring the story of Jordanian terrorism survivor Ashraf al Khaled in his quest to speak with victims and perpetrators of extremist violence, exposing the true costs of terrorism.¹⁸¹ The Network combines this online activism with offline events internationally.¹⁸²

Key points

- (i) Aims to provide a platform for survivors of terrorism to share their experience in their own words, working to spread their message in vulnerable communities.
- (ii) Produces audio-visual series highlighting survivor testimonies disseminated through social media, and has produced an Oscar-nominated documentary film ‘Killing in the Name’.
- (iii) Combines this online activism with offline events internationally.

Fatwa on Terrorism International

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Disseminate a fatwa on terrorism issued by prominent scholar Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri to undermine the religious justifications for violent extremism.

Description:

An online platform designed to disseminate a 500-page fatwa which dismantles central tenets of Al-Qaeda's ideology - particularly its use of violence - fatwaonterrorism.com was initiated in 2010. The authoritative Islamic decree, which uses references from the Quran and Sunnah to refute the religious

justifications for terrorist violence used by Al-Qaeda and their affiliates, includes passages citing that 'Terrorist acts expel a Muslim from Islam', 'No terrorism is permitted, even in war time' and 'Terrorists distort the concept of Jihad'.¹⁸³

There are a number of other similar examples of religious personalities which have directly attempted to undermine the religious narratives of violent extremism, however, Dr Tahir ul-Qadri's pronouncements were seen as unparalleled both in their comprehensiveness (removing all 'ifs and buts'),¹⁸⁴ and through their dissemination strategy. Originally published in Urdu, the publication has now been translated into English, French, German and Norwegian. The platform also hosts an audio-visual presentation of the ruling which took place in London on the 2nd March 2010.¹⁸⁵ Additionally, the website also hosts a 'fatwa on terrorism' fact sheet.

Key points

- (i) Online platform designed to disseminate a 500-page fatwa which dismantles central tenets of Al-Qaeda's ideology - particularly its use of violence.
- (ii) Includes passages citing that 'Terrorist acts expel a Muslim from Islam', 'No terrorism is permitted, even in war time' and 'Terrorists distort the concept of Jihad'.
- (iii) Translations of the religious ruling exist in English, French, German and Norwegian. The platform also hosts audio-visual materials.

EXIT Deutschland
Germany

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Provides support structures to enable individuals to leave extreme right-wing movements through on and offline engagement.

Description:

EXIT Deutschland performs outreach work to enable individuals to leave extreme neo-Nazi movements in Germany. In 2011 the initiative used music, clothing and social media to scale their impact, seeding one of the most successful online outreach strategies designed to engage right-wing audiences. Based around the theme 'Get Out of the Scene', EXIT Deutschland set up a task

force of private sector representatives, former neo-Nazis and social media experts to assist in maximizing the reach of EXIT Deutschland's campaigning reach.

This resulted in the 'Trojan T-Shirt' campaign, in which EXIT Deutschland distributed 250 white power t-shirts at a neo-Nazi music festival that when washed altered the logo to 'What your T-shirt can do, so can you - we'll help you break with right-wing extremism' and included the EXIT brand.¹⁸⁶ The initiative made the headlines both on and offline, including mainstream and far-right forums, which even temporarily shut down because of the positive reaction to the initiative. The campaign increased overall awareness of EXIT among right-wingers, trebling the number of self-referrals to its disengagement programme. To maximise the impact of the campaign, EXIT produced a video sequencing the production and distribution of the offline campaign.¹⁸⁷

Key points

- (i) Performs outreach work to enable individuals to leave extreme neo-Nazi movements in Germany, uses music, clothing and social media to scale their impact.
- (ii) Resulted in the 'Trojan T-Shirt' campaign where staff distributed 250 white power t-shirts at a neo-Nazi music festival whose logo altered when washed.
- (iii) To maximise the impact of the campaign, EXIT produced an audio-visual production sequencing the formulation, design and distribution of the offline campaign.

Al-Sakina Saudi Arabia

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Online repository of information and intervention programme to answer questions on Islamic belief and to bring radicalised individuals back into the mainstream.

Description:

An independent, non-governmental organisations supported financially by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Al-Sakina programme was initiated to engage in online dialogue as a way to combat Internet radicalisation. The Sakinah Campaign promotes a one-on-one engagement strategy designed to counter the appeal of violent extremist ideologies online. Reports indicate the initiative is staffed by approximately 66 volunteers, and the programme contains a separate woman's section composed of 11 workers.¹⁸⁸

Volunteers include religious scholars, psychologists and psychiatrists, sociologists and academics. The programme is divided into different sections. The Scientific Section - made up of academic and religious scholars and psychologists - directly engage users in dialogue. Though the scheme works with those seeking answers to Islamic questions, it also engages directly with those who have expressed solidarity with extremist narratives.¹⁸⁹ Transcripts of conversations are often published online to multiply the programmes reach.¹⁹⁰

Additionally, the Sakinah Campaign houses a Psycho-Social Section which explores the social and social-psychological dynamics of violent extremist groups, while the Monitoring Section provides research and analysis into online extremist content, audio, visual and textual. Finally, the Publishing section is responsible for the formulation and dissemination of religious texts and educational materials. The programme also contains a Design Section, Service-Site Section, Public-Relations Section and Supervision and Planning Section.¹⁹¹

The Sakinah Campaign houses one of the most advanced online databases,¹⁹² which contains religious texts, research, news and educational materials about issues related to jihad, political violence and radicalisation, in order to inform and raise awareness among individuals seeking religious knowledge through the Internet and social media. The initiative also uses social media to reach out to younger audiences,¹⁹³ and has produced video materials.¹⁹⁴ Aiming to challenge, expose and refute extremism, these educational resources are designed to target those seeking religious advice, in both English and Arabic.

Its English-version database stores materials on 'Extremism & Deviant Thought', pointers on the 'Defining Characteristics of the Takfīri', contributions on topics of 'Islamic Civilisation & Heritage', 'Great thinkers and Contributors to Islamic Heritage' and 'Muslim minorities'. The initiative also hosts information on popular misconceptions surrounding Jihad, Sharia and the Islamic State. The programme invites users to contact staff through its online platform.

Key points

- (i) Independent, non-governmental organisations supported financially by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, aims to engage users online to counter the appeal of violent extremist ideologies.
- (ii) The programme is staffed by volunteers, including religious scholars, psychologists and psychiatrists, sociologists and academics.
- (iii) Works in the upstream with those seeking advice or religious guidance, and further downstream by engaging individuals one-on-one in Al-Qaeda affiliated forums.
- (iv) Combines engagement activities with research and monitoring activities to better understand violent extremist ideologies and the dynamics of extremist groups and movements.
- (v) Transcripts of dialogues are published online so that others can view the arguments presented and the program can reach a wider audience.

EXIT Fryshuset
Sweden

Category:
Non-governmental

Objectives:
Provides support structures to enable individuals to leave extreme right-wing movements through on and offline engagement.

Description:
Established in 1998, EXIT Fryshuset performs outreach work to enable individuals to leave extreme neo-Nazi movements in Sweden. Its underlying principles are guided by the notion that individuals join white supremacist movements not simply because of ideology, but due to social reasons and the search for status, identity, support and power. The majority of EXIT Fryshuset staff are former members of white supremacist groups (although they are complemented by others, including a physician and psychotherapists),¹⁹⁵ and their work is based on long-term cognitive treatment that assists in the protracted disengagement process.

Offline, the programme has resisted engaging with individuals on matters of ideology or trying to challenge the ideas of the white supremacist movement. This is partly due to the recognition that young people rarely enter extreme right-wing movements based solely on ideology, and also due to the fact that extreme right-wing groups school their members with ideological counter-arguments. Nevertheless, EXIT Sweden has recognised that the online sphere presents a number of opportunities to engage on matters of ideology.

Recognising that the radicalisation and community bonding processes of extreme right-wing movements moved online,¹⁹⁶ former neo-Nazis enter Internet chat rooms under pseudonyms and with in-depth knowledge of extreme right-wing discourses and narratives, actively participate in discussion and debate. Under the cover of anonymity, the engagement process is designed to introduce doubt. Importantly, these activities are designed not to prove users wrong, but to gradually remove black and white thinking.¹⁹⁷

Key points

- (i) Performs outreach work to enable and assist individuals to leave extreme neo-Nazi movements through direct engagement, staffed by highly credible former violent extremists.
- (ii) Former neo-Nazis enter Internet forums under pseudonyms and with in-depth knowledge of extreme right-wing narratives and thought actively participate in discussion and debate.
- (iii) While its offline programme focuses on social drivers of disengagement, its online interactions have enabled staff to engage right-wing sympathisers on matters of ideology.

Strategy to Reach, Empower and Educate Teenagers (STREET) United Kingdom

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Provide media deconstruction of Al-Qaeda-related audio-visual propaganda to counter the appeal of violent extremism among Muslim youth.

Description:

The Deconstruct Programme developed by the government-funded grass-roots community organisation - STREET (Strategy to Reach, Empower and Educate Teenagers) - has been activated to counter the adverse impact of online extremist and terrorist propaganda among those identified as susceptible or sympathetic to narratives of violent extremism. Government restricts its involvement to funding and initiative has enough operational independence to maintain community credibility. STREET defines its programme as "a process of de-radicalisation which deconstructs religious extremist propaganda and replaces it with a mainstream, moderate perspective, thereby creating resilience against violent extremism".¹⁹⁸

Its Deconstruct Programme is designed in successive stages.¹⁹⁹ Once the extremist propaganda has been identified, the audio-visual media is assessed historically, ideologically, religiously and from conventional media deconstruct perspectives, in order to analyse "the various messages being encoded within the text and the subtleties at play that are deliberately put together for effect and impact upon the viewer". This includes the analysis of the audio, visual and textual components. The programme carries this out frame-by-frame, demonstrated in the deconstruction of a video released by Al-Qaeda's media wing, As-Sahab.²⁰⁰

Following this, a counter-narrative is introduced "to repel the justifications offered by the producers of the said video. These justifications are aimed at devaluing the arguments put forth by highlighting the weaknesses of these arguments in the light of the Quran and Sunnah".²⁰¹ In order to do so, mentors possess a wide-range of knowledge of Islamic education in addition to considerable understand of the ideologies of extremist movements - particularly those of Al-Qaeda and its affiliates - enabling them to perform in-depth theological deconstruction of the violent extremist narratives embedded within their propaganda.

Key points

- (i) Grass-roots organisation - set up by the community for the community - with mentors that combine 'street credibility' with extensive knowledge of religious thought and scripture.
- (ii) Government restricts its involvement to funding and initiative and has enough operational independence to maintain community credibility.
- (iii) Deconstruct Programme provides interactive media workshops designed to deconstruct violent extremist propaganda through audio, visual and textual deconstruction.
- (iv) Develops counter-narratives to undermine the arguments put forward within propaganda, particularly theological counter-arguments.

Bold Creative United Kingdom

Category:

Non-governmental

Objectives:

Empowering young people to become more resilient online, teaching them to engage critically with extremist content and building capacity in vulnerable communities.

Description:

A digital communications agency which specialises in youth engagement, Bold Creative launched its Digital Disruption programme in 2008. Presently a separate non-profit entity run with project partners, Nominet Trust, Wikimedia Foundation and the think-tank DEMOS, the project has been activated to raise the ability of young people to critically engage with the content they consume, create and share online.²⁰² It does this through the delivery of research, tools, training and practical communications activities that provide young people aged 11-19 with the skills needed to lead more informed and discerning digital lives.²⁰³

Seeded following increasing concern surrounding the spread of extremist propaganda through the Internet and social media, Bold Creative launched its pilot project (2008-2010)²⁰⁴ in which a team of digital media specialists, youth workers and filmmakers worked with groups of 12 young people identified as particularly susceptible to extremist propaganda to investigate the ways misinformation online is affecting them and their peers, and to co-produce films to promote critical, independent thinking in relation to the Internet.

Receivers of the programme were invited to perform hands-on filming, production and editing, culminating in a 'Vampire conspiracy' campaign,²⁰⁵ which was then spread through social networks both on and offline. A follow-up video 'What you need to know'²⁰⁶ then revealed that viewers of the video had been tricked, designed to show how easy it is to manipulate audiences. The video outlines some key techniques used in the conspiracy campaign intended to influence audiences. A further video 'Techniques of Propaganda' sees offline receivers of the programme give audiences their own tips about how to being more digitally savvy.²⁰⁷ Digital Disruption facilitators now train educators and youth workers on how to best use these digital outputs with the young people they work with.

Through this interactive co-creation process, it is anticipated that Digital Disruption will raise the digital literacy of users identified as particularly susceptible to ideas, attitudes and behavior influenced by misinformation via YouTube. This includes inoculating vulnerable target audiences against audio, visual and textual propaganda, but also the more subtle manipulative techniques designed to influence the viewer subconsciously. The project has trained 325 young people offline in six months, and its online digital literacy toolkits have reached 600,000.²⁰⁸ Digital Disruption has currently expanded its focus to raising digital literacy of 11-16 year-old across the United Kingdom, notably hosting a Digital Disruption summit in October 2012, which included leading digital literacy experts from the public, private and third sectors.

Key points

- (i) Project has been activated to raise the ability of young people to critically engage with the content they consume, create and share through the Internet and social media.
- (ii) Engages young people on a wide range of media issues, not just extremism, to understand the ways in which propaganda manipulate audio, video and text.
- (iii) Empowers vulnerable audiences through a co-creation process.
- (iv) Has developed a series of online audio-visual toolkits, and now trains frontline practitioners and educators on how to best use these digital outputs with the young people they work with.

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