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## Storytelling against extremism: How fiction could increase the persuasive impact of counter- and alternative narratives in P/CVE

Linda Schlegel<sup>a1</sup>

<sup>a</sup>PhD Student, Goethe University Frankfurt

### Abstract

The past decade has seen an increase in research on narratives in extremist communication and their role in radicalization processes as well as on both counter- and alternative narratives as tools to prevent or counter radicalization processes. Conspicuously absent from the P/CVE literature so far, however, is a discussion on fictional narratives and the potential of stories not based on ‘realistic’ presentations of life. This article is an exploratory contribution to the discourse suggesting how fictional narratives, low in external realism but eliciting a high degree of transportation and identification in audiences, may be useful tools for P/CVE campaigns built on narratives and storytelling. It discusses the importance of transportation, identification, and perceived realism for narrative persuasion as well as the possibility to use fictional utopian narratives in P/CVE campaigns.

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### Introduction

*Winter was approaching fast. You could smell it in the air in the morning and see it in the old trees dressed in a million shades of yellow, orange, red and gold. The group of little, talkative field mice living near-by could feel it too and so the whole family began collecting nuts, wheat, and corn to fill up the storage they would feed from during the cold. Everyone was busy. Everyone except Frederick. “Frederick, why aren’t you working?”, the others asked. “Oh, I am.”, he answered, but did not move. When winter finally came and snow covered the pastures, the little mice huddled in their underground cave. In the beginning, the mice were happy and content. They had plenty of food and enough to chat about. However, as winter*

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author contact: [schlegel@hsfk.de](mailto:schlegel@hsfk.de); Twitter [@LiSchlegel](https://twitter.com/LiSchlegel). All views expressed are the author’s own and neither endorsed nor supported by her affiliated organizations. This research was made possible by a PhD scholarship from Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Linda Schlegel is a PhD student at Goethe University and an Associate Fellow at PRIF, GNET, and modus ZaD.

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*progressed and the food supply had shrunk, the chatter died and coldness took hold of their little bodies. That's when it was time for Frederick to share what he had been working on. "Close your eyes.", he told the others and then he began telling a story. He spoke of the sunlight and its golden rays that had warmed the mice' fur in the summer. He spoke of all the colors that had adorned the flowers in the fields and the buzzing of the insects surrounding them. He spoke of everything he had observed, all the beauty spring and summer have to offer. And suddenly, winter did not seem so long anymore and the mice felt warm with memories and hopes of spring's return.<sup>2</sup>*

Storytelling is as old as mankind. In fact, it is such a pervasive component of our lives that some speak of 'homo narrans' (Fisher, 1984); we are first and foremost a storytelling ape and those who tell the best stories have a power over the minds of their peers like Frederick in the story above. Our brains are neurologically wired for storytelling and processing narratives (Storr, 2019), leading us to feel empathy with fictional heroes and disdain for the story's villains. Strikingly, "every culture bathes its children in stories" (Haid, 2012, p.338) not simply to entertain them, but also to teach them and help them learn the social norms and values of the culture they are growing up in. While teaching children through story is perceived as normal, adults tend to perceive themselves to be less persuaded by the stories they consume, despite ample evidence to the contrary (Sukalla, 2019). The human mind, regardless of age, is a "story processor" (Haidt, 2012, p.338) and sharing narratives is a human instinct (Siefer, 2015). As adults too, perceptions, attitudes, values, and behaviors are influenced by the stories we consume, from the perception of crime (Shrum & Lee, 2017) to our attitudes on homosexuality (Myers, 2014) or stigmatized groups (Igartua & Frutos, 2017; Johnson et al, 2014). Marketing experts have long understood the power of stories and develop advertising campaigns based on 'facts tell, stories sell' (Moesslang, 2020). On a broader level, our liberal democratic societies - supposedly built upon and penetrated by the ideas of Enlightenment and 'rational' political communication - are imbued with narratives

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from *Frederick* (Lionni, 2004 [1967])

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and whether we are consciously aware of or not, we vote for who has the best story to tell (Weber, n.d.). Even our economy, as Nobel Prize laureate Robert Shiller argues, is essentially storytelling in action: What happens at the stock market partially depends on the ebb and flow of narratives in society at large (Shiller, 2020).

It is therefore unsurprising that narratives are an essential component of extremist communication as well. Similar to other fields (Nünning, 2012), extremism studies have experienced a ‘narrative turn’: Over the last decade, an increasing amount of research has described and analyzed the narratives communicated by extremist actors and their potential role in radicalization processes of both right-wing (e.g. Allchorn, 2020b; Braouezec, 2016) and jihadist extremists (e.g. Ingram, 2017a; Schmid, 2014). The stories of good versus evil, of a small group of heroes succeeding against the powerful government with a secret plan to replace its citizens, of David versus Goliath, of a ‘war to end all wars’ and an existential crisis, of fulfilling destiny or God’s plan, of brotherhood, purity, a utopian land of milk and honey, and building a better future to protect the next generation, are not only appealing for the audiences of fictional books and movies, but play a role in the appeal of extremisms of various *couleurs*. Consequently, narratives also receive growing recognition as tools in preventing or countering (violent) extremism (P/CVE). If narratives play a role in radicalization processes, it is only logical to assume that they may also play a part in preventing such processes. Therefore, governments, civil society organizations, and private individuals, are developing and implementing narrative campaigns to counter the appeal of extremist ideologies and/or provide alternative perspectives for their audiences (Carthy et al, 2020). While multiple guidelines, handbooks, and academic articles are available to support the development of such counter- and alternative narrative (CAN) campaigns and increase the chances they have an impact on the intended audience (Ritzmann et al, 2019; Hedayah, 2014; Tuck & Silverman, 2016), research on what makes narratives especially appealing i.e. techniques of storytelling, as well as the effects of fiction specifically are conspicuously absent from the current P/CVE literature.

This article makes a contribution to filling this gap in the discourse and explores how fictional narrative elements could support the development of counter- and alternative narratives in P/CVE. It partially responds to calls for more creative ways to “contest the space” (Awan et al, 2019, p.158) through bolder and “sexy” (Ebner, 2019, p.179) alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. It should be noted from the outset that the main point of the present article is *not* to argue that fictional narratives are superior, more persuasive, or better suited for P/CVE measures than non-fictional narratives (in fact, they may be equally persuasive as Braddock & Dillard, 2016 argue). It merely seeks to highlight the potential fictional elements could hold for CAN as fiction has been largely omitted from the considerations so far. The design of the article differs from classic academic studies. After providing the reader with a brief background on the narrative discourse in P/CVE, selected storytelling elements and their potential role in CAN campaigns are discussed. Each element is introduced by a short fictional story to give readers a glimpse into the reactions such narrative elements may produce in audiences before being influenced by the academic explanation of its effects. Readers should note that these are illustrative exaggerations serving as a vivid introduction to a narrative element. They are neither meant to be read as art nor as suggestions of what fictional CAN could or should look like. Lastly, after reflections on cautions and limitations, a conclusion is provided.

## Background

Multiple research fields, ranging from law to religious studies, history, international relations, social movement studies, psychology, and anthropology have experienced a ‘narrative turn’ (Shiller, 2020, p.38f; Nünning, 2012). There is growing recognition that the stories we tell ourselves and each other - both fictional and factual - shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals and groups. There is no universally accepted definition of narrative. According to the Merriam Webster (2020) dictionary, a narrative is "a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of

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view or set of values”. This means that a narrative is not neutral, it “is more than merely description; it not only illustrates but explains (...) in doing so, narrative inevitably generates meaning, making a moral point, no matter how subtle” (Copeland, 2019, p.234). The present article follows this definition, albeit recognizing that there may be other ways to characterize narratives in the context of extremism and counter-extremism (see for instance Cobaugh, 2018 defining narratives as identity-based). Importantly, narratives refer to the *story as told* not only the events depicted (Cobley, 2014; Corman, 2016), i.e. the same chain of events could be used as the basis for different narratives depending on the storytelling choices made by the narrator. Importantly, media content differs in its degree of narrativity, a continuum to describe to which degree content is told as a story. A documentary-style video or a news broadcast, for instance, may have a lower degree of narrativity than a Hollywood movie or a novel (Simon-Shoshan, 2013).

Narratives hold persuasive power because they are processed and therefore resonate differently than non-narrative stories. Stories are 2-10 times more memorable than facts (Pueyo, 2018) and human brains react similarly on a neurological level to narratives as they do to actual experiences (Cavanaugh, 2019). Consequently, narrative persuasion has received considerable research attention (Sukalla, 2019; Green et al, 2013; Murphy et al, 2011; Braddock & Dillard, 2016) and has informed entertainment-education interventions aimed at utilizing the power of narratives to change real world behavior and attitudes (Moyer-Gusé, 2008), e.g. in the context of health communication (Shen & Han, 2014) or the reduction of stereotypes (Johnson et al, 2014). Narratives are also used widely in advertising, in order to entertain and persuade potential customers (e.g. Stevens & Maclaran, 2007; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012; Brechman & Purvis, 2015). There is ample evidence that narratives are persuasive (Braddock & Dillard, 2016), that the higher the narrativity, the more attractive and persuasive a narrative is perceived to be (Frischlich et al, 2017; Morten et al, 2017), and that there is little doubt in communication research that narratives influence both attitudes and behavior, including political opinions (Mulligan & Habel, 2013; Holbert, 2005; Holbert et al, 2003).

Given the omnipresence of narratives in human life and the persuasive power stories seem to hold, it is hardly surprising that narratives are believed to play a key role in extremist communication and radicalization processes. Castells (2015) argues that coercion only helps actors to achieve their goals until a certain point and that “the construction of meaning in people’s minds is a more decisive and more stable source of power” (p.5). Similarly, Ebner (2017) argues that “studying extremism without studying stories is like studying the brain without studying neurons” (p.21), because ideologically-based narratives play a central role in radicalization processes (Davies et al, 2016; RAN, 2019). Extremist narratives provide a ‘competitive system of meaning’ (Ingram, 2017b) that may seem more appealing to some than narratives provided by mainstream society. Consequently, considerable attention has been devoted to the description and analysis of narratives used in both jihadist (Winter, 2015; McCants, 2016; Monaci, 2017; Briggs & Feve, 2014) and right-wing extremist (Allchorn, 2020a; Forchtner & Kolvraa, 2017; Braouezec, 2016) communities.

While the specificities and key themes of such narratives differ depending on the ideological *couleur* of those communicating such narratives, the underlying structure of the web of extremist narratives is often strikingly similar, including, for instance a longing for a ‘golden age’ in the past, a dangerous conspiracy posing an existential threat to the in-group, a small brotherhood of heroes called to defend the weak, and a utopian vision for society after the evil has been defeated. Sometimes the underlying storylines of such narratives “seem like a dramatic comic-book plot in which a superhero is called to action to struggle against a subhuman source of tragic evil. But comic books (and many movies) may routinely have such plots because, for psychological reasons, the plot sells. Such a plot is highly attention-engaging and may be profoundly motivating to many individuals” (Saucier et al, p.265).

This similarity to popular fictional stories is unsurprising considering that “the best propaganda is disguised as entertainment” (O’Shaughnessy, 2012, p.34). In fact, fictional stories have been shown to carry the power to influence radicalization processes, most famously the *Turner Diaries*, but also other novels (Michael, 2010; Berger, 2016a). In addition, epic popcultural narratives such as *Lord of the Rings* have influenced both righth-

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wing and jihadist extremists, potentially because they are based in Manichean world views and tell a “backward-looking quest to restore mythical lost order, and a leading role for a small vanguard of heroes struggling against betrayal and conspiracy” (Gambetta & Hertog, 2016, p.92). Stylistically too, propaganda material increasingly follows the norms of popular culture to create hedonic and eudaimonic entertainment experiences (Frischlich, 2020), copying epic Hollywood cinematography by employing ‘epic narrators’ (Beese & Baaken, 2021), utilizing well-known hero figures such as vikings (Kolvræa, 2019), and appropriating the visual aesthetics of popular video games (Dauber et al, 2019). Overall, “terrorists inspire their followers; they don’t merely persuade them” (Glazzard, 2017, p.1) and exciting narratives as well as the appropriation of popcultural styles found in fictional narratives aid extremists in their quest to do so.

Because narratives seem to play such an important role in extremist communication and radicalization processes, it is only logical to assume that narratives could also support efforts in preventing and countering radicalization processes, leading to an upsurge in research pertaining to the role of narratives in P/CVE (Logan, 2016; Braddock, 2020; Whittaker & Elsayed, 2019; Ingram, 2017b; Frischlich et al, 2018). Today, counter-narratives are a “key part of western efforts to combat terrorism” (Allchorn, 2020a, p.1; Silverman et al, 2016). While counter-narratives are “attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly through a range of online and offline means”, alternative narratives “undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are ‘for’ rather than ‘against’” (Briggs & Feve, 2013, p.6) and put “forward a positive story about social values, such as tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy” (RAN, 2012). Both are necessary to dismantle the ‘competitive system of meaning’ extremists propagate and to provide a colorful alternative to their black and white thinking (Ingram, 2018). As Tuck and Silverman (2016, p.4) write: “In a world where it is impossible to completely silence extremist narratives, developing ‘counter-narratives’ is a necessary alternative”.

The majority of CAN campaigns is aimed at audiences in a pre-radicalization phase (CTED, 2020; Davey et al, 2019; van Eerten et al, 2017). Consequently, the vast majority of

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such narrative campaigns do not focus on violence as a key issue (Frischlich et al, 2017a), i.e. seem to be aimed at the cognitive component of radicalization. I follow this general trend in this article and discuss the potential of fictional narratives to influence cognition rather than behavior in a pre-radicalization state. There is a variety of handbooks, models, and guidelines for the development of effective CAN campaigns available (Ritzmann et al, 2019; Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Silverman & Tuck, 2016; Hedayah, 2014; Allchorn, 2020a; Reed & Ingram, 2019) as well as case study research on individual campaigns and their effects (e.g. Speckhard, 2018; Aly, 2014; Monaci, 2020). Research on narrative campaigns supports the conclusion that the higher the narrativity of CANs, the larger the persuasive effects (Frischlich et al, 2017b; Frischlich et al, 2018).

While popular, CAN campaigns and their effectiveness are also disputed (Gemmerli, 2013). Ferguson (2016), for instance, reviewed the current research and “found no evidence to suggest that current or past counter-narrative strategies have been effective at reducing the VE threat” (p.15). This may be because they generate much less reach than propaganda material (Lohlker et al, 2016), but also because some “counter-propaganda videos are sarcastic, emotionless, and do not focus on creating a compelling narrative” (Gerstel, 2016, p.7). Glazzard (2017) asks whether governments and NGOs are ‘losing the plot’ in their CAN efforts and McDowell-Smith and colleagues (2017) lament that most counter-narrative material is designed to be cognitively impactful rather than emotionally, which severely hampers the persuasive effects of such campaigns. This may be because there is “little appetite for the trial and error necessary for effective counter-messaging” (Hughes, 2016, p.11). This suggests that while CAN are and will continue to be important components of P/CVE, there is a lot of room for improvement of such campaigns.

One of these potential areas of improvement could be the use of fiction. While there is now a considerable amount of research on non-fictional CAN, fictional narratives have only rarely been discussed in the CAN literature (but see El Damanhoury, 2020) and only a handful of campaigns have used fictional storytelling.<sup>3</sup> This is surprising considering that the

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<sup>3</sup> Notably Jamal al-Khatib <https://www.youtube.com/c/JamalalKhatib/videos>

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persuasive effects of fictional narratives are well established (Sukalla, 2019) and such fiction has been employed in other prevention efforts, for instance in entertainment-education campaigns (Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010; Moyer-Guse et al, 2012), or to foster reconciliation between former conflict parties, e.g. in Rwanda (Levy Paluck, 2009; Levy Paluck & Green, 2009). Indeed, a variety of studies in communication science found fictional narratives such as TV shows, movies, and books to be highly persuasive and capable of changing both attitudes and behavior despite being developed as mere entertainment (Shrum, 2017; Vezzali et al, 2015; Roche et al, 2016; Shrum & Lee, 2017). This includes, for instance, positive effects of fiction on morality (Liao, 2013) and empathy (Djikic & Oatley, 2014; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar et al, 2006; 2009), which points to the potential of fiction in general prevention efforts. Interestingly, fictional narratives elicit similar effects as non-fictional accounts, *even when they are specifically labeled as fiction* (Green et al, 2009; Appel & Richter, 2007). Considering the call for more creative approaches to CAN and the insight from narrative persuasion research that fiction can be a potent vehicle to transport messages effectively, an exploration of the potential benefit fictional narratives may hold, could support efforts to taking the CAN approach forward. In the following three key mechanisms of narrative persuasion - transportation, identification, and perceived realism - and their potential role in fictional P/CVE campaigns are discussed. In addition, the possibility of developing utopian P/CVE narratives to counter extremists' utopian storytelling is examined.

### Storytelling elements and their potential role in fictional P/CVE narratives

#### *Transportation*

*The noise was deafening. It did not come from a single source but was the accumulated sound of the bustle on New Delhi's Sadar Bazar. Local vendors haggling with tourists, rickshaw drivers trying to make their way through the crowds, the honking of cars on*

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Abdullah-X <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx/videos>

Tränen der Dawa [Tears of Dawa] <https://violence-prevention-network.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Flyer-Islam-ist-EN.pdf>

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*surrounding streets, and hundreds of locals chatting with their favorite sellers during their weekly shopping. Like a spider's web clinging onto the prey, the never-ending buzzing entwined the ears and Kyle felt a commencing headache. He pinched his eyes and dabbed the sweat off his forehead as the heat flickered across the asphalt like dancing fireflies. The refreshing breeze blowing across the Irish meadows at home seemed worlds away in what felt like an Indian sauna to him. Wishing himself back to his hotel room and a nice cold shower, he took his sunglasses off and cleared them yet again from the incessant floating dirt and sand that made the air too thick to breathe. Last week's sandstorm had covered the whole city under a thin blanket of khaki grains. Maybe it was a sign that destiny had turned the hourglass and drowned his plans in the sands of time. Maybe he should abort the mission. Kyle put the glasses back on and rolled his eyes. There is no destiny, he reminded himself. The heat had clearly gone to his head. He wiped the sand of his watch to check the time. His contact person should appear any second.*

The construction of a storyworld or the “art of world-making” (Monaci, 2017, p. 2848) or “world-building” (Hickson, 2019) is paramount for fictional narratives. Readers, viewers, or listeners need to be able to grasp and picture the characters’ surroundings and the unfolding events; the characters’ personalities, attitudes, identities and relationships to each other must fit the storyworld logic of their surroundings (Schneider, 2001). Fictional accounts therefore often include descriptions of the setting characters’ find themselves in, as demonstrated above, to draw audiences into the characters’ experiences (Zheng, 2014; Strick et al, 2015).

Building a graspable world audiences can envision clearly is one of the factors that contribute to transportation, one of the central elements of narrative persuasion (Sukalla, 2019). Transportation refers to a state in which “all mental systems and capacities become focused on the events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701); it is a state in which audiences are ‘hooked’ to or ‘lost’ in the story and the storyworld briefly overshadows reality. This also includes emotional involvement in the plot (Carpenter & Green, 2017; Slate & Rouner, 2002). Transportation also occurs in non-fictional narratives

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such as advertisements (Lien & Chen, 2013) and even Instagram selfies (Farace et al, 2017), but in fictional narratives, it necessitates the building of a believable world the characters inhabit. While transportation is influenced by a multitude of factors, (Hall & Bracken, 2011; Mazzocco et al, 2010), the quality of the storytelling, likeable characters, and a graspable fictional world are crucial to elicit transportation and, therefore, persuasive effects (Kreuter et al, 2007; Sukalla, 2019).

A high degree of transportation is positively correlated with persuasion (Green, 2004; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013). Storr (2019) argues that “when we’re transported, our beliefs, attitudes, and intentions are vulnerable to being altered, in accordance with the mores of the story” (p.207). Murphy and colleagues (2011) for instance find that the level of transportation predicts both changes in attitudes and behavior in conformity with those presented in the story, highlighting the importance of transportation for persuasive effects. “Transportation changes people and then it changes the world” (Storr, 2019, p.208; see also van Laer et al, 2014); i.e. attitudes, values, and behaviors of narrative consumers are influenced by fictional storylines and subsequently change reality. Importantly, this holds true regardless of whether the narratives are labeled as fact or fiction (Slater & Rouner, 2002), i.e. CAN would not have to pretend to depict reality to persuade.

For the development of fictional CAN, this means that it will be beneficial to invest some thought and some screen time into ‘the art of world building’, i.e. the construction of a coherent storyworld with the potential to elicit a considerable degree of transportation in audiences. Building such a world may entail showing the characters’ surroundings as well as recurring locations as seen in season two of the Jamal al-Khatib campaign returning to Jamal’s family home at various instances (TURN, 2019). The storyworld is often composed of both the physical and social setting the protagonist finds himself/herself in, rendering footage that shows the character within his/her social and physical surroundings beneficial for transportation and persuasion. Increasing transportation could also entail ‘over the shoulder’ camera shots similar to those used in first-person player video games, allowing audiences to

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experience the narrative as if they were standing behind the protagonist and were directly involved in the events unfolding.

In addition, the use of music may be especially worth considering as a relatively easy way to increase transportation in CAN campaigns. If one imagines movies without soundtracks, one can easily understand that in order to create the desired atmosphere, set the scene and draw viewers in, music is an essential part of conveying the storyworld (Boltz, 2004). Music consistent with the events shown increases transportation (Strick et al, 2015), emotional involvement (Ellis & Simons, 2005; Parke et al, 2007), helps to convey meaning (Herget, 2019; Vitouch, 2001; Ansani et al, 2020, Tagg, 2006; Tan et al, 2007), and may even influence moral judgments of the content shown (Steffens, 2020; Ziv et al, 2012; Seidel & Prinz, 2013). In addition, songs with prosocial lyrics increase prosocial thoughts and empathy (Greitemeyer, 2009), whereas aggressive lyrics may have the opposite effect (Fischer & Greitemeyer, 2006). Therefore, choices of background songs may facilitate the messages conveyed through CAN and support the building of a coherent storyworld.

### *Identification*

*Lesin was upset. Or sad. Or angry. Or maybe all of it together. Life on Graelia<sup>4</sup> sucked! The little planet, around 6 billion light years to the right of galaxy ESO 593-8<sup>5</sup>, was home to Irkeils, Zumeil, and various minorities, including his tribe, the Vussun. Irkeils were tall and graceful, had silk skin, long hair they wore in buns, and had amazing fighting abilities. Zumeil were different. While Irkeils often came across as reserved, the smaller Zumeil were friendly and charismatic. With their intellect, their wit and their sophisticated jokes, they had others wrapped around their fingers before anyone could notice their shortcomings such as their big, floppy hands or the often questionable choices of tattoos displayed on their backs. But he was a Vussun. He was neither tall and cool nor intelligent and funny. Lesin stopped in his tracks and examined his reflection in the shop window. He*

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<sup>4</sup> All names were generated via <https://www.fantasynamegenerators.com/>

<sup>5</sup> ESO 593-8 is located in Sagittarius, around 650 million light years away from earth and can be observed via the Hubble telescope: <https://esahubble.org/images/heic0810aj/>

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*gave a sniff at it. He was a typical Vassun: Tiny body, big feet, small upper tentacles and, worst of all, fluffy fur. Fluffy! How embarrassing was that? He turned away from his reflection, shaking his head. That was the reason Kelia would never speak to him. And the reason he never spoke to her. There was no use in it anyways, she had all these cool and funny boys to choose from, why would she as much as look at him? He sighed. Life was really not fair.*

In addition to transportation, identification with characters in narratives is deemed essential for persuasive effects (Shen et al, 2018; Tukachinsky & Tokunaga, 2013; van Laer et al, 2014). Identification refers to ‘putting oneself in the protagonist’s shoes’ (Oatley, 1999), i.e. it describes the immersion into the character’s viewpoint and emotions as if it were one’s own and experiencing the story from the character’s perspective (Sestir & Green, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012). Identification may facilitate persuasion by increasing story-consistent attitudes (Green & Donahue, 2009) as the audience is more likely to accept the characters’ attitudes on various issues, including approval or disapproval of the death penalty (Till & Vitouch, 2012), euthanasia (De Graaf et al, 2012) or the consumption of alcohol (Cho et al, 2014). In addition, by decreasing the perceived social distance to characters portrayed (So & Nabi, 2013), identification may elicit perspective-taking even with out-groups, which may in turn reduce stigma (Chung & Slater, 2013).

Naturally, perceived similarity to the story’s characters may increase identification (Pinkleton et al, 2010), especially when this similarity is not derived from factors such as demographics (Ooms et al, 2019) but from psychological similarity of attitudes and beliefs, i.e. there is ‘psychological proximity’ (Tesser, 2000) between viewer and character. Likeability too may increase the chance of identification (Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010; Brown, 2015), because audiences are more drawn to perceiving themselves as similar to likeable, friendly characters. Crucially, identification aids emotional involvement in the story, which in turn can increase the persuasive appeal of narratives (Betsch et al, 2011; Keer et al, 2013), and elicit both cognitive (De Graaf et al, 2009) and behavioral (Murphy et

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al, 2011) effects. The higher the identification with the character, the more emotional appeal is ascribed to the story and the more persuasive power it holds over the audience (Igartua, 2010; Igartua & Barrios, 2012; Hoeken & Sinkeldam, 2014).

As the story above and thousands of pieces of entertainment media demonstrate, identification is not dependent upon physical similarity or membership in the same social group. If that were the case, movies such as *The Lion King* or *Wall-E* should have been a flop at the box office. Instead, millions of viewers were hooked to these stories and could relate to Simba's grief and Wall-E's clumsy attempts to woo robot lady Eve, because the characters, their emotions and relationships were relatable. In the story above, Lesin's experience is relatable not because readers understand the struggle of having a fluffy fur, but because many will relate to and identify with the teenage struggle with body image and the perception everyone else is cooler than oneself. In this way, even non-human characters can elicit identification.

There are obvious benefits to focus on increasing identification with characters in CAN. As discussed, identification may increase the persuasive effects of narratives by prompting audiences to perceive the story through the eyes of a character and mirroring the character's attitudes and emotional states. If the character belongs to the in-group, audiences may be inspired to follow him/her in both attitudes and actions. If the character is dissimilar to the audience, e.g. belongs to an out-group, perceived psychological proximity, likeability, and relatable emotional experiences may facilitate identification and encourage perspective-taking with members of an out-group. Such identification may decrease stigmatization, increase tolerance of other attitudes, and may even reduce tension in opinions on controversial issues such as protracted conflicts (Cohen et al, 2015; Chung & Slater, 2013; Hoeken & Fikkers, 2014; but see Cao & Decker, 2015 who find that a first-person perspective of a victim of violence may lead to greater victim-blaming). In these instances, identification may initially be harder to achieve, because humans are more akin to identifying with characters similar to themselves. If narrative identification is, however, achieved under these circumstances, its effects may be positive and far reaching for the management of intergroup relations (Chung &

Slater, 2013). Non-realistic fictional characters may hold additional benefits. Presenting a character obviously belonging to an out-group may elicit negative reactions, e.g. dismissing their experiences. This may make engagement with difficult inter-group issues such as discrimination challenging. If, however, the narrative is fictional and has, for example, likeable aliens grappling with discriminatory practices, the identification with their suffering may translate into changed attitudes towards real-life out-groups (see Vezzali et al, 2015 on how *Harry Potter* influenced stereotyping). Fictional characters may also be suitable for exposure to highly contested, potentially very emotional topics. Despite identification, fictional characters such as aliens or humanized animals still create more distance to the events depicted than realistic accounts may. The use of likeable fictional characters engaging with such delicate topics could therefore reduce a potential backlash by pulling the topic into the realm of fiction.

Identification and high-quality narratives may even hold the potential to override political ideologies held by audiences. In their study on how *Law and Order* influences participants' opinions of the death penalty, Slater and colleagues (2006) found that narratives can suppress the effect of ideology. Both liberal and conservative participants showed narrative-congruent attitudes rather than those mirroring party-line differences. Narratives eliciting high identification with characters may therefore hold the power to override pre-existing beliefs and perception of peer group norms and aid CANs' persuasive intent. This is beneficial for CAN, especially if campaigns are situated not only in primary but also in secondary prevention efforts aimed at those potentially already contemplating extremist views. Here too, characters that do not exist in reality, may hold the potential to support the overriding of political ideologies. A realistic political framework or ideology may not as easily be applied to an alien, a robot, or an animal than it may to any human character regardless of the level of fictionality. Therefore, such characters may afford greater leeway in CAN campaigns to depict political issues with a decreased risk of resistance or repercussions.

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*Perceived Realism*

*“We’re running out of time. We need a plan NOW!” Arargorlim<sup>6</sup> looked at his comrades. Everyone looked scared but defiant. They had taken cover behind an old battlement, built by his ancestors thousands of years ago during the great war between the dwarfs and elves. He looked at Ryfon, whose long hair and fair skin identified him unmistakably as an elf. Thousands of years ago, they would have been enemies; now they fought alongside each other against a much more terrifying adversary. Glozz, the foolish Goblin king driven by greed, had broken into the Nusha temple to steal the legendary cask that produced a never ending flood of jewels. Instead of infinite richness, he had brought Cirsis’ curse upon the vast lands of Yefror and awoken Moghor, a dragon so powerful, so terrifyingly evil and brutal that nobody dared to even speak his name. Nobody doubted that he was capable of slaughtering every single living creature in Yefror. Instinctively Aragolim looked to the sky. Moghor could appear any minute, the horizon had already turned into a black and red gloom, as if destiny was preparing for their demise. Cesan, commander in chief of the centaurs, shook his head. He knew very well they would not be able to fight Moghor, not even all of them together. He sighed. “Look at you! You boys are pitiful!” All heads turned to Thoestra, the amazon, who had been quietly listening to them developing and immediately discarding plans for hours. “I have an idea...”*

Although most adults will severely doubt the existence of dwarfs, elves, and dragons, most readers will not have spent much time thinking about how unrealistic the plot is while reading the story presented above. When reading or viewing fictional narratives, audiences have a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’, which means that “instead of the reader constantly evaluating the truth or falsity of information in relation to the reader’s general world knowledge, the reader should suspend such evaluations and become absorbed in the hypothetical world” (Grasser et al, 2013, p.257). In other words, audiences treat the plot as if it were true. Humans could not enjoy fiction and not be transported into the story if they were

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<sup>6</sup> All names were generated via <https://www.fantasynamgenerators.com/>

constantly busy contemplating whether the story they are presented with corresponds to the physical reality on earth. This gives writers the freedom to construct different worlds and creatures not bound by what exists in real life.

Nevertheless, even in fiction, it is not ‘anything goes’. Narratives must be coherent and events believable and ‘realistic’ within the storyworld constructed. A distinction must be made between external and internal realism. External realism is the degree of consistency between the narrative and the real world (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000), whereas internal or narrative realism (Shapiro & Cock, 2003) describes the internal coherence of the plot in the narrative setting (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Cho and colleagues (2014) follow Hall (2003) to describe the dimensions of external realism: Perceived plausibility (this could happen in the real world), perceived typicality (the events are similar to the audience’s real life experience), and perceived factuality (based on facts and real events). Internal realism, on the other hand, is the perception of plausibility *within* the storyworld, i.e. the logic of the fictional world is used as a yardstick to measure how realistic a story element is perceived to be.

Perceived realism depends on the audience’s expectations of the storyworld. For instance, the appearance of a dragon may be perceived as congruent with the storyworld logic in *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, but would cause cognitive dissonance in *James Bond* as it would break the setting of the story. When perceived realism is high, it elicits a positive influence on emotional involvement (Brusselle & Bilandzic, 2008), identification with the characters (Larkey & Hecht, 2010) and message evaluation (Cho & Boster, 2008) and may therefore increase the persuasive appeal of the narrative. When a break in storyworld logic happens, however, perceived realism decreases and narrative experiences, including transportation and identification, may be impaired, which threatens the persuasive effect of the narrative.

Narratives’ persuasive effects are not contingent upon high external realism. On the contrary, fictional narratives low in external realism can elicit transportation, identification, and emotional involvement (Cho et al, 2014) as long as they are plausible or ‘real enough’ (Hong, 2015) to be believable (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011). Hamby and colleagues (2018)

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refer to this as verisimilitude and write: “A story may take place on Mars, and the characters may even be Martians, but they must interact in a way that matches our understanding of social interaction, or be motivated to achieve goals that correspond with motives and goals that one might encounter in one’s *real world*” (p.117, emphasis in original). In other words, the emotions and interactions must be realistic, protagonists and settings do not need to be.

So far, most CAN campaigns are high in external realism as they are usually non-fiction. When CAN do employ fictional elements and wish to retain a high level of external realism, they are dependent upon a realistic depiction of target audiences’ experiences to be perceived as authentic. This often necessitates direct access to members of the target audience to ensure believability. Fictional narratives low in external realism may elicit similar persuasive effects as those high in external realism but may not require such access and authenticity. Fictional elements and moving away from realistic depictions may therefore afford P/CVE narrative campaigns greater freedom to maneuver without necessitating support from target audiences. Low external realism may also allow P/CVE campaigns to employ ‘comic exaggerations’ (Lippe & Reidinger 2020, p. 27). Similar to political cartoons, fictional stories may exaggerate or overemphasize certain aspects in order to highlight their importance. When external realism is high, comic exaggerations may be perceived as mocking, as gimmicky, or ridiculing. In stories low in external realism, it may be possible to overemphasize certain aspects without eliciting negative responses, because non-human characters or settings not corresponding to reality may create greater distance to the storyline, i.e. events depicted may not be taken personally.

Such distance may increase the persuasiveness of fictional CAN even in instances where comic exaggeration is not used. Narratives are never received by a ‘blank page’; audiences have pre-knowledge, preconceived ideas and beliefs. If the story content is high in perceived external realism but challenges such preconceptions, the story may be dismissed as unrealistic. Narratives obviously low in external realism, however, can circumvent such preconceptions, because the content is not as easily compared to reality and therefore less likely to be perceived as unrealistic. For instance, it may be easier to discuss discriminatory

practices of one alien tribe against another than discussing humans experiencing discrimination, because the verisimilitude of the narrative is not threatened by the audiences' beliefs about discrimination in real-life. Because it is 'just a story', viewers or readers may be much more willing to accept the storyworld logic as realistic in this particular setting and find it less easy to argue against the discrimination experiences of an alien than a human. Given the sometimes delicate nature of CAN content, low external realism and fictional characters may help the P/CVE community to address difficult aspects of a given issue with a reduced risk of unintended backlash.

#### *Utopia and grand narratives of significance*

*"Have you wondered how you could have found such a treasure? The Gods have a plan for you. A destiny."<sup>7</sup> Leroy was still kneeling, breathing heavily. Who was speaking to him? Surely it was an angel or some other supernatural creature; the sound of her voice was ringing in his ears. He did not dare to look up for he feared she would disappear. "What is my destiny?", he asked, his eyes fixated on the dirt beneath his body. "The sword you are holding could only be found by the chosen one. It will determine your destiny. From this day on, you are the Olymp's hands on earth. You will gather the strong-willed, those who desire to break free from the chains of the idle meaninglessness of your existence. And you will lay the foundation of a new community. The Gods will lead you to the divine land and you will erect a new kingdom. A kingdom in which every man, every woman, and every child is equal. In which the strong protect the weak and the wise lead the foolish. There will be no war, no discrimination, no envy, greed or wrath. None of the sins that sicken the society you have lived in. Your kingdom will be a lantern in the dark. You will not know hunger or thirst, sadness or anger for you will have finally reached the epitome of perfection and live peaceful and prosperous until you are called home to the Gods." Leroy finally had the courage to look*

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<sup>7</sup> Beginning sequence of the *Prince of Persia - Sands of Time* trailer (2009)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZ7Li5w2I-k>

*up. His eyes were blinded by gleaming light and an all-encompassing warmth encased him. He knew the angel's story was true, this was his destiny, and he was ready. Then he woke up.*

Both jihadists' and right-wing extremists' communication strategies include utopian narratives and visions of what life in an ideal society would look like. Such positive storytelling is an essential component of extremist messaging (Winter, 2017). In their now classic account of collective action frames, Benford and Snow (2000) stress the importance of not simply providing audiences with a diagnosis of the problem, but with a prognosis of what the solution aimed for will look like and which (positive) change it will bring, alongside motivational frames to facilitate action. The diagnostic frames sometimes include dystopian narratives by extremist actors, including 'the Swedish dystopia' (Thorleifsson, 2019) or the 'Great Replacement' (Davey & Ebner, 2019), whereas the utopian frames may tell the tale of ethnically pure, homogenous societies built upon a strong collective identity (Baldauf et al, 2017). In fact, utopian notions of purity and, relatedly, a defense of women and children from 'evil foreign influences' can be found in both right-wing extremist and jihadist storytelling (Meiering et al, 2019). Such utopian narratives can elicit considerable motivational powers. Building a new society and a new state where all Muslims can live peacefully in a brother- and sisterhood of equals, for instance, was a strong motivational driver for many foreign fighters joining IS (Winter, 2015).

Such utopian narratives are usually supported by narratives of personal significance (Kruglanski et al, 2014; 2019). A revolution and the subsequent building of an ideal society requires heroes brave enough to take action against the current system and put themselves in potentially dangerous, maybe even lethal, situations (Dugas et al, 2016). Utopias do not build themselves, they require a courageous endeavor to overthrow the current societal organization. For instance, the Identitarian Movement (IB) uses the Greek Lambda as their symbol, which supposedly adorned the shields of Spartans defending themselves from the Persians during the Battle of Thermopylae (ADL, 2021); the inspiration for the movie *300*. The narrative communicates the necessity of a selected elite of warriors heroically fighting

against the seemingly superior adversary to defend the weak and protect their way of living, which translates nicely into the IB's self-image of heroically defending Europe. The possibility of changing the world for the better and belonging to a select *avant garde* of fearless and altruistic warriors may be especially appealing to individuals seeking personal significance, adventure or thrill (Venhaus, 2010). The prospect of becoming a hero may be perceived as the chance to (re-) gain significance, feel empowered, and self-efficacious (Schlegel, 2020); prospects the current society may deny to potential recruits. Utopian narratives therefore not only present Benford and Snow's (2000) prognosis; they may also address the quest for significance and the wish for adventure or heroism individuals may not have found an outlet for in mainstream society.

In contrast to extremist communication strategies, counter- and alternative narratives normally do not include utopian elements. This is a logical consequence of lack of fictional storytelling in CAN campaigns. After all, a utopian vision is, by definition, fictional and not (yet) reality. Because narrative campaigns are usually high in external realism and are supposed to be grounded in realistic 'factual' accounts, the inclusion of utopian elements would be incompatible with the approach currently taken. This is problematic, because it leaves an essential part of extremist messaging unchallenged and those longing to be a hero and changing the world without a non-extremist alternative. At the moment, CAN campaigns are often (unconsciously) defending the status quo and, as Berger (2016b) argues, "pro-establishment messaging is inherently uncool" (p.7). The Radicalization Awareness Network (2019) has acknowledged this too, writing: "Violent extremist narratives are awe-inspiring, offer simple solutions to existing problems, and provide certainty, guarantees of success and adventure. CN [counter-narratives] and AN [alternative narratives] are unlikely, no matter how slick in production, to provide these because they are mostly embedded and committed to 'the status quo'" (p.10). A defense of the status quo may be generally less appealing than the thrill and excitement promised by the prospect of revolution and building a better world, producing a disadvantage for CAN in comparison to extremists' utopian narratives. Worse than being perceived as less exciting, the current system is often perceived as unjust by those

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drawn or vulnerable to extremist ideologies. Defending it may be seen as justifying discrimination and oppression, the support of a ‘corrupt’ elite leading a ‘broken’ system, or as a pathway to alienation from what is just and true. When the status quo is far removed from what is perceived as an ideal society, narrative campaigns portraying positive aspects of existing conditions may be unable to provide a believable and desirable alternative for those feeling ostracised or discriminated against.

However, the problem goes deeper than a defense of the status quo. Even if those developing CAN campaigns were willing to include utopian narratives, what would such a utopia look like? Webb (2013) laments the emergence of an anti-utopian age, i.e. the abandonment of the very idea of utopia in the Western world. Because democracy in its current form is believed to be the beacon of societal organization, one may work towards small improvements within the system, but cannot expect large, far-reaching changes. The very idea of a revolutionary change to the system is absurd if the current situation is understood to be the most desirable state. Fukuyama (2006) may have been wrong about the end of history in world politics, but Western societies have a tendency to treat the present organization of political and social life as such an end state. Consequently, there is no grand narrative available to pit against extremists’ utopian visions. We are lacking an ‘epic story’ (Schlegel, 2021) and therefore leave an important part of extremist narratives unchallenged.

Clearly, the lack of a grand narrative for the future and corresponding utopian narratives is a problem extending beyond P/CVE efforts. No CAN campaign, no matter how cleverly developed, will be able to compensate for the absence of such a narrative in society at large. Nevertheless, the adoption of fictional narrative components may allow P/CVE practitioners to address the heroic and revolutionary ambitions their target audience may hold and move away from a defense of the status quo. As discussed, fiction can but does not have to adhere to the principle of external realism, i.e. it does not necessarily have to be realistic. Fiction may therefore afford CAN campaigns with additional room to maneuver. In the absence of a grand narrative in the political reality ‘on the ground’, a fictional world can provide the opportunity to move from the defense of the status quo towards the

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communication of an alternative vision for societal progress. If racism, discrimination, stigmatization, injustice, and other problems can be addressed in fictional narratives, so can their potential solutions and visions for a better society. Displaying both current problems and potential utopian solutions may yield stronger effects than utopian narratives by themselves. Appealing stories are stories of change; perfect characters in a perfect world are boring (Storr, 2019). Therefore, utopian CAN would not necessitate communicating unrealistic storylines of ‘unicorns and rainbows’. Utopian narratives of grand societal change could be built into CAN acknowledging the imperfection of the current system and grievances of the target audience in a fictional setting while providing room for revolutionary aspirations.

Narratives of significance and empowerment, of ‘normal’ people becoming heroes and saving the world are abundant in fictional literature. The ‘hero's journey’ is one of the most fundamental pillars of fictional storytelling across time and cultures (Campbell, 2008). Characters such as Frodo, Harry Potter, or the ‘book thief’ Liesel Meminger are unlikely heroes at the beginning of their stories, but are empowered and transformed by their journey. CAN may benefit from fictional elements that allow the addressing of significance seekers and those longing to do something and be someone special. Fictional characters can facilitate feelings of empowerment and significance that translate into the real world, especially when identification is high. For instance, there is growing recognition of the importance of female heroes in fictional storytelling and their influence on young female viewers (Tigges, 2017; Greenwood, 2007). From the women of Wakanda to Mulan, Princess Leia and, most prominently, Hermione Granger, female characters have played a role in the empowerment of women and girls (Quiroga, 2018). Whole books have been written about Hermione Granger as a feminist icon (Bell, 2012) and an abundance of signs at women’s marches have made reference to her (Gray, 2017). Actress Emma Watson, now a UN ambassador for women’s rights, summarized how Hermione was empowering women across the globe like this: “Young girls are told you have to be a delicate princess. Hermione taught them that you can be the warrior” (McAlpine, 2015). The stories we consume influence our perception of reality, the patterns we see in this world and the type of roles we aspire for ourselves. Whether

we like it or not, fictional narratives have real-life consequences. If this is true for Hermione empowering women, it may also contribute to the effectiveness of fictional CAN narratives aimed at providing alternative, non-extremist avenues to (re-)gain significance and ‘be a hero’. Fictional elements may therefore be a way to circumvent the lack of utopian storytelling as well as a way to provide engaging narratives of significance without the need for high external realism.

### **Cautions & Limitations**

Fictional storytelling has not been used in many counter- and alternative narrative projects. When it has been used, the narratives produced are often high in external realism and seek to display radicalization processes and fictional characters as true to life as possible. The empirical evidence for the effects of fictional story elements in narrative campaigns against extremism, especially plots moving away from the strong focus on external realism and a direct display of realistic radicalization dynamics, must therefore be regarded as extremely limited. Only when professionally produced campaigns with fictional storytelling of high quality are available and their effects evaluated, can the potential benefits of fictional elements in CAN be judged with any acceptable degree of certainty. Consequently, this article is necessarily theoretical in nature and relies on insights on narrative persuasion effects from research outside of extremism studies. The hypothesis that fictional elements may aid the persuasive effect of CAN campaigns is logical given the research discussed but must be empirically validated in the future and the specificities of the P/CVE context must be taken into account in evaluating its potential.

Narratives, whether fictional or not, are not a silver bullet that will ‘solve’ the issue of radicalization and extremism. Not only must narratives always be understood as part of a broader set of P/CVE measures rather than as stand-alone approaches, expectations of their effects should be realistic. Simply watching a propaganda video is not enough to radicalize an individual and simply watching a CAN campaign will not be enough to prevent radicalization.

Narratives always influence audiences in conjunction with a myriad of other factors in their lives. In addition, no matter how high the quality of the storytelling, no narrative will be appealing to everyone, not even everyone in a clearly defined target audience. Preferences for genres, visual styles, type of realism etc differ. Some people simply prefer dragons to detectives, some prefer messages with high sensation value, others with low and so on. Therefore, any judgment on the promises of fiction for P/CVE can only be made after a diverse range of fictional narrative approaches has been tried. In other words, fictional campaigns need to be implemented before empirical evidence to validate this article's hypotheses can be generated.

It should also be stressed that the further one moves towards fiction and low external reality, the higher the risk that narrative campaigns not done well and lacking high quality storytelling will appear gimmicky. While this article argues for the inclusion of fictional elements and encourages a move away from the portrayal of a realistic radicalization process through a fictional character towards lower external realism and more creative plots, the positive persuasive effects of fiction will always depend on the quality of the storytelling and the choice of an appealing, professional-looking mode of delivery (videos, graphic novels etc). Simply including fictional elements for the sake of including them is likely going to backfire and runs the risk of undermining CAN campaigns.

Finally, there should be discussions about potential ethical considerations of using fictional stories in CAN. Some may argue that using fiction is manipulation, 'pretending', or worse, social engineering. As we have seen, labeling a narrative as fiction does not diminish its persuasive power (Green et al, 2009; Appel & Richter, 2007) and P/CVE actors could use such labels to deflect accusations of deception. However, especially for fictional CAN high in external realism that could be perceived as true or featuring fictional characters as actually existing in real life, may come with additional caveats that need to be taken into consideration.

## Conclusion

While the last decade has seen a stark increase in research focus on both extremist narratives and narrative campaigns as tools in P/CVE, engagement with the potential benefits fictional elements may hold for narrative persuasion has been largely absent. This article is an exploration of how four elements of narrative persuasion and fictional storytelling, namely transportation, identification, perceived realism, and utopian narratives could support the development of high-quality fictional CAN campaigns. While research on fictional CAN specifically is extremely limited, research conducted on narrative persuasion more generally points to the potential fictional narratives can hold in influencing attitudes, values, and behavior. As discussed, fictional elements may provide those developing CAN campaigns with greater freedom and potential for creativity in their approaches as well as the benefit of not having to limit themselves to what is deemed a realistic representation of the world in order to counter extremists' (utopian) narratives.

This article should not be understood to argue that fiction is superior to non-fiction, that fictional CAN need to be low in external realism, or as a call to employ exclusively fictional CAN. Narrative campaigns will benefit from a diversity of approaches as audiences differ tremendously in their preferences. Some may be best reached with a 'classical' counter-narrative, others may respond most favorably to fictional stories high in external realism, yet others may prefer low external realism. Much more research on how audiences respond to fictional elements in CAN is needed before the precise role and benefit of such elements for political education, prevention, and countering of radicalization processes can be determined. However, the literature currently available suggests that fictional narratives hold considerable persuasive power and influence audiences' real-world beliefs and behaviors. It may therefore be fruitful to take a risk and attempt the development and implementation of fictional CAN campaigns in order to explore the merits they may hold.

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