THE IMPACT OF COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact

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www.againstviolentextremism.org

AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

About

The **Institute for Strategic Dialogue** (ISD) is a London-based 'think and do tank' that has pioneered policy and operational responses to the rising challenges of violent extremism and inter-communal conflict.

Combining research and analysis with government advisory work and delivery programmes, ISD has been at the forefront of forging real-world, evidence-based responses to the challenges of integration, extremism and terrorism.

The **Against Violent Extremism** (AVE) network is a unique and powerful new global force in the ongoing struggle to tackle violent extremism. Former violent extremists ('formers') and survivors of violent extremism ('survivors') are empowered to work together to push back extremist narratives and prevent the recruitment of 'at risk' youths.

AVE uses technology to connect, exchange, disseminate and influence all forms of violent extremism (from far right and far left to AQ-linked and inspired and gangs). It leverages the lessons, experiences and networks of individuals who have dealt first-hand with extremism. Through the website and YouTube channel, members can stay in touch, share ideas, collaborate, find investment and partners, and project their messages to wider audiences.

About the authors

Tanya Silverman coordinates the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. AVE is a partnership between ISD, Jigsaw (formerly Google Ideas) and Gen Next which comprises of former extremists and survivors of extremism. Previously, she was involved in all areas of the organisation's security and counter-extremism work, particularly counter-narratives.

Christopher J. Stewart is a programe associate at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, focussing mainly on ISD's Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI). The OCCI was launched by Facebook in Berlin, January 2016, and is designed to counter hate speech and extremism online. Previously, Christopher helped to deliver innovative counter extremist campaigns in projects run with private partners Google, Facebook and Twitter, and government partners such as, the United States State Department.

Zahed Amanullah heads the counternarrative projects at ISD, with extensive experience in creating and managing on and offline resources and technology to combat radicalisation, hate speech, and to promote dialogue between Muslim communities and wider society. He is the Chair of the Concordia Forum, a global network of leaders from Muslim backgrounds that holds conferences and exclusive retreats annually. He is a founding board member of CEDAR, a pan-European network of Muslim professionals and a founding board member of AMILA (American Muslims Intent on Learning and Activism). Zahed has a BS from the University of California, Berkeley and a graduate diploma in management from the University of Bath.

Jonathan Birdwell is Head of Policy and Research at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Jonathan leads ISD's research and policy strategy, policy reports and policy maker networks, including the Policy Planner's Network, the Strong Cities Network, and the educational film series, Extreme Dialogue. Prior to joining ISD, Jonathan was based at the think tank Demos, where he authored reports on the relationship between non violent radicals and violent extremists, and online supporters of far-right xenophobic political parties and street-based movements.

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Executive Summary

The concept of creating counter-narratives[1] in order to push back against extremist recruitment and propaganda has become well established in recent years. In practice, however, it has proven difficult to curate this content in a systematic way, target it toward at risk audiences, and - most importantly - measure constructive impact on their behaviour.

Over the past few years, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has developed research and pilot studies conducted with the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network of former extremists and survivors of extremism that it manages. This research has been conducted in order to test and improve methodologies that help optimise the impact of counter-narrative campaigns.

This report presents the development, deployment, and evaluation of three counter-narrative campaigns orchestrated by AVE and Jigsaw (an incubator within Alphabet that uses technology to address geopolitical issues) with additional in-kind and financial support from Facebook and Twitter. This project builds on the findings of a previous counter-narrative pilot project conducted in 2014 and attempts to find ways to achieve greater scale, authenticity, efficiency, reach, and impact.

The key objectives of this project were to:

- Assist a wide geographic, ideological, and cultural variety of small non-profit organisations to develop and disseminate counter-narrative content to target audiences by utilising a variety of social media advertising tools;

- Analyse the strengths, weaknesses, and overall effectiveness of different social media platforms to facilitate reach and engagement among target audiences; and

- Provide guidance to build the capacity of similar non-profit organisations to produce effective counter-narrative content in the future by creating 'how-to' videos and a counter-narrative 'toolkit'.[2]

To achieve these objectives, AVE identified two pre-existing organisations and assisted them in the creation of counter-narrative content along with the development and execution of a target audience strategy. In the third example, AVE created a fronting organisation from scratch, building a brand through multiple accounts across multiple platforms in response to security concerns from the third party organisation.

The three campaigns included:

- **Average Mohamed.** A non-profit organisation that uses animation to encourage

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1   A counter-narrative is a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives. For further definitions of terms refer to the glossary at the end of this publication.

2   www.counternarratives.org

critical thinking among Somali youth (in Somali and English) about extremist ideologies.

- **ExitUSA.** A project of the US-based non-profit organisation 'Life After Hate', which aims to discourage individuals from joining white power movements and encourage defection by offering a 'way out'.

- **Harakat-ut-Taleem.** A front organisation created by AVE for a third party Pakistani communications company with sound experience in creating counter-narrative documentaries and content. They aim to counter Taliban recruitment narratives in Pakistan.

The campaigns were deployed in October 2015 with a total of 15 videos spread across the organisations. The methodologies used in the campaigns were informed by AVE's previous experience using social media advertising tools to reach target audiences. While the three counter-narrative campaigns are different in terms of content, approach and target audiences, a number of common findings emerged from the campaigns. The evaluation criteria used for evaluating the campaigns were 'awareness', 'engagement' and 'impact'.

Key findings

Our hypothesis was that a small amount of funding and guidance for counter-narrative campaigners, in terms of deploying social media advertising tools to reach 'target audiences', could dramatically improve the awareness, engagement and impact of counter-narratives and NGOs working in this space. The findings presented in this report support this hypothesis in a highly compelling way.

The three campaigns received over 378,000 videos views and over 20,000 total engagements, including likes, shares, replies, retweets and comments. Over 480 comments were made in response to the content.

Average Mohamed's page likes on Facebook increased by sevenfold, while the campaign doubled its number of Twitter followers and subscribers on YouTube. ExitUSA tripled its Twitter followers, doubled its YouTube subscribers and increased its Facebook page likes by 48 per cent. Harakat-ut-Taleem went from no presence on social media to 116 Facebook likes, 6 YouTube subscribers, and 62 Twitter followers.

Our qualitative analysis of comments, and in particular 'sustained engagements', provide a persuasive indication of content inspiring the consideration of different viewpoints, critical thinking and sowing the seeds of doubt. Average Mohamed's videos inspired young Muslims to debate the role of gender in Islam and the struggle of having multiple identities. ExitUSA's videos led to constructive and antagonistic exchanges with users who clearly held neo-Nazi views. Harakat-ut-Taleem's videos performed better in Urdu in Pakistan than they did with English sub-titles in the UK, demonstrating the ability for

counter-narratives coordinated in the UK to have a global impact.

Most importantly, the campaigns demonstrated that people going through the process of personal deradicalisation are willing to reach out and contact an organisation on social media in response to a counter-narrative campaign. In the clearest examples of impact, eight individuals reached out to ExitUSA asking for assistance 'getting away from hate' in response to their campaign.

Recommendations

This project demonstrates that a coordinated effort between content creators, social media companies, and private sector partners can substantially boost the awareness, engagement and impact of counter-narrative campaigns and NGOs.

One of the key aims of this project is to assist small and medium size NGOs in producing, disseminating and evaluating counter-narratives and counter speech. Based on these campaigns, we make the following recommendations to campaigners:

- Allocate modest amounts of funding in order to dramatically increase the reach and impact of counter-narrative campaigns. A Facebook-based counter-narrative campaign, for example, used a £2,500 ($3,750) budget to achieve a reach of +670,000 individual users.

- Conduct or utilise in-depth research on target audience interests and behaviours in order to maximise the potential of social media advertising tools and thus the impact of a campaign.

- Test a range of topics and message tones with similar target audiences – as a form of A/B or 'split testing' – in order to determine which resonate, and then apply the findings to the campaign.

- Train at least one member of staff to become an expert at using social media and marketing tools. Ensure that social media and marketing analytics are properly applied and monitored during the campaign.

- Supplement counter-narrative campaigns with user engagement strategies. This may require labour-intensive activities, such as engaging in conversation with audience members.

- Use alternative media channels in geographic areas where access is limited or censored.

- Coordinate online counter-narrative campaigns with offline campaigns or events.

- Be aware of the presence of online 'bots' used to scrape websites and social media. These may skew results and give a misleading picture of impact and reach.

- Spread online campaigning budgets over as long a period of time as possible. This can also help ensure that campaigns maximise reach with finite resources, and allow them to be responsive.

The findings from this project also demonstrate that each social media platform provides different strengths and weaknesses for disseminating advertised content to particular audiences across the radicalisation spectrum, from upstream (few or no signs of radicalisation) to downstream (more signs of radicalisation). **Facebook** produced the greatest reach, video views and engagement for each campaign. **YouTube** provided the lowest cost-to-views ratio and the highest rates of viewer retention. **Twitter** provided the second largest number of video views across platforms as well as the highest engagement-to-impressions ratio.

In addition to recommendations for counter-narrative campaigners, this pilot project also suggests recommendations for social media platforms to support and streamline this process. The most important recommendation is the need to provide detailed training and updated 'how to' guides and toolkits for NGOs following changes made to advertising interfaces.

Next Steps: Recommendations

This project shows the potential to significantly augment and amplify the vital work that many organisations are doing to tackle violent extremist narratives online. More can be done to scale this work to a greater extent by generating more data to help understand impact.

The science of measuring the impact of online counter-narratives is still in its early days. In this project, we have begun to build what is likely the first ever evaluation framework for online counter-narratives that goes beyond 'reach' and 'engagement' figures. With the beginnings of a framework in place, what's needed now is to test and compare a wide range of counter-narratives to add to and begin to construct a true, scientific evidence base for understanding impact. This would revolutionise our understanding of counter-narrative impact. In particular, this should include:

- **Sourcing a wider range of content that allows for testing of different counter-narrative components**. This would include: 1) intervention 'type' (i.e. prevention versus deradicalisation content; 2) ideology (i.e. far-right versus Islamist messages); 3) different message tones (i.e. thoughtful, personal story, cartoon).

- **Explore the possibility of identifying and redirecting pre-existing counter-narrative content with greater facility**. This project demonstrated that the process of creating counter-narrative content can be slow and arduous. One possible method of getting around this bottleneck is to use social platforms to categorise and map the landscape of counter-narrative content by analysing a broad range of 'pre-existing narratives' from campaigners across the social media spectrum. This could then be used to

explore the feasibility of redirecting and targeting pre-existing, 'natural world' content (as opposed to curated) to key audiences.

- **Use of offline market research techniques to better understand user journeys, experience and relationship between online content and offline opinion or behaviour change.** This should include focus groups and user experience testing with target or proxy audiences to help understand how people react to and engage with content. This should also include in-depth interviews with formers and mentors and intervention providers who work with young people in the context of prevention and deradicalisation in order to gain a better understanding of how to analyse comments and sustained engagements.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The concept of creating counter-narratives[3] in order to push back against extremist recruitment and propaganda has become well established in recent years. In practice, however, it has proven difficult to curate this content in a systematic way, target it toward at risk audiences, and - most importantly - measure constructive impact on their behaviour. Over the past few years, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has developed research and pilot studies conducted with the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network of former extremists and survivors of extremism that it manages. This research has been conducted in order to test and improve methodologies that help optimise the impact of counter-narrative campaigns.

This report outlines the key findings and results of three counter-narrative campaign pilot projects curated through the AVE network in coordination with Jigsaw and with additional in-kind assistance or financial support from Facebook and Twitter. Although some details and figures have been omitted for security purposes, the results of the study are presented in full.

Project aims:

- Review a selection of counter-narrative campaign concepts in collaboration with three NGOs covering a variety of geographies and ideologies

- Curate campaign content with these organisations whilst developing their understanding of best practices from our own research

- Set target audiences, disseminate the campaigns, and monitor their impact over a set duration

- Analyse campaign success metrics and produce recommendations for NGOs and social media platforms based on this data

The insights derived from these campaigns will help to further build knowledge and an evidence base of effectiveness for the growing field of counter-narratives. In particular, we highlight how advertising tools can be utilised, and evaluations undertaken, in a cost effective manner with the aim of encouraging small and medium-sized charities to create, disseminate and evaluate counter-narratives themselves.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used in order to effectively assess each of the counter narrative campaigns. These measures included:

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[3] A counter-narrative is a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives. For further definitions of terms refer to the glossary at the end of this publication.

- **Awareness metrics:** indications of whether target audiences were reached (including impressions, reach, video views and viewer retention).

- **Engagement metrics:** how much users interacted with each respective campaign's content and social media accounts and shared content (including video retention rates, numbers of comments, shares, likes).

- **Impact metrics:** whether campaigns' content appeared to encourage critical thinking and spark discussions around violent extremism by target audiences through sustained engagements, or encourage a target audience to reach out directly for support.

Selecting partner organisations

In order to identify organisations to produce counter-narrative content for this project, the AVE network put out a call for proposals amongst AVE members and to wider networks. AVE offered to provide partner NGOs with expertise and additional in-kind support from Facebook, and in-kind advertisements from Twitter, to scale and target their counter-narratives.

The organisations chosen by AVE were as follows:

ExitUSA is an "exit"/outreach programme run by Life After Hate (LAH). It is intended to help individuals who want to leave white supremacist groups, as well as provide support for former members of these groups. Their focus is on the far right in the USA. They have not engaged with targeted counter-narrative campaigns previously.

Average Mohamed is a non-profit organisation that uses the medium of animation to counter the ideology of Islamist extremist groups. Created by a Somali-American, it uses democratic principles as an alternative to channel frustrations both online and offline. Their focus is on ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups. Although Average Mohamed was featured at the White House CVE Summit as an example of a counter-narrative, previouslty it did not employ an online targeting element to their video campaigns in order to reach the right audience.

Harakat ut Taleem is a front organisation created by AVE for the counter-narrative content campaigners that chose to remain anonymous for the campaign, and this report, due to security concerns around disseminating anti-Taliban content in Pakistan. The organisation has worked with the development sector for the past seven years and created numerous awareness-raising campaigns. Their current focus is on Islamist extremism and, specifically, the Taliban in Pakistan. They have not developed targeted counter-narrative campaigns previously.

Methodology

The aim of this project was to increase the capacity of organisations to undertake counter-narrative campaigns designed and delivered for a target audience. In addition to providing guidance on the creation of counter-narrative content, a variety of online platforms were employed and the campaigns assessed through each platform's respective advertising and targeting capabilities. The methodology was chosen to be replicable and utilised by small-medium organisations with limited technical knowledge and small budgets, and was informed by AVE's **Counter-Narrative Toolkit**.

With its lower cost than traditional advertising methods, social media platforms provide the third sector with an opportunity to promote their work to key target audiences. The platforms chosen for this project were Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These were chosen because of the sophistication of their advertising platforms as well as the billions of users these platforms reach on a regular basis. AVE had previously used Facebook advertising and Google AdWords (which is used on YouTube). This was the first time AVE utilised Twitter's advertising function, and received in-kind support from Twitter to do so. Other niche social media platforms, including Ask.fm, Telegram, and Instagram, were initially considered but could not be included in the study because they lacked an advertising function (Ask.fm), employed encryption in their messaging streams (Telegraph), or because their advertising function was still in development (Instagram).

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEWS

Campaign overviews

Each organisations' goals and campaign objectives helped to plot their online campaign, understand what video content to produce and reach their target audience with that content. Gaining a brief overview of their social media experience helped to recognise their overall expertise in social media, not limited to social media marketing, and provide recommendations to improve their online presence. As social media marketing is a useful tool for reaching target audiences, AVE worked with organisations to produce targeting criteria to use on each platform that would enable their content to be seen by the right people.

Each counter-narrative video can be categorised into a number of 'tones' with different message 'content'. This has been informed by ISD's previous work with One to One online interventions[4]. The different tones that each video can be categorised into are: scholarly, reflective, sentimental, and casual. Equally important, the content of the videos can be categorised as presenting: consequences of negative actions, personal questions, ideological challenges, personal stories, and offers of assistance. It is useful to categorise the tone and content of videos to understand what counter-narrative content might resonate with each organisation's respective target audience.

Targeting

The following profiles on each campaign provide an overview of the targeting criteria used to try to reach the intended audiences. AVE advised each organisation to draft a case study of a mock target audience which, alongside previous campaigns and research conducted by ISD and the AVE network, informed the targeting criteria. The full lists of locations and 'interests' were expansive for each campaign, and these profiles only present a sample. They give an indication of both broad and specific interests that were used, and can act as an example for future campaigns about the depth and breadth of research required to create successful targeting criteria.

The report does not provide the targeting criteria for each individual video within each campaign, although AVE did tailor each of the targeting criteria depending on the message and content of the video. For example, within Average Mohamed's campaign, the *Be Like Aisha* video used more female-focused targeting due its message of Muslim female empowerment. In Harakat-ut-Taleem's campaign, the targeted locations chosen (regions and cities within Pakistan and the UK) reflected whether or not the video had English subtitles or not.

The ExitUSA Campaign

ExitUSA's counter-narrative campaign was made up of four videos, designed to discredit far-right extremist groups, 'sow the seeds of doubt' in far-right extremist individuals, and promote their exit program among to disaffected 'formers' looking for a way out, and their concerned families and friends.

Organisation Goals and Campaign Objectives

GOALS	OBJECTIVES
• Encourage disaffected far-right members to disengage from their groups and seek the help of ExitUSA • Provide a supportive community for former far-right extremists • Sow the 'seeds of doubt' in the minds of far-right members	• Increase online awareness over the issue of far-right extremism in the US • Engage directly with far-right extremists in an online setting • Build awareness of the organisation's project among family and friends of would-be extremists

The primary focus of the campaigning period was to garner video views. However, the campaign period also placed ads for engagements to understand if these types of ads would encourage more comments than video view ads.

Video Content and Campaign Targeting

ExitUSA's video development used the stories of both ExitUSA staff and AVE's 'formers' to highlight personal stories and the "false truths" often told by extremist groups. The organisation was keen to target the videos at a broad geographic audience, as their research indicated violent white-supremacists were sparsely located across all areas of the US.

AGE, GENDER AND LOCATION	INTERESTS AND KEYWORDS	TWITTER FOLLOWERS
13-35 & 35-60+ Male and Female Locations in the US	Stormfront, Aryan Brotherhood, Justice for Germans, Aryan Nations, Cultural Marxism, White Voice Network, National Front, Stop White Genocide, White American, Michigan Militia, Alabama Crimson Tide, Confederate States Army, Oak Creek, Wisconsin, Sodom and Gomorrah, American History X, Nazi Germany, Aryan, Right Wing News, Hardcore Skinhead or Apartheid, We are at War, White Power, Confederate Flag, WR, WPWW, KKK, Ku Klux Klan, 88, Affirmative Action, 14 Words, Jim Crow Laws	#WhiteResister, WHITE PRIDE, Southern Belle, BossMan, Van Von Faust, WHITE WATCH 14/88, Awakened Saxon, UNSB, fin_lander, SEIG, Nazi Follower, A. White, light4rights #WR, NSM Nationalist Talk, White Resistance, WhiteFront, Storm Fog, Valiant 87, DOUG AKA THOR, WhiteWizard, Grand Wizard, Aryanpower18, SS Command (NNP)

ExitUSA VIDEO TITLES AND DESCRIPTION

NO JUDGEMENT JUST HELP

The video explains that since 9/11 home-grown white supremacists have killed more Americans on US soil than ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban combined and continues to offer a way out to those involved in white supremacist movements. This video has a reflective tone and presents an ideological challenge and an offer of assistance.

THERE IS LIFE AFTER HATE

Tim Zaal spent half of his life thinking that he had killed a man one night when he was out looking for a fight. It wasn't until he came face to face with his victim many years later that he realised the power of forgiveness. This video has a reflective and sentimental tone, and presents a personal story.

OAK CREEK

This video tackles the same issues as *No Judgement Just Help* but is presented in a different format.

THE FORMERS

The Formers in this video begin by provocatively telling the viewer the 'truths' they believed whilst still in their violent extremist movements. At the end of the video they reveal that these were 'lies' that they fell for, highlighting the realities of hateful ideologies. This video has a reflective tone and presents an ideological challenge and personal story.

The Average Mohamed Campaign

Average Mohamed's campaign consisted of five videos, aimed at reaching young Somali-Muslims living in the United States as part of a preventative educational campaign. The organisation hoped to instil the critical thinking needed to build resilience among youth and prevent violent-radicalisation in future.

Organisation Goals and Campaign Objectives

GOALS	OBJECTIVES
• Create messages using Islamic principles that promote peace and encourage democracy • Empower young Muslims through counter ideology messages and discourage them from joining Islamist-extremist groups	• Promote five videos to young Somali-Muslims living in the US, each with a distinct theme, in a bid to educate youth and discredit extremist thinking • Established Average Mohamed as an online voice of counter-extremism and pro-democracy

Video Content and Campaign Targeting

The Average Mohamed campaign involved five videos that each addressed a distinct theme: identity, gender equality, democracy, being a Muslim in Western culture, and slavery. The videos revolved around the central character, Average Mohamed, who would discuss the themes with other characters. The organisation used an animation style designed to resonate with a young audience.

The target audience for the Average Mohamed campaigns was primarily young Somali-Americans aged 14-25 in communities with high Somali Muslim populations in Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle and Washington, but also including a broader US reach. The organisation also wanted to go beyond a US audience, which led to experimental targeting in the UK. The counter-narrative content is educational and preventative, which allowed for broader targeting.

AGE, GENDER AND LOCATION	INTERESTS AND KEYWORDS	TWITTER FOLLOWERS
14-25 Male and Female Locations in the US and UK	Niqāb, Hijab, Quran, Extremism, Prophets and Messengers in Islam, Muhammad, Islamic State, Mujahideen, Burqa, Human Rights, Womens Rights, Sunnah, Fard, Imam, Islamism, Fiqh, Hadith, Aisha, Sharia, Allah, Women in Islam, Sheikh or Prophets in Islam, Almuharjirah, Baqiyah, Bagiyahfamily, digitaldawah, IAmAhmed, Haram, Ummah, Muslimummah, Muslimah, AverageMohamed, Slavery, Identity, Abd Allah, Sunna, Womens Rights Islam, Aisha, Jijab, Niqaab, Kuffar, Shirk, Hijara, Wear Burka, Muslims West, Islam	AbuTurki, Meshal, Alshammari, Meshari, Althomali, Saif_alhasan, FAISAL, Hafsa haji elmi, Barkhad, Mohammed Omer, Harbi Jama, Isse Islmail Yasin, Adbibarry Yassin, Kali_duul, Adan Suheyfa, Abdifatah Jama Mire, Ibrahim Gedow Awale, Abdi Gudcur, Sa'eed Mahmoud, Abdirahman, Junyadi, Abdikadir aden, Salman Sheikh, InaAhmed, Shadija 11/15, Nurr, Ridwan, Abas Kareem Nor, Somali Pictures, Airfizzo's Wife, Everything_Somalia

AVERAGE MOHAMED VIDEO TITLES AND DESCRIPTION

BE LIKE AISHA

Whilst many Islamist extremist groups say that women shouldn't be heard, this video explains that Aisha was a pillar of Islam and a mother to all Muslims. She was an important theologian and the source of over 2000 hadiths. The video is scholarly and reflective and offers an ideological challenge.

A MUSLIM IN THE WEST

This video tackles the key themes of an identity crisis, duality in identity, and understanding other cultures. It questions whether the viewer lives in the 'old' or 'new' world, and encourages them that they can be a part of both Islam and the West. The video has a sentimental and casual tone and presents a personal question.

IDENTITY IN ISLAM

Tackling the issue of identity a Muslim youth in the West might face, this video discredits the need to label oneself into these categories. It unpacks the realities of a multi-cultural world and explains that an individual has many identities. It has a sentimental tone and asks a personal question.
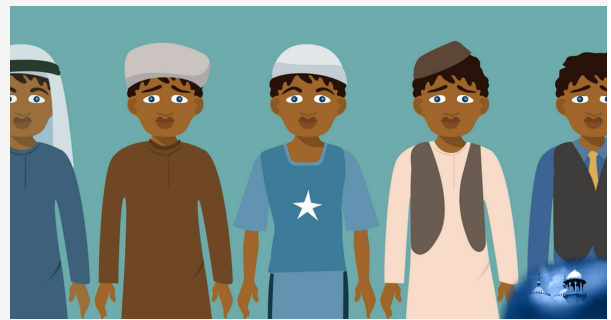
ISLAM AGAINST SLAVERY

The video explores the idea of slavery in Islam, and explains that Muslims have a duty of care to the needy, especially women. It discredits slavery using Quranic verses to explain that extremists' interpretation that, slavery is okay, is wrong. It utilises a scholarly and reflective tone and presents an ideological challenge.
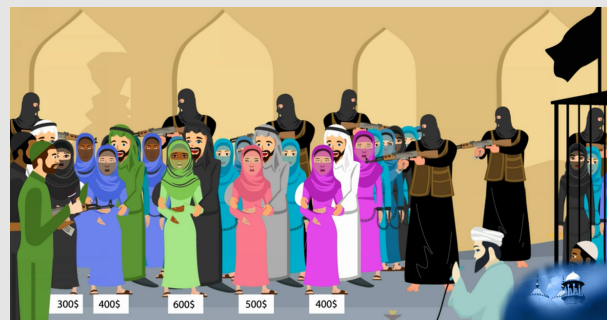
THE BULLET OF THE BALLOT

This video tackles a key theme of democracy using music to create a slick and catchy animation. It also tackles the issues addressed in the previous 4 videos. The tone is casual and the content asks a personal question.
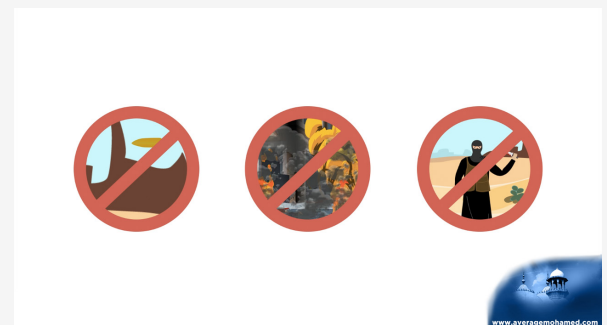
The Harakat-ut-Taleem Campaign

The Harakat-ut-Taleem was a front organisation created to protect the anonymity of the Pakistan-based organisation behind the campaign, which consisted of six videos (three videos in Urdu and three with English subtitles) designed to dissuade young people from joining the Taliban in Pakistan and show Western young people the destructive nature of violent extremist groups through personal stories. The videos combined testimonial narrations, with dramatisation of the narrator's story. This campaign has now been removed from the internet.

Organisation Goals and Campaign Objectives

GOALS	OBJECTIVES
• Discourage young Pakistanis in the UK and Pakistan from joining an Islamist-extremist group by highlighting the negative consequences	• Discourage young Pakistanis in rural areas of Pakistan from joining the Taliban by using the personal stories of those with first-hand experience of the violent extremist group • Establish an anonymous online CVE organisation to disseminate counter-narratives in an area with a high-security risk

Video Content and Campaign Targeting

For this campaign, the counter-narrative campaigners had pre-existing videos that were ready to be used with some modifications to make them more 'social media friendly.' As the content was in Urdu we reached out to an Urdu-speaking AVE former to ensure the content was emotive and true to the situation in Pakistan. We helped to enlist the assistance of one of YouTube's resident creatives who also spoke Urdu and had a good understanding of the content. From this, AVE recommended the third party organisation shorten the length of the videos to retain interest in the target audience, re-film some video-content to add to the emotive impact of the films, and include English subtitles on the video to broaden the scope of the campaign to English-speaking Pakistani's in the UK.

AGE, GENDER AND LOCATION	INTERESTS AND KEYWORDS	TWITTER FOLLOWERS
14-25 Male and Female Locations in Pakistan and UK	E.g: Authentic Taweed, Yusha Evans, Prisoners of Faith, Anwar al-Awlaki, Women in West for Khifah, Aniem Choudry, Islamic State, Green Birds, Ummah News, Jihad, Syria, Religion Truth, Tafseer, Al-Qadr, Khyber, Hadith, Allah, Baqiyah, Taliban, Baqiyafamily, Tehrik-i-Taliban, Dieinyourrage, Taliban, GenerationKhilafah, FreeAbuBaraa	Masoodzai, M Rafi, Stanikzai, Irshad, Raghand, Faridon Noor, Amir Afghan, Zahidullah, Zaland, Mansoor Shah, Abdul Wajid, Shinwary Ali, Gul Afghan, Parmakhtag.com, RT Pashto

HARAKUT-UT-TALEEM VIDEO TITLES AND DESCRIPTION

IMPLICATIONS OF OUR ACTIONS

ENGLISH SUBTITLES/URDU

This video highlights the negativity of the Taliban's actions by showing how involvement ensnares families and creates divisions. It also explores the importance of education by discussing polio.
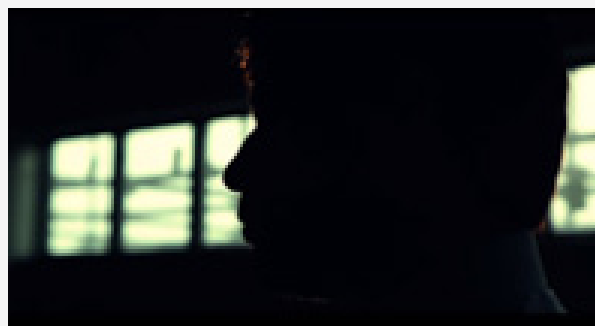
ISLAM IS PEACE

ENGLISH SUBTITLES/URDU

In this video the narrator tells his story, following his father's death and his new responsibilities as man of the house. He reflects back on when he began to be indoctrinated at the mosque, and the imam's influence on young people. A key theme is the importance of repentance and redemption.
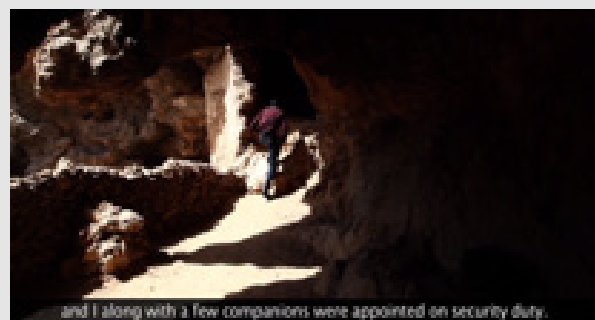

PROTECT YOUR LOVED ONES

ENGLISH SUBTITLES/URDU

The protagonist in this video details the crimes he witnessed as a member of the Taliban, including the kidnap of his uncle and the sexual assault of women, which ultimately led him to leave the movement and seek redemption.

CAMPAIGN FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Campaign Findings and Analysis

There are a number of metrics which can be useful to measure how many people viewed and engaged with video content. In addition, the social media platforms chosen for disseminating the campaigns allow the aggregation of vast amounts of data based on these metrics. However, understanding the impact counter-narrative content has on an individual's opinions and their behaviour remains a huge challenge.

The different metrics that we used to analyse how the counter-narrative campaigns performed included the following:

- *Awareness:* The number of people who the videos were advertised to, measured primarily by 'impressions' data across platforms, and 'reach' on Facebook;

- *Engagement:* The number of people who engaged with the videos, including 'likes', comments, shares, link clicks and page likes accrued by the promoted videos, as well as video retention rates; and

- *Impact:* The amount of sustained engagement achieved by users, particularly in the 'target audience', and qualitative analysis of comments and discussions.

Quantitative measures of 'awareness', 'reach' and 'engagements' provide a general indication of the number of people engaging with the campaigns. However, qualitative analysis comments and sustained engagements provide a better window into the impact that a campaign is having.

One objective of this study was to help NGOs understand which measures and platforms are best suited to them and their aims and roughly what costs they can expect are needed to achieve them (see Table 1 for costs of reach and engagement for the campaign). Ultimately, improving our understanding of how to measure the impact of counter-narrative campaigns requires further testing on a much larger scale.

Awareness: Impressions, reach, video views, and retention

Our metrics of 'awareness' capture how many people were exposed to the counter-narrative campaigns and how many people subsequently viewed that content. These metrics include 'impressions', 'reach', 'video views' and 'viewer retention'.

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube each offer a different definition of what an 'impression' is. For Facebook an 'impression' includes the number of times the content appeared in a newsfeed or side-bar; for YouTube, how many times the content or ad appeared as in-stream advertisement; and for Twitter, the number of times a promoted tweet appeared in a user's feed. Facebook also provides an additional 'reach' metric, which refers to

the number of individual users who had the content or advert appear on their personal newsfeed.

In general, the more impressions a counter-narrative video receives, the greater number of people who will potentially watch and engage with the video. Across the three campaigns, there were over 1.6 million impressions achieved on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Table 1 below illustrates the cost of so many people being shown the content for this project.

TABLE 1: COSTS FOR REACH AND ENGAGEMENT BY CAMPAIGN				
CAMPAIGN TITLE		**ExitUSA**	**AVERAGE MOHAMED**	**HARAKAT-UT-TALEEM**
FACEBOOK	Overall cost	£839.72	£930.47	£816.36
	Reach	212,051	456,113	88,351
	Cost/1000 Reach	£3.96	£2.04	£9.24
	Cost/ Engagement	£0.39	£0.29	£1.46
YOUTUBE	Overall cost	£392.84	£454.50	£12,002
	Reach	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Cost/1000 Reach	£10.37	£7.12	£12.71
	Cost/ Engagement	£0.04	£0.02	£0.06
TWITTER	Overall cost	£927.32	£1,754.00	£1,754.00
	Reach	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Cost/1000 Reach	£7.35	£17.01	£17.39
	Cost/ Engagement	£0.55	£0.24	£0.36

With the smallest potential audience, Harakat-ut-Taleem received the highest impressions-to-reach ratio. This meant that a small group of people were seeing the videos appear on their newsfeed multiple times. A counter-narrative campaign looking to produce an online 'flash-mob' to a very specific audience could find this useful, but for Harakat-ut-Taleem it was not a specific aim and left it as the least cost efficient of the three campaigns.

Further testing would be needed to determine if a higher impressions-to-reach rate

leads to higher levels of engagement with counter-narrative content, or whether it would be better to spread campaigns over a longer time frame if they are targeting smaller audiences. It may be that users need to have content advertised to them multiple times before they engage with it.

Reach, gender and age

Advertising tools can also provide an indication of the demographic breakdown of the target audience being served content. Figure 1 below illustrates that, across campaigns, there is a notably greater percentage of males being 'reached' by the respective campaigns on Facebook. These types of insights can help an organisation understand who is responding to their content, and to consider designing different content for more specific demographic groups (e.g. female specific videos targeting only females through advertising tools).
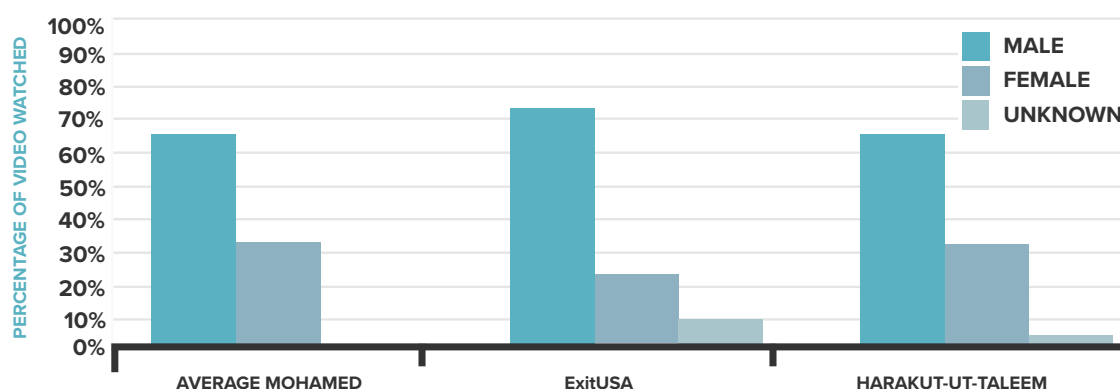
Figure 1: Gender breakdown of Facebook 'reach' metric across three campaigns

Video views and viewer retention

Overall, across the three campaigns – including all twelve videos – there were 378,694 video views during the campaign period. Our analysis showed that higher numbers of video views were achieved on Facebook and Twitter, respectively, across the campaigns. 'Viewer retention' rates –the duration a viewer keeps watching a video – provide a more valuable indication of whether the video content is actually being watched by users online.

For example, Average Mohamed's campaign on Twitter achieved more video views than both Harakat-ut-Taleem and ExitUSA combined, but it was ExitUSA's videos that had a higher retention rate on average across all videos. This suggests that getting lots of views do not necessarily translate into sustained views.

Looking at viewer retention rates can also reveal at what point in a video a user's attention is lost. This can inform future content design: by highlighting uninteresting parts of a

video that can be changed, or by encouraging the production of a shorter video, which may be more likely to put the right message across to the audience.

While the different statistics available for advertisers makes it difficult to provide comparisons between viewer retention rates across platforms, the data from the campaigns suggests that – while there are higher numbers of video views of Facebook and Twitter – viewer retention rates appear to be significantly longer on YouTube.

This could be because YouTube is primarily a video-based platform, meaning users might be more willing to watch a video ad for longer. It could also suggest that YouTube's targeting tools – based on users' behaviour, rather than self-reported demographic and interest information – are more effective at reaching interested target audiences.

As a point of intrigue, we found that the Harakat-ut-Taleem videos targeted in Pakistan (without English sub-titles) received higher viewer retention rates compared to the English subtitled versions targeted in the UK (see Figure 2). This could suggest that the content was resonating more with a Pakistani audience given the content of the videos and messages.

That said, the English subtitled versions did not underperform and the difference is marginal. This could further suggest that counter-narratives tackling issues outside of the location they are targeted in can perform well. This would need to be tested further, but it implies that counter-narrative content production could be replicated across different localities, saving organisations time and money.
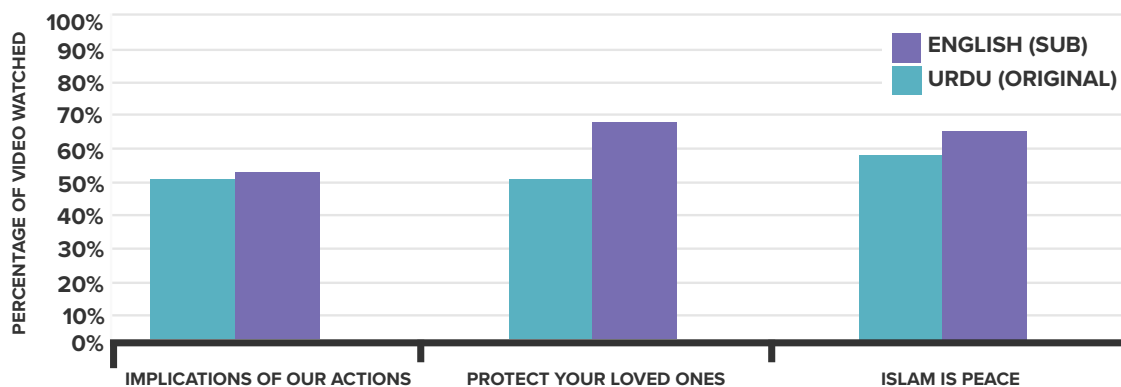
Figure 2: Average % of video viewed for Harakat-ut-Taleem's Urdu and English-subtitled versions.

Viewer retention versus engagement metrics

Looking for an indication of the relationship between viewer retention rates and user engagement – including likes, shares, and comments, the data suggests that there is less of a correlation between the average length of a video being watched and the number of engagements, than there is with overall views or impressions. This was revealed when analysing the Average Mohamed videos in particular.

A Muslim in the West had the highest average percentage of video viewed on Facebook, but the lowest number of total engagements. On the other hand, *Be like Aisha*, had the highest number of engagements on Facebook but not the highest average percentage of video viewed. It did, however, receive the highest number of impressions and video views on Facebook. This may mean that the message in the *Be like Aisha* video resonated quickly with the viewership and they were compelled to engage with the content. The *Slavery* video had low engagement combined with the lowest average viewer retention rate, and suggests that the video did not resonate with the target audience as well as the other videos. This could be because the message was lost with the slow start to the video, or that the issue of slavery was less compelling to the target audience compared to gender and identity issues. Indeed, the '*A Muslim in the West*' video had the highest average percentage of video viewed, suggesting that the topic of dual identities is one that resonated with Average Mohamed's target audience.

This is not conclusive and would require more testing. Conducting focus groups, market research or user experience research with target audiences could provide further insights into message resonance and how viewer retention relates to engagement and ultimately attitude shifts. However, the feasibility of this would depend on the target audience. For example, ExitUSA's target audience are individuals with far right propensities, or those who are currently in far right groups. Of course, finding individuals such as this to take part in focus groups and research might not be practical or safe.

Engagement: Likes, shares and comments

Engagement metrics outline how many people liked, disliked, shared, retweeted, or commented as a result of the campaign videos. Whether this quantitative engagement data can, on their own, be taken as a measure of a counter-narrative's success or impact depends on a campaign's objectives. For some campaigns which are targeted further 'upstream' at prevention or education (such as Average Mohamed), simply reaching more people, and more people engaging with the content could be used as a measure for success or impact. However, for organisations like ExitUSA – which are more focused on disengagement or deradicalisation – sheer quantitative measures are more ambiguous. Nonetheless, 'engagement' metrics across all types of campaigns are an important component of overall evaluation as they do give some indication of how counter-narrative content – including message types and tone – resonate with target audiences.

As is the case with reach, what constitutes an 'engagement' differs across the three platforms: likes, shares, comments, link clicks and page likes from promoted posts, adverts and videos on Facebook; comments, likes and dislikes on the videos on YouTube; retweets, favourites, media clicks and replies to, and of, promoted tweets on Twitter.

Table 2 displays the total engagement figures for each campaign, across each platform. This includes 'engagement' with 'video view' adverts, as well as 'engagement' adverts. In total, the campaigns received 20,694 'engagements' during the campaign period.

TABLE 2: TOTAL ENGAGEMENTS FOR BOTH 'VIDEO VIEW' AND 'ENGAGEMENT' ADVERTISEMENTS

	FACEBOOK	YOUTUBE	TWITTER	CAMPAIGN TOTALS
AVERAGE MOHAMED	3,241	210	7,359	10,810
HARAKUT-UT-TALEEM	646	3	4,814	5,463
ExitUSA	2,127	42	1,692	4,421
PLATFORM TOTAL	6,014	255	14,425	20,694

For all campaigns, total 'engagements' were significantly higher on Facebook and Twitter compared to YouTube. This is due to a number of factors, including how people generally use different social media platforms and what social media platforms offer and label as engagements. For example, on YouTube users can comment, like or dislike videos, compared to a wider range of 'engagements' that users can take on Facebook. Moreover, it may be that users in general are more likely to like or comment on content on Facebook or Twitter, than they are on YouTube. This highlights the limitations of simply presenting a quantitative number of engagements as a sign of 'success' in terms of measuring the impact of counter-narrative content on different platforms.

With this caveat in mind, engagement-to-impressions ratios give a snapshot of campaigns' performance. As Table 3 illustrates, Twitter provided the highest engagement-to-impressions ratios, followed by Facebook. Again, this is in part driven by how Twitter functions as a platform and defines engagements. Ultimately, this data needs to be collected for a much greater number of counter-narrative campaigns to help get a better indication of what represents a good engagement-to-impressions rate for different platforms and different target audiences.

TABLE 3: ENGAGEMENT-TO-IMPRESSION RATIO ACROSS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

	FACEBOOK	YOUTUBE	TWITTER
AVERAGE MOHAMED	1 : 141	1 : 304	1 : 14
HARAKUT-UT-TALEEM	1 : 582	1 : 19,293	1 : 21
ExitUSA	1 : 142	1 : 889	1 : 123
TOTAL	1 : 288	1 : 6,829	1 : 72

Breakdown of engagements

As we break down different engagement types across the different platforms, we begin to understand cross-platform dynamics more clearly.

The first series of tables below present Facebook engagements broken down by campaign videos. On Facebook there appeared to be a correlation between impressions and engagement metrics. This was confirmed by the fact that Average Mohamed had the highest levels of engagement across all of their videos, as well as the highest number of impressions and the broadest target audience. For ExitUSA and Average Mohamed we ran adverts for 'video views', while for Harakat-ut-Taleem we ran adverts for 'engagements' to test out these different options. There appeared to be a clear indication that video view ads are better at fuelling engagement than engagement ads.

Twitter garnered the highest number of total engagement for Average Mohamed (7,354), followed by Harakat-ut-Taleem (4,814) and ExitUSA (1,692). Overall, there was less of a correlation between impressions and engagements on Twitter compared to Facebook. All three campaigns received just over 100,000 impressions (with ExitUSA receiving slightly more at 126,625). Yet, Average Mohamed received over four times as many engagements as ExitUSA on Twitter.

40 RETWEETS ON
HARAKAT-UT-TALEEM'S CONTENT

275 RETWEETS ON
AVERAGE MOHAMED'S CONTENT

141 RETWEETS ON
EXITUSA'S CONTENT
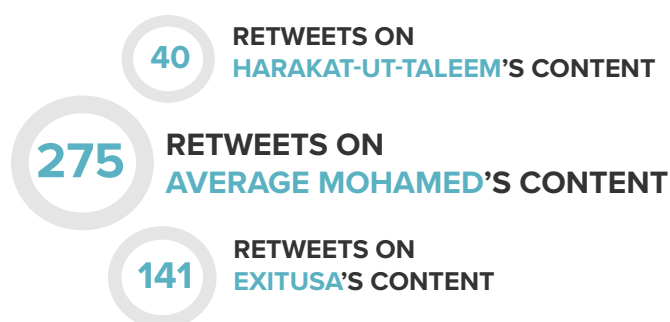
Average Mohamed received the highest number of retweets overall (278) compared to Harakat-ut-Taleem (141) and ExitUSA (40) as well as 'likes' (352, 286 and 32, respectively). However, all three campaigns received a similar number of 'replies'. Interestingly, Harakat-ut-Taleem received the highest number of new followers (69), suggesting the value of targeted Twitter campaigns to build the online presence of new organisations.

While there was some indication that the two videos that performed best on Facebook – ExitUSA's *Formers* video and Average Mohamed's *Be Like Aisha* video – also performed best on Twitter (*Formers* had the most total engagements among the ExitUSA videos, while *Be Like Aisha* had the most retweets among Average Mohamed's videos), the performance metrics across all of the campaign's videos was more evenly spread on Twitter.

YouTube garnered a considerably lower number of engagements across campaigns compared to Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, the videos that received the most engagements on Facebook or Twitter were not necessarily the videos that received the most engagements on YouTube. In ExitUSA's YouTube campaign, *Oak Creek* received

the most attention from the target audience, receiving 21 total engagements, including 6 likes, 2 dislikes, 13 comments. The *Formers* video, which performed best on Facebook, received the second highest number of engagements with 11 likes, 1 dislike, and 4 comments. The remaining two videos produced negligible results. This is not to say that the video content was not interesting (as we can gauge from the average percentage of video viewed on YouTube, discussed later). It could simply be because the content of the videos did not incite a reaction, as *Oak Creek* and *Formers* is more provocative in nature. Similar to ExitUSA, Average Mohamed's videos that performed best on YouTube were not necessarily videos that performed best on Facebook and Twitter. On YouTube, it was the *Identity* video that accumulated the most number of engagements, including 35 likes, 18 dislikes, and 22 comments. The low number of engagements on Harakat-ut-Taleem's videos on YouTube were the result of difficulty of targeting in Urdu, and because YouTube is banned in Pakistan. The English subtitled versions of the videos also did not do very well in terms of inspiring engagements.

Engagements: Increasing the online presence of the campaign organisations

In addition to users' engagements with the campaign videos, we were also able to measure 'engagements' with the organisations overall and measure the extent to which the campaigns helped to boost their online profile. Table 4 provides the before and after figures for Facebook page likes, organic research per day, Twitter followers and YouTube subscribers.

The figures show that support for a one month targeted campaign can have a significant impact on increasing the online presence of organisations doing important prevention and disengagement work. They also provide quantifiable evidence that the campaigns were effective at reaching their target audiences.

TABLE 4: BEFORE AND AFTER ENGAGEMENT STATISTICS FOR ALL ORGANISATIONS					
		FACEBOOK		TWITTER	YOUTUBE
CAMPAIGN	CAMPAIGN PERIOD	PAGE LIKES	ORGANIC REACH/DAY	FOLLOWERS	SUBSCRIBERS
AVERAGE MOHAMED	Before	126	0 to 3	90	137
	Gained	733	256 to 15,474	93	152
	Total at end	*859*	*0 to 1,339*	*183*	*274*
ExitUSA	Before	192	1 to 34	50	16
	Gained	94	956 to 2,779	105	16
	Total at end	*286*	*0 to 32*	*155*	*32*
HARAKAT-UT-TALEEM	Before	0	0	0	0
	Gained	116	0	62	6
	Total at end	*116*	*0*	*62*	*6*

At the completion of the project, Average Mohamed's page likes on Facebook increased by sevenfold, while the campaign also doubled its number of Twitter followers and subscribers on YouTube. ExitUSA tripled its number of Twitter followers, doubled its YouTube subscribers and increased its Facebook page likes by 48 per cent. Finally, Harakat ut-Taleem, created as a new organisation for this project, gained 116 page likes on Facebook, 62 followers on Twitter, and six subscribers to their YouTube channel, (See Table 4)

Comments

Commenting on content suggests a deeper form of engagement (or being moved by the content) than liking or sharing, whilst at the same time providing researchers with a potentially clearer indication of how users are responding to counter-narrative content.

In terms of our metrics, 'comments' are counted in the comment section of promoted posts and videos on Facebook and YouTube, and replies to promoted tweets on Twitter. In total, the campaigns generated 484 comments during the campaign period. This included 340 comments made on Facebook, 68 on YouTube, and 76 on Twitter across all

three campaigns.[5] In terms of the breakdown of comments by campaign:

40 COMMENTS WERE MADE ON
HARAKAT-UT-TALEEM'S CONTENT

305 COMMENTS WERE MADE ON
AVERAGE MOHAMED'S CONTENT

139 COMMENTS WERE MADE ON
EXITUSA'S CONTENT
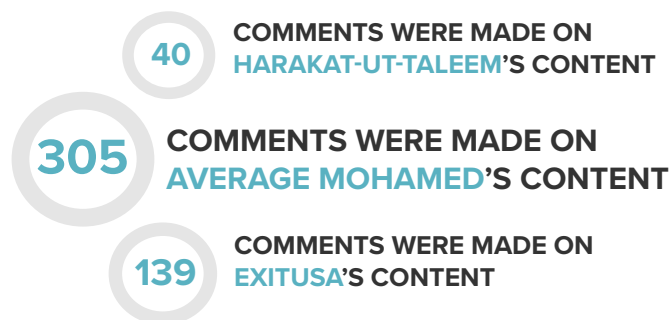
Whilst Facebook garnered the most comments for ExitUSA and Average Mohamed, Harakat-ut-Taleem received the bulk of theirs on Twitter. Our analysis focused primarily on comments on Facebook, with comments categorised into four subsections:

• Supportive comments praising the counter-narrative campaign, organisation, video or subjects addressed in the video.

• Negative comments expressing distaste towards the counter-narrative campaign, organisation, video or subjects addressed in the video.

• Misunderstood comments, likely expressing negativity (above) but due to a misunderstanding of the content.

• Unrelated comments that do not relate to the content, campaign, or organisation, or are spam.

As an overview of all the campaigns, Average Mohamed received the most comments. Analysis shows that 66% of these were supportive[6]:

> [Facebook User 1]   **Please keep up your work... it is very important**
>
> [Facebook User 2]   **Average mohamed is cool, check it**

Extract 1: A sample of supportive comments received by Average Mohamed on their Facebook visitors wall.[7]

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5 On Twitter 'mentions' were categorised as comments for the purpose of this analysis.

6 Comments were also categorised as supportive if users 'tagged' friends but did not expressly make a supportive sentiment of about the content. Although we cannot tell for sure whether a user was tagging a friend for negative reasons, we included these as supportive on the rationale that they didn't include a negative sentiment and that tagging increases awareness of the campaign.

7 These quotes have been extracted from social media users and as such typos have been intentionally kept in the text body

> [YouTube User 1]: So much respect for you brother, taking time to address these issue, believe me when I say this, your message will get far not only to non Muslim but Muslim who have forgotten their religion.
>
> [YouTube User 2]: You're doing an awesome job of highlighting our religion's standpoint on very important topics. People need to be educated about the real Islam so they are not fooled by the media or extremists. May Allah bless your work and accept your efforts.

Extract 2: A sample of supportive comments received by Average Mohamed on YouTube.

The remaining comments were divided evenly between 'negative' and 'unrelated'.

> [Facebook User 3]: These people are crazy
>
> [Facebook User 4]: not true, read your Quran well
>
> [YouTube User 3]: The only "right" Islam has the right to be wiped off the face of the earth because of their insanity and demon worship.
>
> [Twitter User 1]: @AverageMohamed why do so many Muslims shout "Allah Snack Bar" right before/after they kill an infidel? #InfidelQuestions

Extract 3: A sample of negative and unrelated comments received by Average Mohamed on their Facebook and YouTube promoted videos and promoted Tweets.

ExitUSA also received high comment traffic, with 32% of their comments being supportive of the content, campaign, or organisation:

> [Facebook User 5]: This is a great video, thank you guys for making it
>
> [Facebook User 6]: I respect what you guys are doing. It's infinitely harder to realise that the will consume you from the inside out and to make a change towards love and peace. Well done, I commend you.

Extract 4: A sample of the supportive comments received by ExitUSA on Facebook promoted posts.

> **[Facebook User 7]: So as a devoted WN who has been involved in the digital wing of the ideology sicne [*sic*] 2012-ish, what's your sales pitch for me leaving? What do I personally stand to gain by leaving a movement that I've been a mover and shaker in, a movement where I'm making a positive difference for my people? What's your case in favour of me giving up that?**
>
> **ExitUSA: Well, if you are like I was after 2-3 years in the movement you are probably still feeling the high, the rush and the excitement at the significance, acceptance and brotherhood you are getting and there is very little chance of persuading you to leave. I was in the movement for 15 years and I know that feeling wears off. When you find how empty, destructive and lonely it is behind the illusion, we will still be here for you.**

Extract 5: An example of a current white national extremist posting on ExitUSA's visitor wall.

A persistent issue with the ExitUSA was people misunderstanding the objective of the organisation, and numerous people failing to finish the videos before choosing to comment. In total, 14% of ExitUSA's comments could be categorised as 'misunderstood', which often then led to greater engagement from people who felt the need to correct other users' confusion:

> **[Facebook User 8]: Am I the only person who understood this video?**

Extract 6: A typical Facebook user response when another user has misunderstood the content of the video.

Negative comments made up for 18%. An example of a negative video comment is "Once a racist always a racist." Comments like this are unsurprising given the hesitation towards formers, and the disbelief that they can de-radicalise. Here, negative comments also include those which bring up wider societal issues regarding ethnicity. Interestingly, this includes individuals that express, to a greater or lesser extent, sympathies towards to 'white power'. Examples of this include:

> **[Twitter User 2]: @ExitUSATeam you're #Insane its not about hate its about survival #WhitePride #WaronWhites #WhiteGenocide by #Multicultralism**
>
> **[Twitter User 3]: I am a recent reluctant convert to white nationalism from basic bitch conservative. I would LOVE to believe I am wrong.**
>
> **[Twitter User 4]: @ExitUSATeam Will you please tell our psychotic leaders to stop flooding white counties with millions of non-whites that's pretty hateful.**

> **[Twitter User 5]: @ExitUSATeam just wanted to let you know I think this page is bullshit. It's not hate to be anti-Islam, it's common fucking sense!**
>
> **[Facebook User 9]: 14/88! SIEG HEIL!!!**
>
> **[Facebook User 10]: I'm proud to be white damnit! So I'm a racist, yeah blacks got BET, no we don't… if I'm a racist for being proud of my race and not wanting non American workers to steal out jobs then so fucking be it, I'll wear that proudly too.**
>
> **[Facebook User 11]: How can you fully trust someone who completely turned their back to something they allegedly were committed too death… their tattoos meant nothing, what they wore on the outside portrayed nothing they claimed to hold on the inside.**

Extract 7: A sample of four tweets and three Facebook comments that present the kind of negative language and tone used by some Twitter users against ExitUSA.

While it's clearly difficult to describe these comments as 'positive', they do demonstrate that ExitUSA's campaign was effective at reaching its target audience.

Three individuals specifically expressed distaste for ExitUSA as an organisation on Twitter. When looking further into the individuals' backgrounds, they appeared part of the target audience based on open-source information.

Harakat-ut-Taleem garnered the most comments on Twitter.[8] Both supportive and negative comments were equally divided, with one comment asking "what is the msg in the story?". This comment was categorised as "misunderstood." Examples of positive comments are:

> **[Twitter User 6]: A great initative (short vids) against religious terrorism by this twitter account. Please follow them guys.**
>
> **[Twitter User 7]: I can understand what you are trying to portray my lesson for every Muslim – gain knowledge over religion you will earn janah**

Extract 8: Two examples of positive commentary on Twitter

Negative comments included asking about the organisation's mission statement, with the authenticity of the organisations messaging being brought into question by one user who asked: *"y r u destroying our beloved Pakistan???? U r Indian agents."* These

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8   This can be down to a number of variables: that their target audience is most active on Twitter; targeting on twitter was more efficient to reaching them; Twitter's interface might cater for 'newbies' better by deemphasising the lack of pre-existing social presence. This remains inconclusive.

suspicions likely arise as a result of the anonymity of the campaign and campaigners. It may be likely this anonymity also affected engagement. Further research into the role of authorship and engagement should be carried out.

Overall, these comments show that Facebook performed best at encouraging people to comment. Twitter proved the best platform for comments for Harakat-ut-Taleem. It is not conclusive why. The campaigns all received a majority of "supportive" comments. There were still a substantial number of negative comments, but the content within these comments help not only to understand target audiences' attitudes towards the campaigns and content, but also to understand whether the target audience is being reached. This is shown best with ExitUSA's commenters that displayed sympathetic attitudes towards white power.

The next section on **impact** provides further qualitative analysis of the comments and discussions that were sparked by the three campaigns. The content of the discussions that took place across the campaigns provide some insights as to the general reaction of the target audience of the counter-narrative content and overall campaigns. This also helps us to better understand the kinds of individuals that commented on the content, and to understand whether or not the target audience were a part of these discussions.

Impact: Sustained engagement

Assessing the *impact* that online counter-narratives have on attitudes and behaviour is, as mentioned earlier, extremely difficult. The anonymity that the Internet provides makes it impossible to know exactly who users are and how they are reacting to content. Moreover, further research is needed into the process of disengagement and deradicalisation in general, which could take place over a long period of time. It could be that an individual with extreme views reacts with anger and aggression after watching a powerful counter-narrative video but then, over time, begins to question their extreme beliefs.

It is extremely unlikely that a user who clearly has violent views will proclaim a change of heart after watching a counter-narrative video. Nonetheless, sustained engagements – or individuals reaching out to counter-narrative campaigners for assistance – provide the clearest indication of impact for online counter-narrative campaigns.

Counter-narratives are designed to provoke a reaction in the intended audience: comments and sustained engagements can provide us with valuable information on the topics users are most likely to engage with constructively and antagonistically.

Sustained engagements can be understood as:

- An individual user making more than one 'comment' on a Facebook post or YouTube video.
- An individual user replying more than once to a tweet, or starting a conversation on Twitter with other users or the organisation.
- An individual user sending a direct message to the organisation on Facebook or

Twitter.

Sustained engagements can be divided into two distinct categories:

- **Sustained Constructive Engagement**: a conversation about the content or campaign where individual users comment more than once in a positive manner. This can encourage critical thinking.
- **Sustained Antagonistic Engagement**: a user who negatively disputes or dismisses the content, or campaign, to other users or the organisation. This can potentially sow the seeds of doubt.

ExitUSA's counter-narrative ads outperformed the other two campaigns with regards to fostering both constructive and antagonistic discussions. This is attributed to ExitUSA's capacity and willingness to engage with comments, and the 'authentic voices' of its members. On average, ExitUSA replied to comments within less than one day, a response rate that was evident across all the platforms.[9] Many of the discussions that took place in the comment sections of their posts involved members of the organisation.

In comparison, fewer conversations took place on Average Mohamed and Harakat-ut-Taleem posts, and there was minimal constructive engagement with either of the campaigns' YouTube pages. This may be because of the less provocative nature of their videos, or perhaps just the manner in which their target audiences act and present themselves online. Arguably, as both Average Mohamed and Harakat-ut-Taleem were more educational, and their aims geared more towards prevention, they could not spark conversation as effectively as the more provocative content presented by ExitUSA and targeted at an audience that already held extremist beliefs.

Average Mohamed did manage to generate large quantities of engagement on specific posts, which was mainly categorised as sustained antagonistic engagement, with users outside of the target audience arguing about theological, cultural, social and political issues. The position taken with Harakat-ut-Taleem was to provide minimal responses to comments and messages which, predictably, undermined its potential to achieve sustained engagement. However, without a natural Urdu speaker at ISD, and with no support from the content providers, this was considered as the most appropriate approach.

Sustained constructive engagement

Both ExitUSA and Average Mohamed offer compelling evidence of sustained engagement, with the comment section beneath their videos often acting as an interface from which users could discuss politically, socially and culturally divisive topics. Comments on racism and racial equality were particularly good at stimulating sustained engagement, especially when users were confronted by challenges to their perceptions and ideologies. These kinds of conversations presented different world views that offer the opportunity for

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9   A response is either a direct message to their profiles, or when a user questions the organisation in a comment or Tweet.

critical thinking, which could potentially build resilience to extremist narratives.

Both ExitUSA and Average Mohamed's campaigns spurred these kinds of discussions. Below is an example from ExitUSA.

> **[EXIT User 1]: No, people of color can't be racist to white folks. Prejudiced and discriminatory? Absolutely, but that isn't racism.**
>
> **[EXIT User 2]: [User 1] look up the actual definition of racism. Then you can talk about who can and can't be racist.**
>
> **[EXIT User 1]: Race isn't real. It's a social construct.**

Extract 9: A conversation between two users in a Facebook comment thread beneath the ExitUSA video titled 'Formers'.

For ExitUSA, the clearest examples of dialogue involving far-right extremists or sympathisers came from Facebook. This may be due to Facebook's comment interface, which makes viewing and responding to other users comments a relatively simple process without the interaction being posted on a commenters' own personal feed. It is interesting to note that the platform which requires the least amount of anonymity from its users, Facebook, would appear to encourage the greatest quantity of impactful engagements.[10]

This is given further proof when we examine the direct messages received by ExitUSA. There were eight cases of people in the process of personal de-radicalisation reaching out to ExitUSA, via the messaging function, and asking for information and support.

> **[EXIT Former 1]: Hey guys I am a former white supremacist**
>
> **[ExitUSA]: Hi [former]. Thank you for reaching out. How can we help you?**
>
> **[EXIT Former 1]: I have been away from it for a few months but I still get old feelings an thoughts**

Extract 10: The opening lines of dialogue between a former who directly Facebook messaged ExitUSA asking for support[11]

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10   A possible reason for this is that the public nature of Tweets, and the abundance of trolls and advertising comment bots on YouTube, may work to deter legitimate conversation when held up against Facebook. Further research will help us understand this with greater certainty.

11   These are the opening lines of dialogue from a conversation ExitUSA had with a Facebook user who was going through the first steps of personal de-radicalisation. The ease with which the two parties could communicate with each other allowed the conversation to move quickly over various aspects of the de-radicalisation process, and address the support that the user was looking for.

> **[EXIT Former 2]: What is this about? [...] I was just wondering how you help whould [*sic*] love to speak to someone about this. I'd like help to get away from hate**
>
> **[ExitUSA]: Hi [Anonymous User 1]. I'm glad you reached out. My name is Christian, I was one of the founding Northern Hammerskins in 1987. I left the movement in 1995. The first major hurdle is reaching out.**

Extract 11: the opening lines of dialogue between a former who directly Facebook messaged ExitUSA asking for support

These messages are perhaps the most direct evidence possible of counter-narrative campaigns having impact. The people who directly messaged ExitUSA asking for support appeared to be encouraged to maintain a dialogue with the ExitUSA team because of the authenticity of its members as formers. This may have also worked to breakdown some of the hesitancy the users may have felt when engaging with an organisation via a platform that does not protect a user with much anonymity.[12]

The capacity of the organisation, and the experience of its members, meant that these messages were given the necessary attention to sustain a constructive engagement. One individual (former) wrote that they were grateful to have seen the video:

> **[EXIT Former 2]: What is this about? [...] I was just wondering how you help**
>
> **[ExitUSA]: Ok, I promise we will work through this.**
>
> **[EXIT Former 2]: It means alot thank you**
>
> **[ExitUSA]: I'm out of town right now, but might be able to get some time next week after xmas and before new years. No, thank you! This is a huge first step.**

Extract 12: The concluding lines of dialogue of a message between a former and ExitUSA on Facebook

ExitUSA aims to help far-right extremists to exit from their respective movements and actively offers help to those who want to leave, which could be the reason they received direct messages. The targeting criteria for their campaigns were informed by this. As such, it is more likely that individuals would reach out in a bid to get help to do this.

Average Mohamed's counter-narrative content aims to be purely educational and preventative; by equipping youth with knowledge to be resilient to extremist narratives. For them, the targeting criteria was broader and thus the success of the campaign should

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12   Further research can help support this campaigns findings that an organisation willing to engage with users produces a more impactful counter-narrative.

not necessarily be judged in terms of encouraging direct messages from individuals 'reaching out' for help.

Responding to messages can be an issue of capacity. ExitUSA has a dedicated team of professional intervention providers that deal with sensitive individuals and information. Responding to users, especially potentially volatile or sensitive ones, requires training. An organisation disseminating counter-narratives should be prepared – in terms of training, personnel and protocols – to deal with the possibility of individuals reaching out to them directly for help as a result of seeing a campaign.

A number of discussions took place in the comments sections across campaigns that give a good indication that the audience were engaging in sustained discussions on the subjects that Average Mohamed aim to unpack, including democracy and Islam, Islam and the West, women's role in Islam, slavery in Islam, and identity issues. One example of an exchange on gender equality issues is provided below:

> **[AM User 1]: Qur'an (4:3) – (Wife-to-husband ratio) "Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four."**
>
> **[AM User 1]: Qu'ran (2:282) – (Court Testimony) "And call to witness, from among your men, two witnesses. And if two men be not found then a man and two women." Muslim apologists offer creative explanations to explain why All felt that a man's testimony in court was [worth more than a womans]**
>
> **[AM User 1]: Qur'an (4:11) – (Inheritance) "The male shall have the equal of the portion of two females" (see also verse 4:176). In Islam, sexism is mathematically established.**

Extract 13: A series of comments posted in the comments section underneath the 'Be Like Aisha' video. Using passages from the Qur'an was a common theme of users looking to argue that women and men are not equal in Islam.

In one instance a conversation between two users (totalling 25 comments between them) that covered gender equality, religious belief, politics, scripture, and war ended with a positive outcome on the merits of debate:

> **[AM User 3]: So if women are equal to men in the Islamic faith, then why is she still wearing a hijab?**
>
> **[AM User 4]: Sorry the bible also tells women to wear hijab, they just don't. I'm sure you wouldn't call the bible "oppression" right?**
>
> **[AM User 3]: Well you all can have your beliefs and I can have mine but at the end of the day I don't see Christians beheading people or stoning people or pushing gays off a roof top. I don't see any Islamic countries that are not torn**

> **by war and strife.**
>
> **[AM User 4]: Actually [AM User 3] maybe not Christians in America but the Christians in Africa kill anyone who is not a Christian and refuses to convert :)**
> **[**
> **AM User 3]: I love how you all assume I am Christian lol**
>
> **[AM User 4]: [...] you believe men treat women bad in Islam to my belief it's you American men who treat women badly and are disrespectful to women, you guys make music videos with naked women and have women expose skin [...]**
>
> **[AM User 4]: Anyway I have to go now and I'll try to come by as much as I can :)**
>
> **[AM User 3]: Debating like this is always good for the mind**
>
> **[EXIT Former 2]: Yea when ever is convenient for you thanks for posting that video I'm glad I watched it**
>
> **[ExitUSA]: Hey [former], that's pretty normal. While most of us have been out for years, it takes hard work and a support system to pull yourself out.**

Extract 14: A portion of the 25 comment conversation between two users.

As evidence of a campaign having impact, these are encouraging signs. Average Mohamed and Harakat-ut-Taleem campaigns led to fewer examples of sustained constructive engagement compared to ExitUSA, but that is not to say they achieved no impactful results. Average Mohamed's *Be Like Aisha* video, received more comments, likes and shares than any other Facebook post of all the campaigns. Additionally, whilst the other videos received substantially less comments than *Be Like Aisha*, there were still examples of sustained dialogue between users within these:

> **[AM User 1]: They were not Christians. They were extremists. And are you bringing slavery into this?**
>
> **[AM User 2]: You asked why am I here and then you answered.. No one brought me here .. im here and paying for school.. its all business if I don't have the money I wouldn't be welcomed here.. you said all those bad acts came from christains but its not ur [sic] business...**
>
> **[AM User 1]: For being a self policing force of the single most populated religion on the planet, as a whole, there hasn't been much condemnation or correction. Just more terror and tyranny.**

> **[AM User 2]: Ok … can you tell me the cause of those terrors? Or is it just because for being a muslim you have to be violent and do harm or others…?**
>
> **[AM User 3]: At the end of the day we are all the same, human beings. I'm not going to continue with this foolishness because it really saddens me that we all can't just get along.**
>
> **[AM User 1]: The cause? Following the laws in your Quran.**
>
> **[AM User 4]: Lol so they are "Christian extremsits" yet ISIS are your average muslim? Bahahahaha … another thing you brought 9/11 and I brought you slavery which Christians in the south loved and KKK loved who are also Christians :)**

Extract 15: A conversation between users in the comment section of the 'Muslim in the West' Facebook advertisement.

It's clearly difficult to interpret these conversations and whether they are a good or bad thing, without being able to conduct in-depth interviews with the individuals taking part in the discussion.

Sustained antagonistic engagement

Engagements were labelled as antagonistic when an individual user disputed or dismissed the content or organisation in an unconstructive way, or disputed other users' comments. Examples of this can be seen from Twitter users who responded to the ExitUSA promoted tweets with accusations of the organisation having a bias towards non-whites.

As to be expected, scepticism towards the motivations of the organisations was a theme that was apparent across all three campaigns, and produced numerous examples of antagonistic commentary or responses from users. The importance of presenting the messengers of a counter-narrative as authentic appears to be a key aspect in the ability of the campaign to produce impactful results, and underlines the importance of organisations using credible messengers. It also suggests that making public the role of AVE within or during the campaigns could have undermined this credibility by exacerbating such scepticism.[13]

There were, overall, five conversations (counted as repeated comments by more than one individual) in response to ExitUSA's campaign that included posts with racial hatred in the form of texts or images. Eleven individuals were, at a minimum, sympathetic to white supremacist ideology. Again, this gives a good indication that the campaigns were reaching their target audience.

The below discussion is a continuation of the discussion that was shown in 'Comments'

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13   This highlights the need for organisations to understand how the branding of their organisation can influence the message of their counter-narrative.

section, and an example that members of far-right groups were also viewing and engaging with the content:

> [Exit User 5]: **How can you fully trust someone who completely turned their back to something they allegedly were committed too until death... their tattoos meant nothing, what they wore on the outside portrayed nothing they claimed to hold on the Inside [...]**
>
> [ExitUSA]: **We turned our backed on fear, misinformation, insecurity, and being disconnected from the world around us. When you begin to question the lies and drama, when you feel the weight of the disconnect between heart and mind, we'll be here for you with no judgment.**
>
> [Exit User 5]: **when you begin to question the lies and drama" You should ALWAYS question everything which is brought before you and not take it for word of mouth, or face value.**
>
> **"when you feel the weight of the disconnect between heart and mind" Obviously you people didn't work either..**
>
> **You walked away from fear? More like embraced it and walked with it. You didn't have the heart, determination, will, love, honor, and endurance to follow through the hardships.**
>
> **You blame your short comings on the movement just as you did when you got into the "SCENE" and blamed your short comings on society. You guys are cowards and deserters, you had no concept of Loyalty, Honor, Pride, Will, Courage, Truth and Love for you people... you were in it.**

Extract 16: Discussion between user and ExitUSA

Other examples include: one ExitUSA commenter wrote: *"There is nothing wrong with having pride in your race WHITE PRIDE WORLD WIDE".* In a similar vein, another user exclaimed *"Now it is hate to defend your face, your culture, and your country with it is jeopardised by vicious, unruly, unjustified groups that are led by un-American and un-Godly beliefs and agendas?????"* whilst another explained *"sorry, proud I'm white."*
Again, it's difficult to know how to interpret these discussions based on the limited information available about the users, and the complexity of the process of disengagement in general. Nonetheless, in our framework of impact – this type of discussion should be seen as a positive thing in the context of assessing the effect of counter-narratives. The simple fact that this individual engaged in a conversation with ExitUSA suggests a potential 'cognitive opening' for having impact.

The topic that led to the most sustained discussion concerned the Black Panthers and their comparison to white hate groups, such as the KKK. Eight individuals contributed to this discussion, with half stating that the Black Panthers were not a hate group, and

the other half stating that both the KKK and the Black Panthers are one in the same.[14] Again, this highlights that sustained antagnoistic engagement can encourage exposure to differing points of view that may lead to critical thinking.

As noted above, ExitUSA were very active in responding to negative comments and they noticed that they also got a lot more comments when they engaged. Examples of their responses to antagonistic discussions included:

- *"There is nothing wrong with being proud of who you are or where you come from. The problem arises when that pride is used to dehumanize others."*

- *"Every community has drivers of racial tension. We are talking about people in our communities today that act out the violence we once promoted. Having been "drivers" ourselves we want to assist people who followed us down the same dead end to escape that place of intolerance."*

- *"There is nothing wrong being proud of your heritage or ethnicity but when it happens to the exclusion of all others and brings with it an implied violence it has gone beyond simple pride and is about anger and hatred. We all found that carrying around that anger and hatred was draining and exhausting while not accomplishing anything. I challenge you to look in your own heart and ask yourself what is it really about, is it about pride or anger? If it is anger, we are here to help you."*

Summary of impact: towards a future framework

With the campaigns complete, we are now able to offer the beginnings of an evaluation framework for measuring the impact of counter-narratives that goes beyond impressions, reach and engagement metrics. Comments – and in particular, sustained engagements or conversations – provide a better indication for researchers about how individual users and target audiences overall may be reacting to the messages in counter-narrative videos. To be sure, the majority of these comments and discussions will be hostile, aggressive or difficult to interpret. Further testing and evaluation with a wide range of counter-narrative content aimed at different target audiences is needed to further our understanding of impact.

In general, it would seem that fostering conversations online, even if they are antagonistic, is a positive thing. Exposure to alternative viewpoints can potentially foster critical thinking or plant a 'seed of doubt' that later matures into a change in attitudes and behaviours. Understanding this better requires further testing and research: trialling more and varied counter-narrative campaigns, but also other research – for example, with focus groups (for those aiming at preventative target audiences) with 'formers' who have gone through the process themselves, as well as interviews with intervention providers who work with young people who are disengaging.

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14   One individual posted six links to YouTube videos that expressed the violent attitudes of the Black Panthers. The discussion changed to one of positivity, and one user wrote: *"It's honestly nice to see that most of you don't agree with the "New ideology" of The Black Panthers as I think the vast majority of Americans feel that ALL of us are just Americans, regardless of color".* This user's own comment is a fair analysis of the discussions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

Overall, this project demonstrates that a coordinated effort between campaigners, social media companies, and private sector partners can produce impactful counter-narratives. This methodology - an organised cycle of curation, production, data acquisition and analysis – can be replicated and applied globally to help scale up counter-narrative efforts that push back against extremist recruitment.

One of the key aims of this project is to assist small and medium size NGOs in producing, disseminating and evaluating counter-narratives and counter speech. These pilot campaigns raised a number of insights about how to make counter-narrative production and dissemination more efficient and effective. Based on our findings, we make a series of recommendations for NGOs and counter-narrative campaigners – many of whom will only be vaguely familiar with social media marketing. We also make recommendations to social media platforms about how they can best support this process. Social media marketing tools can be incredibly effective at identifying and delivering content to key target audiences. However, they can also be complex, confusing, opaque and unpredictable.

TABLE 5: SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF PLATFORMS		
PLATFORM	**STRENGTHS**	**WEAKNESSES**
FACEBOOK	• Global reach covers numerous territories and demographics • Language specific versions offer greater scope for CVE campaigns • Intuitive and easy to use interface makes constructing advertisements a quick process • Allows for dialogue between the users, and between users and the organisation • In-depth targeting functionality based on self-reported user demographics including age, location, education, employment, as well as interests, groups and pages liked, allows for very specific targeting of advertisements and videos. • Private messaging, visitor wall posts and user comments provide three different routes for users to contact the organisation.	• Facebook interface regularly changes, making it difficult to maintain up-to-date best practice guides. • In the 'Manage Ads' sections, the column totals are often wrong – this makes it problematic when trusting the statistical data. • Large discrepancies in the successes of some videos compared to others, despite similar or identical targeting and content. It is not always clear why some adverts achieve such higher results. • Some thumbnails – the picture that accompanies an advert – were restricted, while others with similar content were not. For example, some thumbnails showing men holding guns were allowed, and some were not. • Some statistical insights are not clearly defined i.e. 'People Talking'.

PLATFORM	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
YOUTUBE	• Largest video hosting site, with a global reach. • Easy to use video upload function makes adding new content to a page a simple process. • Ability to input a detailed and exhaustive list of keywords to use for targeting adverts • Allows for dialogue between the users, and between users and the organisation • AdWords function 'My Client Center' allows for multiple YouTube accounts to be managed by one account. This is useful when conducting multiple targeted campaigns. • Ease with which advert targeting can be changed during the advertising period, makes it easy to alter and re-focus targeting. • Large amounts of statistical insights are offered by AdWords, allowing for a multitude of different analysis.	• AdWords interface not easy to negotiate, and requires more research and study into how to use it compared to the advertising platforms built-in to Facebook and Twitter. This is an issue for CVE NGO's without prior experience in advertising on YouTube. • AdWords regularly changes and additions can undermine the value of previous best practice guides. • Large discrepancies in the successes of some videos compared to others, despite similar or identical targeting and content. It is not always clear why some adverts achieve such higher results. • Quantity of videos being uploaded, and advertisements being run, mean that the achieving impressions and views can be expensive.
TWITTER	• Highly-active audience and with global reach. • Widely used by extremist groups with far-right or Islamist sympathies, which are easily identifiable once hashtags and Twitter handles are researched. • Speed with which content moves around Twitter and people interact with it means a campaign can quickly learn if their content is engaging with the right people. • Allows you to target by similar users, meaning once you do your research you can reach people similar to your target audience.	• In-kind support does not allow campaigns to be set-up over a set amount of time, which is frustrating if orchestrating a wider online campaign involving multiple platforms. • Much less self-reported data or other targeting criteria e.g. groups liked, or interests. • Does not generate many replies or comments on counter-narrative content. • Promoted tweets do not have much longevity, in terms of engagement or reach, past the initial promoted push. • Unlike Facebook, you cannot target users based on keywords AND interests, only keywords OR interests.

Recommendations for counter-narrative campaigners

Working with counter-narrative campaigners, each with their own interests and idiosyncrasies was in many ways the most challenging part of this project. However, maximising the impact that campaigners can have – including producing and disseminating content at scale – requires closer working, trust building, and collaboration between campaigners, social media platforms and organisations like ISD. NGOs and campaigners should have an established social media presence, dedicated personnel, and a commitment to engage and be responsive to the advice of social media companies.

The key strategic principles are as follows:

- Conduct in-depth research on target audience interests and behaviours before designing and disseminating content.
- Test a range of topics and message tones with similar target audiences in order to determine which resonate most strongly.
- Train at least one member of staff to become an expert at using social media and respective marketing tools.
- Supplement counter-narrative campaigns with user engagement strategies.
- Use alternative media channels in geographic areas where access is limited.
- Online counter-narrative campaigns should operate alongside offline campaigns.
- Be aware of the presence of online 'bots.'
- Spread online campaigning budgets over a longer period of time.
- Identify testable hypotheses, demonstrate results, and identify new courses of action.
- Use identifiable subjects where possible.

Additionally, we also make a series of recommendations for campaigners that are specific to each platform. Overall, as our findings elucidate, each social media platform provides different benefits and challenges for disseminating advertised content. Moreover, content that does well on one platform will not necessarily perform best on other platforms. Ultimately, campaigners and disseminators need to adopt a comprehensive approach that utilises all of the major social media platforms:

Facebook produced the greatest reach, video views and engagement for each of the organisations. In terms of campaigners using Facebook to disseminate content, we recommend:

- Utilise Facebook for preventative campaigns that seek to build resilience among broader demographic groups.
- Upload videos directly to Facebook instead of linking from other sources.

YouTube provided the lowest cost-to-views ratio and the highest rates of viewer retention. For campaigners using YouTube to disseminate content, we recommend:

- Utilise YouTube for campaigns that aim to dissuade people further downstream in the radicalisation spectrum.
- Undertake or utilise rigorous research into your target audience's behaviour online before designing and disseminating content and campaigns. Use YouTube for longer video content.

Twitter provided the second largest number of video views across platforms as well as the highest impressions to engagement ratio:

- Utilise Twitter to generate engagements with users and to build the online profile of a new brand or counter-narrative campaigner.
- Utilise Twitter to target those further downstream on the radicalisation spectrum by utilising the user-handle based targeting function.

Recommendations for social media platforms

In addition to recommendations for counter-narrative campaigners, this pilot project also suggests a number of recommendations for social media platforms to support this process. As noted throughout this report, social media marketing tools can be highly effective at identifying key target audiences for organisations working to tackle radicalisation. This is true whether the aims of the organisation are more preventative in nature (reaching a broader audience) or whether they are aiming more at persuading individuals who may already be interested in extremist ideas.

However, social media marketing is very much a new science. As such, it contains a huge amount of numbers and metrics that can be difficult to interpret – particularly for small NGOs without this expertise. The two biggest challenges for NGOs creating and disseminating content using marketing tools are the frequency with which advertising tools and platforms change, and apparent inconsistency and inaccuracy relating to the figures reported.

We therefore recommend that social media platforms:

- Provide detailed training – and updated 'how to' guides and toolkits – for NGOs to coincide with changes made to advertising interfaces.
- Support NGOs to undertake 'split testing' and 'user experience' research to increase understanding of effective image and message usage as well as user journeys.
- Provide accurate and more in-depth analytics that can take the place of market research.

Finally, these campaigns point to a number of gaps in our knowledge about how to measure the impact of counter-narratives online. To help improve our understanding, we make the following recommendations:

- Initiate further research into the process of disengagement and deradicalisation in order to gain a better understanding of how to analyse comments and sustained engagements.
- Evaluate counter-narratives online with a greater use of offline focus groups and user experience testing with target or proxy audiences.

Conclusion

By implementing a methodology that incorporates partnerships, curation, content creation, deployment, and evaluation, this study demonstrates that the use of counter-narrative messaging with measurable impact is replicable and scalable, though not without difficulty. Working with multiple partners and campaigns, we now have a much better idea of the interplay between key factors such as geography, language, ideology, audience, and media platforms.

While resourcing for content creation will continue to be an issue, future campaigns can

benefit from this study and, in applying the same methodology, produce data that will further optimise and extend it. This virtuous cycle of learning, which takes into account the most current trends and promises to improve the impact on at-risk individuals, holds the key to a comprehensive, global strategy that can compete with the targeted, professional production that extremists will continue to use in the future.

In this regard, ISD has produced two reports that complement the methodology described here. The first one, entitled The **Counter-Narrative Handbook**[15], was written to help anyone looking to proactively respond to extremist propaganda with counter-narrative campaigns and is intended as a beginner's guide for those with little or no previous experience of counter-narrative campaigning. It takes readers through the main stages of creating, launching and evaluating an effective counter-narrative campaign. It can also be used alongside ISD's freely available online **Counter-narrative Toolkit,** which can be found at **www.counternarratives.org**.

The second report, entitled **Youth Innovation Labs: A Model for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism**, is based on ISD's experiences in creating, running and evaluating in-country innovation labs through its Youth Civil Activism Network (YouthCAN). These labs bring together independent content-creators, from civil society and NGO campaigners to young activists, and connects them with private sector partners to amplify their counter-narrative messages through training, networking and campaign support. As of mid-2016, these labs have been held in Amsterdam, Budapest, Madrid, Tirana, Nairobi, Kigali, and Berlin, training over 400 individuals who have created counter-narrative campaigns reaching targeted audiences of over 500,000.

In a world where extremist use of communication technologies continues to exploit vulnerable people, we can significantly increase the scale of organic, accessible, and effective counter-narrative content with these replicable and scalable methodologies.

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15   http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Counter-narrative-Handbook_1.pdf

Glossary

Awareness: a metric that indicates exposure of content to target audiences (including impressions, reach, video views and viewer retention).

Clicks: the number of times people have clicked on your ad or a link in your posts.

Counter-narrative: a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives.

Downstream: an audience that includes those already engaging with violent extremist material, or actively participating in online extremist communities or networks.

Engagements: interactions between audience members or with campaigners themselves, which could be positive or negative and help provide an insight into reactions to a campaign.

Impact: a measurable change in behaviour, ideally constructive, that can be attributed to exposure to or engagement with counter-narrative content.

Impressions: the number of times content or adverts appear on a user's screen online. Avoid over-relying on impressions as a metric of impact, people don't necessarily take notice of every ad that appears on their screen.

In-built analytics: analytics services available on social media platforms that allow you to monitor your campaign's

reach and levels of audience engagement, and help determine whether your online objectives were met.

Metrics: different social media or website analytics services will offer different types of data. There are a vast range of different metrics that can help you understand who you reach, how well you engage your audience, and the impact your campaign is having.

Organic growth/reach: audience reach or engagement on websites or social media platforms generated from searches and/or as a result of unpaid campaign strategies and tactics.

Promoted content: posts or tweets that have been promoted through paid advertising to appear in selected audiences' news feeds on social media platforms.

Reach: the total number of people that received an impression of your post or ad on their screens or newsfeeds.

The **Institute for Strategic Dialogue** (ISD) is a London-based 'think and do tank' that has pioneered policy and operational responses to the rising challenges of violent extremism and inter-communal conflict.

Combining research and analysis with government advisory work and delivery programmes, ISD has been at the forefront of forging real-world, evidence-based responses to the challenges of integration, extremism and terrorism.