Udvalget for Udlændinge- og Integrationspolitik 2013-14
UUI Alm.del endeligt svar på spørgsmål 622
Offentligt

INSTITUTE *for*
STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

Policy Briefing

INSPIRE, RADICALISE, RECRUIT: COUNTERING THE APPEAL OF EXTREMISM ONLINE

1.0   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by the Danish Ministry of Social Affairs, Children and Integration and written by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). It draws on discussions and conclusions from three days of meetings in Copenhagen in June 2013 with a range of relevant stakeholders to discuss means of tackling online extremism. Co-organised by the Danish government and ISD, these international meetings involved academics, practitioners, central and local government policy makers, intelligence agencies and representatives from the private technology sector. The purpose of this paper is not to summarise discussions, but to draw on them to offer a framework and series of recommendations for the ways that governments should structure and resource their responses to online extremism.

Extremists and violent extremists are using the Internet and social media to inspire, radicalise and recruit young people to their cause, whether as passive supporters, active enthusiasts or those willing to become operational. Not enough has been done to date to tackle the use of the Internet and social media by extremists and violent extremists. Most effort has been focused on reactive measures, such as take-downs and filtering. While this is important, more focus and resources need to be invested to enable the silent majority to be better equipped to see through extremist propaganda, take control of online spaces, and actively push back on extremist messages. There are three areas where government should focus its efforts:

Strengthening digital literacy and critical consumption among young people:

i.   Governments should support mainstream digital literacy and critical consumption programmes through state schools and enable their provision through youth and community organisations.

ii.   Governments should support at arm's length projects working with at risk youth to deconstruct extremist messages.

Increasing counter-messaging, counter-narrative and alternative narrative activity:

i. Government strategic communications need to be centralised and coordinated, either through a dedicated unit or by assigning lead status to a single unit or department.

ii. Governments need to be realistic about the challenges that limit their ability to play the role of active 'messenger' in counter-narrative work.

iii. Governments should make significant investments into funding non-governmental organisations able to offer credible alternatives.

Building the capacity of credible messengers:

i. Governments should make significant investments in developing the skills and expertise of the most effective counter-messengers, to build their capacity in technology, production, communications, and campaigning.

ii. Governments should use their convening power to bring the private tech sector to the table as their expertise can help the voices of credible messengers.

iii. Governments should fund centralised information gathering to provide economies of scale and ensure that effective counter-messengers have the information they need to work, such as analytics, audience profiling, and the sharing of good practice in alternative and counter-narratives.

iv. Government must work multilaterally to pool resources in this area, taking an active role in streamlining the cross-border exchange of expertise and lessons learned in capacity building.

There are many challenges for governments operating in this area of policy and practice, but the biggest risk is inaction; there is a need to move on rather than allow these risks to hold things up.

2.0 Extremist Messaging: What are we trying to counter?

There has been considerable focus on how violent extremists have used the Internet and social media to plan and carry out their attacks, but in recent years growing attention has been given to the ways in which these spaces and platforms are used to inspire, radicalise and issue a 'call to action' to those vulnerable to extremist messages and narratives.[i]

There are few examples of radicalisation happening entirely online, but it is certainly an increasingly important tool for violent extremists. One example was Arid Uka, responsible for shooting US servicemen in Frankfurt, Germany. Uka was reported to have been compelled to action by a fabricated Jihadi propaganda video depicting the rape of an Iraqi girl by US soldiers. The video production posted on social media had actually utilised footage from Brian de Palma's fictional production, *Redacted*.[ii]

Groups differ in their approach, but there is a tendency towards disseminating a high volume of material, the use of wider range of multi-media tools and techniques (images, video, music), and compelling stories and arguments delivered by charismatic individuals designed to influence a "computer savvy, media-saturated, video game addicted generation".[iii]

Extremists have adapted their tactics over the past couple of years in line with shifting Internet patterns, and this change of approach has potential benefits. There is less emphasis placed on bringing core target audiences to dedicated forums and websites (although this does still occur) in favour of operating within mainstream platforms, such as YouTube,[iv] Facebook[v], Twitter[vi] and Instagram[vii].

This allows extremist groups to continue to reach, inspire and radicalise their traditional constituencies, while continuing to grow their tacit base of sympathisers. They are also drawing audiences into events in real-time, as was evidenced by the way the May 2013 Woolwich attackers encouraged onlookers to film and upload the murder of Lee Rigby, or how al-Shabaab offered real-time battlefield updates throughout the Westgate attacks in Nairobi in September 2013. [viii]

2.1 DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND PROPAGANDA TECHNIQUES

Extremist messages mix ideological, political, moral, religious and social narratives, based on a range of real or imagined grievances. They provide a simplistic, unifying ideological framework, which combines historical and

political facts with half-truths, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Using emotionally engaging 'narratives' or 'stories', they often convey one-dimensional interpretations of the world and seek to dehumanise the 'enemy'.

The messages and tactics used by violent extremists online vary according to group and target audience, as well as shifting over time and in response to changing events. Yet, it is possible to highlight a number of common messages and calls to action:

- **Duty**: you have a duty to protect, avenge, stand up for and defend those 'on your side', whether on humanitarian or religious grounds.
- **Victimhood**: you and your kin are the victims of an aggressor or wider conspiracy and you need to do something to stand up to it.
- **Religious reward**: God rewards those who fulfil their obligation to defend their religion and fellow believers.
- **Identity**: you need to fight to become a real man.
- **Belonging**: you need to come together with people like you to work together to fight the aggressor.
- **Wider purpose**: your day-to-day life is meaningless so you need to find that meaning by taking up arms.

- **Adventure**: joining up is fun; you will have access to weapons you can't get otherwise and fight alongside other young, idealistic men.

In seeking to inspire and radicalise vulnerable audiences, these movements and groups draw on common propaganda techniques. These include the following methods:

- **Bandwagon**: encouraging their targets to fit in with the crowd.
- **Scapegoating**: blaming a problem on one group even though there could have been other factors involved.
- **Lesser of two evils**: convincing targets to make a bad choice by comparing it to something worse when there could have been another option.
- **Down with the kids**: acting differently in order to be accepted and listened to by the target group.
- **Assertion**: stating something as if it is fact when it is just a statement that may or may not be true.
- **Transfer**: transferring what you think or feel about one thing on to another thing
- **Omission**: excluding small facts that would radically change the meaning of the message.[ix]

2.2 THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGE OF FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Many western governments are particularly concerned about the ways in which the Internet and social media are being used to radicalise and recruit young people to become foreign fighters in places such as Somalia, Libya, Mali and Syria. Violent extremists are using many of the same propaganda techniques and messages, combined with narratives tailored to the specific histories and geographies of their conflict zone.

The dominant messages related to foreign fighters tend to amplify the 'call to action' and the need to do *something*. These also seek to contrast fighting with the futility of everyday life in the West, and in the case of Syria, stress the humanitarian case, the political legitimacy of fighting, and the fact that the war can be won. There has been a lot of 'homemade' amateur content, including videos and testimonies from those claiming to be on the frontline, offering an insight into the daily routines of a foreign fighter. As with other types of radicalisation, those seeking to recruit foreign fighters often make available practical 'how-to' guidance including travel itineraries, local contacts and tips about how to stay safe when on the ground.[x]

3.0 Government Responses: 'Negative' and 'Positive'

Many governments have been slow to respond to the challenge presented by violent extremists' use of the Internet and social media to inspire, radicalise and recruit young people to their causes. In 2008, the United Nations Working Group on Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes reported that only 12 of the 34 member states that responded to its information request had developed a programme to combat the use of the Internet for violent extremism.[xi]

3.1 'NEGATIVE' RESPONSES

In the intervening years, governments have increased their action, but their efforts have tended to concentrate on reactive law enforcement measures designed to reduce the supply of 'terrorist' content, either through removal, filtering or hiding information (see Table 1). For example, the UK government set up the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU) to coordinate efforts with private sector industries to remove illegal content, from videos of violence with messages of glorification for terrorists to bomb-making instructions.[xii] Reports in 2013 indicate that the unit has taken down over 4,000 URLs which breach UK terrorism legislation since it was established in 2010.[xiii]

At the pan-European level, the Clean IT Project has led multilateral efforts in developing law enforcement responses to counter terrorist use of the Internet, streamlining public-private sector cooperation and identifying best practises in removing terrorist-related products online. This has included advocating the need for streamlined notice and take-down procedures; transparent private sector involvement in the removal of content embedded on their platforms; more coherent and consistent government legislation addressing the issue; more efficient end-user flagging mechanisms; and the development of both public and private-sector internet referral units. [xiv]

Table 1: 'Negative' Activities to Counter Violent Extremism Online[xv]

Activity	Description	Example
Removing	Make private sector industry take down user-generated content or websites usually through legal means	US government forcing micro-blogging platform Twitter to suspend account linked to the terrorist organisation al-Shabaab.[xvi]
Filtering	Blacklist key words or web addresses that are intentionally dropped from search results	Proposed legislation in the United Kingdom requiring ISP's to filter hardcore pornography will possibly extend to the filtering of extremist and terrorist-related materials.[xvii]
Hiding	Influence choice-architecture of users by manipulating search engine results to boost or reduce content	'Hacktivist' collective, Anonymous, calling upon Internet users to upload altered copies of Anders Breivik's manifesto.[xviii]

While it is important for governments to enforce the law and be seen to be doing so, such strategies have very limited practical effectiveness on their own in addressing violent extremist content on the Internet and social media because of the following challenges:[xix]

- **_Scale_**: 100 hours of content are uploaded to YouTube every minute,[xx]

and 300 million photos are posted on Facebook every day.[xxi] Only a fraction of this content is posted by violent extremists for the purpose of inspiring, radicalising or recruiting, yet the numbers are prohibitive to a take-down approach.

- ▪ ***Resourcing***: the financial and human resources needed to support a negative approach make it unworkable.

- ▪ ***Take down 'whack-a-mole'***: even where take-downs have been implemented, the sites and forums often reappear elsewhere.

- ▪ ***Legal frameworks***: there is no legal framework enabling the systematic, cross-border regulation of extremist content online.[xxii]

- ▪ ***Definitions of legality***: even if there were a legal framework in place, much of the content that successfully radicalises and recruits individuals is not illegal or fails to break 'terms of service' of internet service providers and social media platforms. For

example, the sermons of the Jihadist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki remain widely available on mainstream video-sharing sites.[xxiii]

3.2 'POSITIVE' RESPONSES

Given these limitations, there is a need for such efforts to be supplemented by more proactive approaches, which focus on reducing the demand for such content by undermining its appeal among target audiences.[xxiv] These alternative approaches focus not on restricting access, but on helping people to see through the propaganda and miscommunication techniques of extremists by enhancing their digital literacy and making them critical consumers of content online; supporting those who can offer alternative narratives and calls to action; and by enabling credible messengers to challenge extremist messages. Table 2 below outlines three approaches that governments should support and deliver alongside a range of non-governmental partners.

Table 2: 'Positive' Activities to Counter Violent Extremism Online

Activity	Description	Example
Strengthen digital literacy and critical consumption	Build capacity to enable users to critically engage with extremist	Digital Disruption

	content	
Increase counter-messaging activities	Enable the design and dissemination of online products that counter violent extremist narratives or direct challenge via forums and social media platforms and promote credible alternatives	NoNazi.net, RAN@, AVE
Build the capacity of credible messengers	Assist civil society to provide credible alternatives to violent extremism online	Viral Peace

In most instances, governments are not effective messengers because they lack credibility among the target audiences, and are slow to respond due to bureaucratic constraints. However, they can play an important role in managing their own strategic communications effectively, and providing support, facilitation and resources to non-governmental actors who have the scope and credibility to conduct this work.

4.0 Strengthen Digital Literacy and Critical Consumption

While the Internet is a central part of life, many users are ill equipped to judge the value, authenticity and veracity of the content they consume and share online. A survey in the UK found that 31 per cent of 12-15 year olds believed that if a search engine lists information it must be truthful, while around one in four failed to make any checks when visiting a new website.[xxv] A survey of school teachers in the UK found that 47% reported that school children had produced arguments which 'contain[ed] inaccurate internet-based content they regard as deliberately packaged by the producers to be misleading or deceitful'.[xxvi]

This has implications for the radicalisation potential of the Internet, which increasingly hosts slick, appealing and deceiving extremist content.[xxvii] In 2010, research found that among violent and non-violent Islamists sharing a strong anti-western ideology, the non-violent subset had better critical thinking skills than the violent, suggesting that digital literacy and critical consumption might be protective factors.[xxviii]

It is therefore important for governments to promote and support efforts to improve digital literacy and critical consumption of online content among young people. There are three broad areas of focus for this work:

- *Critical consumption skills*: to help young people to see and understand the use of propaganda techniques online.
- *Digital literacy skills*: to help young people to understand how the Internet works, how search engine results are generated, and how to use various online tools to refine their searches.
- *Deconstruction of extremist narratives*: to help those most at risk to understand the narrative techniques used by extremists and how to see through them.

4.1 CRITICAL CONSUMPTION AND DIGITAL LITERCY SKILLS

There is a growing need for services, products and programmes that will enable young people to critically engage with extremist propaganda online. Similar initiatives have been undertaken in other areas of Internet safeguarding, such as in relation to bullying, paedophilia, pornography and e-fraud, but there is very little tailored to the challenge of radicalisation. The Swedish government has been leading on research in this area and will be rolling out a digital literacy programme in

schools. Such initiatives help young people through developing a better understanding of:

- *Propaganda techniques:* Teaching vulnerable audiences how to spot the use of propaganda techniques by extremists, thus enhancing their resilience to these messages.
- *Source-verification:* Providing them with basic source-verification skills to assess the validity, reliability and authenticity of the information they consume, on or offline.
- *Understanding choice architecture:* Developing an understanding of the architecture and functionality of the Internet and how this impacts the nature and quality of information presented to the individual user.

One of the important qualities of effective digital literacy programmes is that they treat the target audience as the messenger as well as the recipient. In other words, they do not just seek to teach young people passive skills about how to access and process information; they aim to empower them to become proactive consumers and also producers of information. This is based on the 'ladder of participation' theory and practice, which seeks to move people from passive consumers to active participants, and which means that digital literacy is a prerequisite of other counter-narrative work. The further up the

ladder and individual progresses, the more likely they are to be critical information consumers, but also active in challenging misinformation when they see it:

- *Manipulation*
- *Decoration*
- *Tokenism*
- *Assigned but informed*
- *Consulted and informed*

- *Adult initiated with youth input*
- *Youth initiated with adult input*
- *Youth initiated and owned*

One innovative project that aims to enhance digital literacy and critical consumption is Digital Disruption, which is improving the digital judgement of young people to counter extremism.

Digital Disruption

Launched in 2008 by the creative design agency Bold Creative, Digital Disruption has been created to raise the ability of young people to critically engage with content they consume, create and share online. It does this through the delivery of research, tools, training and practical communications activities that provide young people aged 11-19 with the skills needed to lead informed digital lives.

Developed following concern surrounding the spread of audio-visual extremist propaganda, Digital Disruption launched its pilot project (2008-2010) in which a team of digital media specialists, youth workers and filmmakers worked with groups of 12 young people identified as particularly susceptible to extremist propaganda. The aim of the project is to investigate the ways misinformation had been affecting young people, and to co-produce films to promote critical, independent thinking.

The programme designs activities that enable them to determine the authenticity of materials; breaking down the tools and processes of conspiracy materials; encouraging discussion around the way people are influenced by their social networks; and identifying and analysing propaganda techniques. In addition to its practical training workshops, Digital Disruption has developed a series of interactive modules aimed to provide educators with the tools to engage young people.

The project has trained 325 young people offline in 6 months, and its online digital literacy toolkits have reached 600,000. Digital Disruption has currently expanded its focus to raising digital literacy of 11-16 year-olds across the United Kingdom, notably hosting a Digital Disruption summit in October 2012 of leading digital literacy experts from the public, private and third sectors.[xxix]

4.2 DECONSTRUCTION OF EXTREMIST MESSAGES WITH THE MOST VULNERABLE

Alongside broader educational programmes delivered through mainstream institutions, it is important to have tailored and focused interventions with those most susceptible to extremist messages to ensure they are equipped to decipher and deconstruct the detail and nuances of more subtle audio, visual and text-based propaganda. These activities

should be implemented through tailored workshops – either one-on-one or in small groups – where the practitioner is able to deconstruct techniques of propaganda face-to-face so they are able to have a dialogue and answer questions.

In the UK, the grassroots community organisation STREET (Strategy to Reach, Empower and Educate) has worked with the government Channel Programme to undermine violent extremist propaganda disseminated specifically online.[xxx] Through its Digital Deconstruction programme, it has aimed to challenge the messaging of al-Qaeda and their affiliates among vulnerable hard-to-reach groups. As it has been reported, 'the deconstruction attempts to isolate the various media components that have been utilised to construct the media text in question...' and then '…identify the various messages being

encoded within the text and the subtleties at play that are deliberately put together for effect and impact upon the viewer'.[xxxi]

5.0 Increase Counter-Messaging Activities

The term 'counter-messaging' has come to be used in relation to a wide range of communication activities, everything from public diplomacy and strategic communications by governments to targeted campaigns to discredit the ideologies and actions of violent extremists. The counter-messaging spectrum can be said to consist of three main types of activities: government strategic communications, alternative narratives and counter-narratives. Table 3 below outlines the three elements of the spectrum, their aims, how they are achieved and who the principle actors are.

Table 3: The Counter-Messaging Spectrum

What	Why	How	Who
Government Strategic Communications	Action to get the message about what government is doing, including public awareness activities	Raise awareness, forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences and correct misinformation	Government

Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are "for" rather than "against"	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society and government
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humour	Civil society

5.1 GOVERNMENT STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

The area where government has the most natural and effective role to play on this spectrum lies within the development and streamlining of its own strategic communications. This aims to ensure its own policies are clearly articulated, that government actions that help to build relationships with key constituencies are amplified, and in some cases directly challenging misinformation about government.

A number of governments have set up dedicated strategic communications units that streamline, develop and implement communications campaigns that feed into national counter-extremism policy objectives. In the UK, the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) sits within the Home Office[xxxii] and in the US the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications

(CSCC) at the State Department has created a specialist Digital Outreach Team (DOT) whose purpose is to proactively counter the messaging of violent extremists on the internet and social media. These kinds of units systematise research and analysis capabilities, invest in audience analysis, support government departments on their strategic communications, as well as conducting communications work themselves. However, there are challenges for governments working within the counter-messaging spectrum:

- *Political*: while units such as these and civil servants can do good sustained work over time, one poorly conceived or mistimed political statement can undo their efforts overnight.
- *Resources*: although this work is attracting more funding and human resources, it will still be difficult to compete with extremists who are able to draw on large number of enthusiasts

willing to give freely of their time to post extremist content online.

- **Bureaucracy**: the slow and risk averse machinery of governments makes it difficult for them to be timely or bold in their responses.

- **Emotion**: governments need to balance the need to transmit factual information with the imperative to appeal to the emotional instincts of target audiences.

- **Say-do gap**: governments communicate more through what they do rather than what they say. Saying one thing and doing another merely reinforces the extremists' messages.

5.2 ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

Alternative narratives play an important role in countering the appeal of violent extremism. They do not tend to challenge extremist messaging directly, but instead attempt to influence those who might be sympathetic towards (but not actively supportive of) extremist causes, or help to unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasising solidarity, common causes and shared values. MyJihad is an example of an alternative narrative project, which seeks to help the silent majority to reclaim the term 'jihad' and forge a centre-ground narrative on religion and faith in contrast to that put forward by extremists.[xxxiii]

MyJihad

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

The initiative provides a platform of expression for users to share their individual 'struggles' online, and thereby contribute to the development of a user-generated centre-ground understanding of the term. These expressions are aggregated on the MyJihad website. The campaign gained publicity through its offline advertising, on billboard and buses,[xxxv] and it is using the Twitter hashtag #myjihad to involve users on social media. It also has a presence on Facebook and YouTube, which hosts audio-visual content showcasing educational materials, interviews and campaigning videos. This included a video-competition inviting audiences to highlight their own personal Jihad.[xxxvi]

MyJihad is in the process of developing materials and online toolkits that can be taught in schools and within communities. This includes a repository of audio-visual content exploring the true meaning of jihad from prominent religious scholars, and other texts such as 'Jihad against the Abuse of Jihad', 'US Muslims Religious Council's Fatwa Against Terrorism', 'Azhar-endorsed Fatwa on

Terrorism', 'Prophet Muhammad's Rules of War'. As well as this, the initiative hopes to use its online spaces to generate interest to connect activists to hold offline events and community-engagement activities.[xxxvii]

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

5.3 COUNTER-NARRATIVES

There is a growing need for more targeted activities that explicitly deconstruct, delegitimise and de-mystify extremist propaganda. These strategic communications should be designed to directly erode the intellectual framework of violent extremist ideologies with the objective of influencing the attitudes and behaviours of those who sympathise or even identify with violent extremist constituencies of belief through the Internet and social media.

The primary objective of these activities should be to sow seeds of doubt among at risk audiences seeking out extremist content online. These targeted counter-messaging activities include attempting to mock, ridicule, or undermine the credibility/legitimacy of violent extremist messengers; highlighting how extremist activities negatively impact on the constituencies they claim to represent;

demonstrating how the means they adopt are inconsistent with their own beliefs; questioning their overall effectiveness in achieving their stated goals and exploiting their mistakes. There are a number of examples of counter-messaging or counter-narrative initiatives:

- **Radicalisation Awareness Network's Working Group on the Internet and Social Media (RAN@)**: European Commission-funded network is chaired by ISD and Google Ideas and connects the private sector with practitioners to produce counter-narrative products and good practice.[xxxix]

- **Against Violent Extremism (AVE):** global network of former extremists and the victims of extremist attacks, run by ISD with seed funding from Google Ideas and the GenNext Foundation, that promotes members' stories as counter-narratives and connects them to work together and learn from one another.[xl]

- ***Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE):*** developed by the Women without Borders initiative the networks aims to provide women with the tools for critical debate to challenge extremist thinking.[xli]

The case study below provides a more detailed account of one innovative counter-narrative initiative: EXIT Deutschland's 'Trojan t-shirt campaign.

EXIT Deutschland

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

This resulted in the 'Trojan T-Shirt' campaign, in which Exit Deutschland distributed 250 white power t-shirts at a neo-Nazi music festival that when washed altered the logo to 'What your T-shirt can do, so can you - we'll help you break with right-wing extremism' and included the Exit brand.[xlii]

The initiative made the headlines both on and offline, including mainstream and far-right forums, which even temporarily shut down because of the positive reaction to the initiative. The campaign increased overall awareness of EXIT among right-wingers, trebling the number of self-referrals to its disengagement programme. To maximise the impact of the campaign, Exit produced a video sequencing the production and distribution of the offline campaign.[xliii]

5.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Any messaging is only successful if it reaches the intended audience and it is here that technology can assist. The science of audience segmentation (i.e. working out who to target and where to find them) is still poorly understood among those involved in counter-narrative activities. Similarly, little is also understood about data analytics, which help measure how successful different types of interventions have been. There are many tools and resources that could be more widely, systematically, and successfully applied to counter-narratives: Google, YouTube and Facebook ads; targeted ads on gaming platforms; true view ads on YouTube; effective use of titles, tags and descriptions on videos; response videos; and serial content, for instance. In the right hands, this

knowledge could transform counter-narrative efforts.

5.5 WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT GOOD PRACTICE AND WHAT WORKS?

Because we have still not fully utilised analytics, our understanding of what constitutes good practice is little more than informed guesswork. Based on the limited experience of practitioners in this field, the following lessons emerge:

- *Clarity of goals is essential:* there are many distinct targets for counter-narrative work, which require different types of campaigns, tactics, and approaches.
- *It's not about 'winning':* It is important to remember that counter-narratives are not about winning the argument or winning over the target audience; they are about gradual movement in the right direction.
- *Emotions are more important than evidence:* given the thought patterns that extremists typically adopt, success is not achieved in counter-narrative terms through evidence, which can always be refuted and countered. Instead, they need to appeal to human emotions.

- *Sustained rather than sporadic activity:* be it maintaining an online community, a twitter following, or a chat room relationship, engagement must be sustained.
- *Professionalism is essential:* successful online counter-narratives share in common with their target content an effective branding campaign, often effective use of music, polish in production quality and compelling stories.
- *Viral is a red herring:* viral is not quantifiable, and even when qualifying invokes the notion of having spread like a virus in an unplanned – unpredictable – manner.[xliv] Extremist messaging can be a concern with just hundreds of individuals having engaged with them, and rarely have gained traction with millions.
- *Counter-narratives can evoke counter-counter-narratives:* online counter-narrative work is not without its risks. Efforts to tackle extremist ideologies can be attacked by extremists with false and conspiratorial claims about motives, and even worse online and offline threats. Countering such ideologies can also make them more alluring and clandestine.
- *Online/offline link is critical:* online success does not generally come in isolation.
- *Humour, shock and subversion:* they will be more successful than worthy

counter-narratives that will be a turn off to young people.

6.0 Building Capacity for Credible Messengers

One of the greatest challenges in mobilising non-governmental actors to play an active role in alternative and counter-narratives is a gap in skills and expertise. There are four key gaps:

- **Technical:** many of the most credible messengers have poor online technical skills so they are not able to use social media platforms, do not understand how to use analytical tools, and are not making best use of even basic tools, such as email and websites.

- **Production:** films and images are now central to extremist propaganda online, but many counter-messengers do not even have the basic skills allowing them to take and upload photos or create and share videos using smart phones.

- **Communications:** many counter-narrative films to date are long monologues to camera, which do not appeal to target audiences.

- **Campaigning:** counter-narrative messaging is not just about communications about campaigning, sustained over the long-term. However, few of the most effective counter-

messengers understand the basics of campaigning.

There is substantial opportunity for governments to play a significant role in building capacity among the most effective alternative and counter-messengers, with the private sector also potentially playing a large role. There are a handful of examples of good initiatives in this area. For example, the UK Home Office has recruited communications experts to support fifteen organisations to use digital media more effectively.[xlv] In the US, the New America Foundation has hosted online workshops for Muslim community leaders, financed by technology companies, such as Microsoft, Google, Facebook and Twitter.[xlvi]

In the US, the government-run Viral Peace and Generation Change programmes represent efforts by US authorities to directly empower credible moderates online. With the assistance of US Embassies, the projects aim to train 'raw talent' in local target communities through the medium of one to two-day offline workshops that include modules on effective storytelling to more technical advice on social media campaigning strategies. The programme aim to increase the reach of these messengers online, enabling them to take ownership of the digital space by better promoting their cause.

Viral Peace

Viral Peace aims to assist community activists in undermining the appeal of violent extremism through adding strategy to their campaigning while also increasing their motivation, influence and reach on the internet and social media.

It has delivered frontline training through a series of 1 to 2-day offline workshops in Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with further sessions scheduled in Nepal, India and Pakistan. The initiative offers training and guidance but encourages participants enrolled on the program to design and deliver their own campaigns, restricting its follow-up involvement to monitoring progress and offering encouragement.

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

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

6.1 PRIVATE SECTOR SUPPORT

Achieving private sector buy-in to these types of activities should be a core priority for government, especially in countries where government-industry relations have already been strained as a result of law enforcement measures to counter Internet radicalisation. Government must signal its commitment to working with (and not against) its private sector partners to counter the threat of violent extremism online. It must also actively encourage the provision of in-kind support to credible messengers through outreach and awareness-raising within these sectors. Private sector support could range from such things as the provision of *pro bono* filming and editing space; advertising grants; marketing advice and other ad-hoc consultancy services.

6.2 CROSS BORDER EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION, GOOD PRACTICE AND ANALYSIS

Given the cross-border nature of messaging developed by violent extremist movements and the digital mediums through which they disseminate propaganda, governments must work multilaterally to pool resources in the counter-messaging space. While a number of governments have begun implementing their own counter-messaging strategies, there is a need for greater cross-border exchange of intelligence, expertise, best practises and most

importantly, lessons learned. This includes commissioning and sharing monitoring and analysis of violent extremist ecologies on the internet and social media and sharing this with non-government partners; sharing of best practices and lessons learned in disseminating counter-messaging strategies; the exchange of private sector contacts and the development of counter-messaging resource hubs, toolkits and templates that can be used to challenge extremist messengers online. Given that most organisations working in this space are small and poorly resourced, it would be useful for government to commission this kind of information centrally and roll it out to the people who need it most.

Rachel Briggs
Sebastien Feve

---

i See Briggs, R. (June 2011) 'Radicalisation: The Role of the Internet'. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.

ii Rising, D. (2011) "Arid Uka, Frankfurt Airport Shooting Suspect, Starts Trial". *Huffington Post.*. Available at **http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/30/arid-uka-frankfurt-airport-shooting_n_941511.html** Last accessed 4 November 2013].

iii Hoffman, B. (May 2006) 'The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists'. *RAND*. Available at **www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf**, [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

iv See Arthur, C. 'Anwar al-Awlaki videos available on YouTube'. *The Guardian*, 2 November 2010 **http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/02/anwar-al-awlaki-videos-youtube** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

v See Bartlett, J. (2011) 'The EDL: a Facebook group with a militant wing'. *Demos*. Available at **www.demos.co.uk/blog/edlfacebookmilitantwing** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

vi See Prucha, N. (September 2013) '66 Important Jihadist Twitter Accounts [Part 2]'. *Jihadica.com*. Available at **www.jihadica.com/66-important-jihadist-twitter-accounts-part-2/** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

vii See Stalinsky, S. (March 2013) 'Online Jihadis Embrace Instagram'. *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*. Available at **www.memri.org/report/en/print7081.htm** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

viii 'Tweeting terrorism: How al Shabaab live blogged the Nairobi attacks'. *Telegraph,* 22 September 2013. Available at **www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/10326863/Tweeting-terrorism-How-al-Shabaab-live-blogged-the-Nairobi-attacks.html** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

ix These propaganda techniques are outlined in the educational resources provided by Bold Creative on their interactive portal: **http://www.digitaldisruption.co.uk/teaching-tools/propaganda-techniques/**

x 'Dutch Muslims recruited online to join civil war in Syria'. *The Amsterdam Herald*, 16 April 2013. Available at **www.amsterdamherald.com/index.php/rss/789-20130416-dutch-muslims-recruited-online-join-civil-war-syria-netherlands-security** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xi See United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force. (2008) 'First Report of the Working Group on Radicalisation and Extremism that Lead to Terrorism: Inventory of State Programmes'. *United Nations*. Available at **www.un.org/en/terrorism/pdfs/radicalization.pdf** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xii See **http://www.herts.police.uk/advice/counter_terrorism.aspx**

xiii 'CONTEST: The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism - Annual Report'. HM Government, (March 2013). Available at **www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/170644/28307_Cm_8583_v0_20.pdf** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xiv See The Clean It Project website **www.cleanitproject.eu/about-the-project/** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xv See Briggs, R. (June 2011) 'Radicalisation: The Role of the Internet'. *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.

xvi 'Twitter of Terror: Somalia's al-Shabaab unveils a new social media strategy for militants'. *Slate.com*, 23 December 2011. Available at **www.slate.com/articles/technology/technocracy/2011/12/al_shabaab_twitter_a_somali_militant_group_unveils_a_new_social_media_strategy_for_terrorists_.html** [Last accessed 4 November 2013]

xvii Killock, J. 'Sleepwalking into censorship'. *Open Rights Group*, July 25 2013. Available at **www.openrightsgroup.org/blog/2013/sleepwalking-into-censorship** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xviii Whitney, L. 'Anonymous lashes out at Norway massacre suspect'. *CNET*, 25 July 2011. Available at http://news.cnet.com/8301-1009_3-20083025-83/anonymous-lashes-out-at-norway-massacre-suspect/ [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xix See Neumann, P. (2012) 'Countering Online Radicalisation in America'. Bipartisan Policy Center.

xx See YouTube's press page, **www.youtube.com/yt/press/en-GB/statistics.html** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxi Andrews, R. 'Facebook has 220 billion of your photos to put on ice'. *GigaOM*, 17 October 2012. Available at **http://gigaom.com/2012/10/17/facebook-has-220-billion-of-your-photos-to-put-on-ice/** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxii Osmonaliyeva, A. 'Kyrgyzstan to fight online extremism'. *Central Asia Online*, 6 May 2013. Accessible at **http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/05/06/feature-01** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xxiii Arthur, C. 'Anwar al-Awlaki videos available on YouTube'. *The Guardian*, 2 November 2010. Accessible at **www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/02/anwar-al-awlaki-videos-youtube** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xxiv See Neumann, P. (2012) 'Countering Online Radicalisation in America'.

xxv See Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. (September 2011) 'Truth, Lies and the Internet: A report into young people's digital fluency'. Accessible at **www.demos.co.uk/publications/truth-lies-and-the-internet** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xxvi Ibid.

xxvii See for example **www.martinlutherking.org** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xxviii Bartlett, J. Birdwell, J. & King, M. (2010) 'The Edge of Violence'. Demos.

xxix See 'Digital Disruption' **http://www.digitaldisruption.co.uk/**[Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxx See Barclay, J. (December 2011) 'Strategy to Reach, Empower, and Educate Teenagers (STREET): A Case Study in Government-Community Partnership and Direct Intervention to Counter Violent Extremism'. *Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC)*.

xxxi Baker, A.H. (2008) 'Rationale for a Extremism Deconstruct Programme & Counter Narrative Hub'. *STREET*, accessible at **www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/specialmeetings/2011/docs/street-rationale%20-counternarrative.pdf** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xxxii Travis, A. (2008) "Revealed: Britain's secret propaganda war against al-Qaida" Available at **http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/26/alqaida.uksecurity** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].
xxxiii

xxxiv See My Jihad website, About section, **http://myjihad.org/about/** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxxv See myjihadtv (December 2012), *MyJihad Ad Campaign Now on Chicago Buses*, **www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=t0zsyJq-TMc#**! [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxxvi See myjihadtv (March 2013), *#MyJihad Video Contest: Win a FREE trip to Turkey and get paid to help kids!*, **www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUxvS4tJqhE** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxxvii Interview with Angie Emara, Project Coordinator, MyJihad (19/02/2013).

xxxviii See The J Word website, **http://thejword.org/** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xxxix See DG Home Affairs website, **http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xl See Against Violent Extremism website, **http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xli See Women Without Borders website, **http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xlii 'Trojan T-shirt targets German right-wing rock fans'. *BBC News*, 9 August 2011. Available at **www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14465150** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xliii See ExitDeutschlandVideo (March 2012), *OPS // Trojan T-Shirt / EXIT-Deutschland,* **www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSIbsHKEP-8,** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].

xliv There is growing knowledge in this area. Some useful work is being conducted by Prof. Sandy Pentland at MIT **http://web.media.mit.edu/~sandy/** [Last accessed 4 November 2013].

xlv 'CONTEST: Annual Report'. HM Government, (2013).

xlvi Neumann, P. (2012) 'Countering Online Radicalisation in America'.

xlvii See Generation Change Facebook page, About section, **www.facebook.com/generationchange.hq/info** [Last accessed 26 July 2013].