

Developing a social media response to radicalization

The role of counter-narratives in prevention of radicalization and de-radicalization.

ABSTRACT

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Radical groups thrive by spreading their message. They have increasingly used social media to spread their propaganda and promote their extremist narratives. Including on websites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. In this study, the main question that we investigate is to what extent it is possible to use counter-narrative programs via social media to de-radicalize individuals or prevent violent extremism. We focus on violent radicalization connected to Salafi-Jihadism. Due to the political and societal context in which this project was initiated, NCTV and WODC were interested in this specific form of radicalization. The method we used consisted of a literature study, interviews (n=8) and three focus groups (n=6, n=7 and n=8) with people with different expertise and backgrounds (including academics, field workers, social media students and a former radical).

In this study, narratives are conceptualized as strategically constructed storylines that are projected and nurtured through (online) strategic communication activities by state and non-state actors in attempts to shape how target audiences feel about or understand events or issues, and ultimately, guide their behavior in a manner that is conducive to their aims and goals. We conceptualize counter-narratives as strategically constructed storylines that are projected and nurtured through strategic communication (or messaging) activities with the intention to undermine the appeal of extremist narratives of violent extremist groups. Narratives have been projected by radical groups through a wide range of social media, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. For counter-narratives on social media, we identify three domains: (1) counter-messaging (e.g., activities that challenge extremist narratives head on); (2) alternative messaging (e.g., activities that aim to provide a positive alternative to extremist narratives); and (3) strategic communication by the government (e.g., activities that provide insight in what the government is doing).

A central outcome of our analysis is that to the extent that people have become more radical and strongly identify with an extremist ideology or group, they are *less* likely to be persuaded by any counter-narrative campaign. In general, it's challenging to persuade people with strong convictions through (online) campaigning. They are typically not very receptive to messages that aim to change their views. However, it will be very difficult to challenge people with extremist attitudes. They may not pay attention to these messages or even may adopt a stronger attitude in the other direction than intended as a reaction to this persuasive attempt. Thus, we argue that counter-narrative campaigns may be most useful for prevention purposes. They could perhaps focus on those that appear to be sensitive to extremist views and information – to the extent that they can be identified meaningfully.

In addition, we have raised the question whether or not such counter narrative efforts may have some effect for the individuals from radical groups who show a glimpse of doubt about their group. For such individuals, a counter-narrative message may fall on fertile grounds and a seed may be planted, although this is highly speculative at the moment and more research is needed to support this notion.

A sound starting point for designing a counter-narrative campaign is research. One should develop a sound understanding of (the context of) 'the problem', underlying determinants, where

communication can potentially contribute to a solution. Here it is advisable to consider relevant theories and insights about radicalization and attitude and behavioral change. Beyond borrowing from existing theory, program planners do well to develop a sound theory of change that explicates how campaign efforts are expected to lead to the desired result.

In addition, the *audience* should be carefully defined and segmented on the bases of meaningful variables. This requires thorough audience research. Campaigns targeting an overly broad and general target audience run the risk of being ineffective and may be counterproductive. It is therefore recommendable to focus on narrow, specific audience segments.

In addition to studying the audience, it is important to develop an in-depth understanding of the *extremist narratives* one aims to counter. When deciding upon which elements of, for example, the Salafi-Jihadi narrative one aims to counter, we argue it is also important to consider *why* members of the target audience in question may be attracted to these narratives. Radicalizing individuals that are looking for extremist content may have different motives. Different motives of radical people may request different alternative or counter-narrative content. Some may be drawn to an extremist ideology. However, there are a variety of other reasons that may motivate people, such as the need for group-membership and camaraderie, a search for meaning, the need for excitement and adventure.

As suggested, it is important to clarify the desired outcome, and the steps towards that outcome. Relatedly, at the outset of a campaign, *goals and objectives* should be delineated that clearly specify which change one aims to achieve. Well-defined objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. Running an effective social media effort also requires adequate *resources* (time, finances, people) which should be assessed at the outset of a program. It is also important to give consideration to potential partners. Involving partners from within local communities in campaign development and delivery may benefit a campaign effort.

Control over the *message* is not strictly assured when it is released on social media. Of course, it is still important to give consideration to the content of the message. As put forward earlier, to the extent that this is possible, it may be fruitful to consider the different motives of radical people. Besides content, it is important to think about different aspects of the message. Messages that use the narrative format have the advantage of using subtle ways to influence people and may overcome various forms of resistance. In addition, double-sided messages (in which one side is being discredited) and messages with a strong emotional appeal may prove to be particularly persuasive.

In terms of *sources*, it is clear that they need to be perceived as credible by the audience in order to function as trustworthy messengers. Commonly mentioned candidates are former extremists, victims of violence, peers and family, as well as key members of communities and civil society actors. The potential of the government to serve as a credible source might be limited. Among other things, the government often suffers from a say-do gap in the eyes of relevant target audiences. Yet, which messenger will in fact effective will depend on the context, the target audience, and the message one wants to relay. Also, it should be noted that source is a murky entity in social media environments. For instance, processes of information transfer may obscure the original source of a message or make it difficult to interpret who the source is. Some

researchers also maintain that social media environments complicate traditional insights about credibility indicators.

In terms of selected *channels*, obviously they should be frequently utilized by the audience one intends to reach. Using multiple channels is argued to be beneficial. Importantly, social media may not be appropriate in all circumstances, and linking online with offline activities is suggested to be particularly effective. In terms of *message dissemination*, one may join already on-going ‘conversations’. Also, it may be beneficial to partner up with people and organizations that have already established a strong social media presence and are popular among the target audience. In some cases, it may also be useful to ask established online (news) outlets to share the message. Furthermore, it may be important to create opportunities for audience engagement. One should also give consideration to aspects such as timing and volume.

Finally, we argue it is important to assess the potential risks, challenges and limitations when developing a communication strategy. These might include losing control of the message, counter-campaigns, threats to safety and well-being of messengers, and multi-tier approval processes that hamper campaign efforts, as well as the notorious difficulty of demonstrating the effect of counter-narrative efforts.

Generally speaking, it is not easy to establish an effect of a policy or measure in counter violent extremism (CVE). For the potential effectiveness of a counter-narrative campaign, it is important to distinguish between a formative evaluation, a process evaluation and a summative evaluation. Specifically tailored at online interventions, we argue that a combination of awareness (e.g., reach and views) and engagement metrics (e.g., likes, shares, comments and emoji responses) can provide some insight into the extent to which a counter-narrative campaign achieved its desired effect. More traditional research techniques such as interviews and focus groups can give insight in the reception of online materials (thus useful in the formative phase), but can also provide input in the interpretation of quantitative data in the summative evaluation phase. Experiments (either offline or online) offer insight in the cause-and-effect-relationship, while “netnography” makes use of data usually obtained from observations of people in their regular social media environments. Sentiment and content analyses are methods to distract the overall evaluation towards a counter-narrative campaign as well as the specific narratives that were put forward in a particular online community. Finally, social network analyses may give insight into the structure of a group and potentially how this might change over time, although the use of this technique in this field has not yet been fully established.

Government actors are not well-suited to act as a counter-narrative producer or messenger. They tend to lack credibility as effective messengers with relevant target audiences. In part, because they are perceived to suffer from a say-do gap, which means their actions and words do not always match in the view of the audience. However, they still can still their part. First, governments can fruitfully engage in streamlining their own strategic communications in terms of explaining their own actions locally and in an international context. Second, the government can play a valuable role by facilitating grassroots and civil society actors best placed to act as counter-narrative messengers. They can do so by establishing an infrastructure to support these initiatives and by sponsoring such efforts (providing help, expertise or financial support) as well as. Yet, they should be cautious, as government endorsement or support for such initiatives may

act as a 'kiss of death' and undermine them. Thirdly, they could stimulate thorough monitoring and evaluation, as there is only limited evidence for the effectiveness of counter-narrative efforts. Finally, government efforts could focus on supporting the development of programs in the area of strengthening digital literacy and critical consumption skills

In terms of limitations of the current study, in our analysis, we have focused only on counter-narratives with respect to the Jihadi ideology. As such, it is not possible to generalize these findings to other groups (e.g., extreme right wings groups). Furthermore, due to the fact that there is hardly any strong empirical research available, we had to base some of our analysis on the general literature on persuasion and communication campaigns, as well as some "grey literature" (e.g., policy papers, working papers, and recommendations). This undermines the options to draw strong conclusions from the current analysis, as one might question the extent to which it is possible to generalize from the general field of persuasion to the specific field of online counter-narratives.

We conclude that, although presenting online counter-narratives appears to be intuitively an appealing strategy to employ, our analysis shows that this may not be an ideal option to de-radicalize people. It might be more fruitful to use counter-narratives in a prevention context, in which people's minds are still open enough to register and process the information presented. Alternatively, it might be possible to explore the options to expose known individuals (e.g., a convicted prisoner) with specific counter-narratives, but ideally not in an online context, but an offline context, in order to directly monitor the reactions of the individuals.