

**Confronting the counter-narrative ideology.
Embedded face-to-face prevention – and youth (media) work¹**

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Introduction – and some base statements

There are times when one should say things as simple and clear as possibly:
Whenever politicians, policy makers and related organisations in research & development speak on the topic of CVE, one of the first things they always seem to be saying is: We need something on the internet! We need web platforms! We need counter messages and counter narratives! These need to be as professional and compelling as the extremists' videos themselves! We need to counter, counter, counter! ... as much as we possibly could! (because “they”, the violent extremists, are doing it so powerfully).

This is a most unfortunate discourse indeed – because these statements are wrong!

Firstly, we don't need these videos and platforms; and we don't need counter narratives. In fact, counter narratives don't work. Field practitioners who have good contact with our at risk young people, know their subcultures and work directly with them (in disengagement/ rehabilitation or in prevent/ distancing settings) have always observed this first hand: Counter narratives and counter messages have no impact on these young people! These media products don't even reach them in the internet (which is empirically proven and will be discussed further down). And if we were to make them see these videos and messages, they would tend to make things worse rather than better. For, in all experience, these young people would look at this, smirk and then say: “Are they stupid or what? Do they really think they can brainwash me with such made-up stuff!” etc.

To be honest, much of what we can find as counter narratives these days rather reflects what we middle age and middle class western professionals would like to watch (and also somehow draw moral reconfirmation from) – and what we possibly would like our sons and daughters to watch and appreciate (and not even our sons and daughters might be much taken by it really). But our target groups will most certainly not be reached or react adversely. Hence,

¹ This article is based on an earlier draft paper – *Do we really need “counter narratives”?* And what would that be anyway? – *The narrative approach to audio-visual media tools in interventions of deradicalisation and prevention against violent extremism and hate crime* which is accessible on the CI website. This draft has now been substantially changed and reworked (while the section on my EU project *European Platform of Deradicalizing Narratives/ EDNA* are omitted here).

while we will be moved to tears by some of these videos, our target group will most likely respond with reactive denial and aggression (see further below on victim testimonials) or not even look at these videos. Recognizing our most basic misunderstanding about internet and deradicalisation thus also gives evidence of how little we know about our most at risk young people and, by implication, how few of us educators and video producers have actually met and/or extensively worked with so-called violent extremists.

All the more crucial it is to realize: While the internet and social media play an important role in radicalisation (although even there the internet's role tends to be overestimated in view of the crucial face-to-face recruitment around it), this does not at all mean that the internet can also have an equally important role in deradicalisation or in targeted prevention with vulnerable young persons. Any such conclusion is unfounded and eventually erroneous. For, the processes of radicalisation on the one hand and deradicalisation on the other need to be of a substantially different quality – or else our deradicalisation would only be a reactive counter-radicalisation, i.e. a paradoxical radicalisation for a good purpose, which in the end will make things worse and not better.

Secondly, not only do we not need counter narratives, because they don't work. We should not engage in all this “countering” to begin with! In fact, field practitioners always had to realize quickly and painfully: countering doesn't work – and we will see further down why this is.

Hence, given what field practitioners have persistently been saying over the last few years (and is supported by some empirical research), the counter narrative ideology seems to be a fallacy. It leads us the wrong way, which is why we practitioners should be maximally clear and outspoken in this matter.

Surely, one could also take a more lenient angle. And of course, there is nothing wrong with pointing out the blatant lies and forgeries in terrorist propaganda and correct any misinformation around by way at some point and in some place. One may also say that ‘a few striking videos about/ from formers, victims and otherwise powerful voices are nice to have’ for practitioners, just in case there is some time in a suitable setting, or a particular impulse could be given within such intervention especially if a secure offline context is provided. Also, such films and case stories may under certain precautions ‘be of great value as means of general education, designed to raise the population's awareness and building a resilient society’.

Hence, there is nothing wrong with such carefully calibrated media strategies; as long as we are honest about the very narrow limits of any internet initiative and as long as we don't promote counter narratives as an all-encompassing miracle tool of CVE – which it is not and which it cannot be for principle reasons (to be elaborated further down). Because all which videos can do here – and this is no little contribution – is support general education and societal resilience. They, however, should not be presented as counter terrorism or prevent violent extremism measure – and most certainly not as their center piece. Also, these videos should probably not be budgeted through CT/ PVE funding streams because if they are this then suggests that they are understood to be able to do extremism prevent and counter

terrorism work. Rather, it seems that such video production belongs into contexts of education material production and/or journalism.

If we suggest otherwise we would convey an erroneous and potentially detrimental picture about what violent extremism is and what it takes to prevent and respond to it. Plus, this erroneous picture would be relayed not only to policy makers, which is problematic enough, but also to the general public which is all the more unfortunate since a well-informed and resilient population is key in any strategy of preventing violent extremism. In view of supporting such resilient population(s) it would be most unhelpful if we were to continue suggesting that we first and foremost need counter narrative videos in the internet in order to successfully defuse risks with our most endangered young people.

By contrast, what is almost never said by politicians, policy makers and related institutes: We need practitioners, we need skilled mentors and disengagement facilitators who are trained to conduct sustainable interventions in appropriate settings on the level of a trust-based work relationships. We need talented social workers, mental health practitioners, youth workers – hundreds of them, dedicated to our most at-risk young people. And we need experienced trainers for relevant staff (like teachers, health care, preschool, police/ prison etc.). In a word, we need human resource, real people; because all successful disengagement/ prevent work requires face-to-face, interpersonal settings, situated in safe offline spaces. Why is this so? Disengagement/ rehabilitation – also targeted prevent/ distancing processes – amount to a change of personality which is quite complex and, for example, compares almost to psychotherapy (and can in some respect be even more complicated than psychotherapy). Now, nobody does psychotherapy through the internet and by watching (counter) narratives of any sort – for evident reasons, which are as valid with disengagement interventions.

Yet, not only is the counter narrative ideology a fallacy; it seems to be an astonishingly robust one. In fact, many proponents of countering – and of launching counter narrative video campaigns in the internet – appear not too interested in any evidence which may raise doubts about the effectiveness of the approach. There almost appears to be a communicational blockage between face-to-face prevent/ disengagement workers and video producers. In fact, the discourse on counter narratives does not always seem to be totally honest. While some proponents admit in discussions that ‘the videos can only be one percent of the effort’ – being only a trigger and an opener for more profound offline face-to-face work –, in presentations to policy makers it is suggested, mostly implicitly, that the videos themselves do the job or else are the most important part of it. Hence, counter narrative producers, by and large, seem intent to just go on with this agenda.

This striking robustness of the counter narrative ideology will be further discussed at the end of this paper in light of a hypothesis which regards issues of “industrialization of PVE work” – and will also refer to my second contribution to this volume with the title: “ ‘Its lobbying, stupid!’ – the industrialization of PVE as ‘added damage’ through increase of funding”.

xxx Some misconceptions around so-called “counter narratives” and “counter-radicalisation” – learning from extremists?

When looking at the current counter narrative discourses from the perspective of first-line practitioners and from pertaining practice research, various misunderstandings and misconceptions become visible which characterize these discourses’ underlying assumptions about the nature of disengagement and distancing processes and about what media products can do in this.

In the first years of these discourses a rather carefree attitude prevailed which regards it as more or less self-evident how a counter narrative or testimonial would have to look like. It often seemed to be assumed that basically any audio-visual and/or interview material about issues of extremism would do, as long as it stems from a “credible source” (of one of the major stakeholder groups, as former extremists, victims, family, social work practitioners etc.) and is an “authentic” and “emotional” self-expression of the person – and as long as one knows where to place it in the internet and social media. This, of course leaves open all more specific questions of how to actually create (and measure) credibility, authenticity and emotion – which is all the more important since our target group is very difficult to reach out to.

Another misperception which often accompanies the above and is quite frequent among professionals who work in online counter-extremism activities, is of a methodological – and epistemological – sort: It is often stated that what needs to be done first and foremost is to closely analyze how extremists’ internet sites work and how online radicalization and social media recruitment operate. The implication here generally is that such insights would then teach us without further ado how to intervene, i.e. how to support disengagement/ deradicalisation and distancing processes and how to produce so-called “counter-narratives” which can then be employed in the internet for this purpose.

For sure, it is certainly not unimportant to know what goes on in extremists’ social media and analyze their website formats. As said above, it is certainly not a mistake to point out propaganda lies and correct false statements which are put onto the internet by extremist organizations. But such analysis will not automatically tell us anything significant about how to do support disengagement/ rehabilitation work (deradicalization) or even how to do impactful targeted prevention with vulnerable young people – and whether and how media can play a role in this at all.

Moreover, when looking at some of these assumptions more closely one realizes a worrisome implication: It is sometimes assumed that not only should we analyze extremists’ websites but we should learn from them in the sense that we use this knowledge to counter-campaign against them – and do this ‘better than they do’. Here the base idea seems to be that deradicalizing or preventive media products need to have the same structure and strength of appeal and be as professional and high quality as the extremists’ products themselves, just the other way around, supporting the contrary attitudes (of democracy, pluralism, diversity etc.). In other words, it is implied that we should copy the violent extremists in their method but

then turn around the objective and “counter-radicalize” the audience, as if were radicalize them in the opposite direction.

Certainly, not very many colleagues may be likely to eventually follow through with such logic and fully subscribe to “counter-radicalization” once the implications of such countering have become more evident during actual practice experiences. Yet, the somewhat ambiguous term “counter-radicalization” or “counter-campaigning” – possibly indicating and furthering a strategy of radicalizing/ campaigning the other way around – seems widespread and generally taken to be a logical and even self-evident response to violent extremism. Probably the only group of professionals who seems rather immune to embarking on such counter-radicalization logic is offline field practitioners who work directly with the young people in face-to-face settings. Because they have often made the experience that not much is gained if one manages to “turn around” a young person in this way.

Also, these field practitioners are acutely aware of one key principle of their challenging work: that one must never use approaches which radicalizers use – and thus give way to the impulse to compete with radicalizers on their own grounds. Because then our impact would be very close to what radicalizers impact is – which is “brainwashing”, “manipulating”, “turning them around” etc. Not to mention that such “counter-radicalizing” approach does not correspond with what has been found to be the methodological guidelines of good-practice in disengagement/ rehabilitation (deradicalisation) – which comes down to open-process, non-directive, narrative, face-to-face, relationship and trust based etc. work (see xx). Hence, focusing our attention on trying to analyze extremists’ on-line contents with the unspoken or expressed intent to possibly even copy and learn from them, puts us at risk of getting into a methodological and ethical deadlock.

xxx The countering ideology – a form of reciprocal self-radicalization

The counter-radicalization fallacy leads us to a closely related and even more widespread misconception about what can and cannot be done through on-line interventions; and this, unfortunately, also implies gross misconceptions about how disengagement/ deradicalisation works to begin with, even in the offline domain, and which preconditions and settings are required for doing effective and sustainable work in this area: Many strategy papers of policy making around on-line approaches start from the key assumption that what needs to be done most urgently in the face of extremist internet material, is: to “counter” it, i.e. to level “counter-arguments”, create “counter-narratives”, produce “counter”-testimonials and/or engage in systematic “counter-messaging” against what is put out by extremists’ websites and social media.

The underlying assumption here is that the force of extremist recruitment via internet is derived mostly from “messages”, “arguments”, and (fabricated) evidence – and that countering these messages is thus the prime way to respond. This then implies a largely content-oriented, rational and cognitive approach which uses the same medium (videos, messages etc.) in order to challenge, contest, contradict etc. these “arguments” and

“messages” on a rational and intellectual level. Sometimes the importance of feelings is duly conceded in principle. However, such concession usually doesn’t change the overall cognitive paradigm of how CVE is understood – being something that first and foremost requires countering/ counter-arguing as a response.

What further complicates matters around this countering ideology – and causes obstacles for any successful response to violent extremism: The appeals of countering are typically expressed in a quite combative and almost aggressive and belligerent fashion. For example, one much quoted – and characteristic – statement issued by the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF) demands that we “combat” and “counter” and that we therefore need to produce “counter-narratives” which promote “an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative”.²

Listening in depth to these pleads to “combat”, “counter”, “dismantle” (“every dimension”) etc. makes us realize how intrinsically aggressive these statements really are – and thus how radicalising the impact will which they eventually have. These pleads seem to be emotionally charged reactions – hence ‘reactionary’ impulses – rather than viable strategies of response; almost like ‘adolescent reactions to an adult problem’, as one anonymous critic from the US American political debate once had it. Such ‘reactionary’ impulses may well be understood as proof of how much violent extremism tends to trigger a peculiar sort of reciprocal self-radicalization with those who try to prevent and respond to it. Because these responders, lacking sufficient resilience, seem to inadvertently get entangled in an attitude of ‘aggressive counterism’ which has quite some extremist energy itself and – being fixated on “combating”, “countering”, “dismantling” – is little apt to generate sustainable solutions.

Viewing these ‘reactionary’ impulses of ‘counterism’ in more detail also makes us realize how important it is – and what it really means – to build resilience. Because if even professional policy making isn’t more resilient than this and gets into counterism that easily, how could we expect the media and the general population to be up to the task and act skilfully as good first responders. (How important and indispensable the media and the populace are as actors in responding to violent extremism, we will come back to discussing further down.)

Moreover, taking these impulses of reciprocal self-radicalization into account makes us better understand what was stated above in the introduction with regard to the practitioners’/ mentors’ perspective: First-line practitioners who have been working directly, face-to-face with our at-risk young people in disengagement/ rehabilitation and prevention settings clearly said: ‘You must not counter, or else you will fail. Impactful practice much rather builds than counters.’

2 Stated by the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF), Omar Ashour: Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy. (Perspectives On Terrorism, Vol. 8., No. 6, 2010); <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/128/html>; accessed April 19, 2013.

xxx The no-countering principle of good-practice deradicalisation interventions

But why exactly is it that countering does not work at all with radicalized young people? Practitioners basically give two reasons: One being that violent extremism in reality is an essentially emotional, biographical, and psychodynamic subject matter, which is misunderstood if one tackles it primarily in a cognitive manner by posing intellectual or ideological challenges. And as second reason why countering doesn't work they point us to the fact that radicalized people and violent extremists feed on being countered. They crave to be contested, challenged and fought against. And they thrive to be put into a counter position from where they can employ their trained rhetoric of ready-made arguments – and can also all the more rightfully assume the gesture of the unjustly persecuted truth-bearers who are discriminated against by the whole world and the “system”, that wants to cover up and deny their truth. This is why professional radicalizers sometimes even actively provoke situations in which they are countered. Hence, countering rather supports extremism than mitigate it.

Conversely, radicalizers and recruited persons are much less confident and tend to feel awkward and shaky when they are not contested/ countered – and when they find themselves in a situation in which somebody manages to talk to them on a human level and thus offers exchange on a truly narrative level (and not only a counter argument). In fact, it is precisely this – non-countering – mode of interaction which is capable of facilitating a process of disengagement.

Therefore, the very first lesson that any social worker and first-line deradicalization practitioner throughout Europe has unfailingly learned is: You should not counter! You should not argue with a radicalized person! For, if you approach this particular sector of our young people by countering them you will fail in no time – and won't have any positive effect. Hence, practitioners (throughout the RAN working groups on Derad and Prevent and similar fora) have come to a quite unanimous conclusion on this point: There is a no-countering principle that applies to good-practice disengagement/ deradicalisation interventions: Any approach that puts a premium on “countering”, “counter-arguing”, and/or “dismantling” the extremists' contestations and beliefs will most likely be unsuccessful. Not only will these approaches fail, they are also likely to backfire and propel radicalization – and they do so already in the domain of direct inter-personal work. Now, needless to say, what doesn't even work in settings of direct inter-personal work will certainly not work in the online domain.

To be sure, as already indicated above, there are certain moments and ways in which practitioners may and should confront issues (just as false statements and fabricated evidence in the internet should be confronted and exposed at some point and in some place).³ This, however, will only be doable with any expectation of success if a stable and trustful work relationship has been established between the practitioners/ facilitators and the clients. Also, these carefully placed confrontational moves (within a direct work relationship) are not to be

3 This is not to say that there is no place for any element of confrontation, ideological issues and arguments in good-practice intervention altogether; see Guidelines paper, footnote 7.

confused with a general attitude of countering – via online videos/ messages, which are an entirely different medium than direct interpersonal work in a secure and confidential off-line space. Confronting and countering are thus conceptualized as quite different activities.

The observation that it is futile – and methodologically ill-advised – to counter an extremist is actually quite intuitive and commonsensical. It thus is quite surprising that policy making had failed to realize this right away. We just need to ask ourselves how it was when we last spoke to a violent extremist person – or to anyone who seemed obsessed with an idea or was fixated on a certain view of the world. Was this person very open to be countered and argued against? Did we get anywhere with our arguing? Or were we all frustrated and annoyed afterwards? And did this person, in turn, seemed much more pleased with the encounter than we were? These questions may help to remind us of the quite commonsensical experience that the more fixated/ extremist a person is in his/her mindset the less impact will any of our countering, reasoning, and arguing have. (Another key question would ask whether there maybe was anything other than arguing which proved more helpful – which will be discussed further down).

To give one empirical example of such intuitive and commonsensical insight in the futility of countering and video campaigning – and underline how this insight can bring about most favorable results: As is well known through wide international media coverage, the Danish city of Aarhus systematically invested in a multifaceted strategy of inter-agency prevention (including intelligence) which put the main emphasis on direct inter-personal communication and mentoring (and on avoiding criminalization of travel). Along these lines Aarhus has develop by far the most successful approach throughout Europe: It managed to fix its foreign fighter problem in no time, lowering the number of Syrian travelers from 30 in 2013 to one traveler in 2014. Aarhus did a lot and employed many different factors including local population awareness raising and family assistance work – but it had no internet or media component in its approach.

In a similar vein, looking at two decades of preventing right-wing violent extremism since the mid 1990s in Germany suggests a similar conclusion. Dozens of high-quality model projects and initiatives were developed (on an annual budget of roughly 25 – 30 million since the year 2000). None of the many project designers ever considered it promising to do a counter narrative project (while international neo-Nazi and rightwing extremist propaganda in internet and social media is massive).

Both in Aarhus and Germany the long experience in preventing violent extremism, crime and other social risks may have produced a sharp awareness of the need to develop human resource and work in direct interpersonal settings (mentoring, therapy) – and thus resist the temptation to invest in technical solutions or “counter messaging machineries” and the like.

All the more perplexing is the fact that international policy making in CVE had instantly failed – and is still largely failing – to arrive at this quite intuitive insight and thus missed out on realizing the no-countering principle of successful CVE work (which practitioners have been informing about continuously). This failure cannot sufficiently be explained without recognizing the above mentioned dynamic of reciprocal self-radicalization which violent

extremism tends to induce – thus triggering ‘reactionary’ impulses of “combating”, “countering”, “dismantling” etc. and seducing us to give ‘adolescent reactions to an adult problem’ which in the end makes any environment even more conducive to violent extremism. This once again underlines how important it is to build societal resilience – especially with those actors and target groups (in and outside of governmental administrations) which are not at-risk of being recruited but may, as anyone, be vulnerable to reciprocal radicalisation.

This also makes clear how important it is that we decidedly steer away from the current counter narrative rhetoric. If we don’t manage to correct the erroneous ideology of countering we would unfortunately continue to convey a false and potentially detrimental picture about what violent extremism is and what it takes to prevent and respond to it. Moreover, as mentioned already in the introduction, this false picture would be communicated not only to policy makers, which is problematic enough, but also to the general public. This, however, would be all the more unfortunate since we need a well-informed population which is both cognisant about and resilient to violent extremism – and may also act as capable first-responders. Society is key in all matters of preventing violent extremism. For, if society at large is not resilient enough, a vicious circle of reciprocal radicalisation may set in which has the potential of subverting any human rights based civil society in the long run.

Therefore, just imagine teachers, parents, neighbours absorbing what is presented as counter messages and counter arguments and then walk up to the young people of their concern and begin to act as counter messaging agents – or a counter narrative activists. Many unfruitful clashes and tensions are bound to come up – which would further boost radicalization more than anything else. Plus, not only would this not work but backfire and thus create even more radicalisation, it would also burn out our engaged citizens; because burn-out and disenchantment is the inevitable consequences of the eventually most frustrating business of countering someone who doesn’t come to senses anyhow but in fact feeds on the countering itself.

Or even worse, imagine our liberal, democratic and human rights abiding young people were to be put into this unfortunate position of being a counter messenger agents; then you have two fractions of our young people being pitted against each other. It would be most irresponsible to knowingly support such delegation of countering activity towards young people.

xxx The results of practitioner exchange among and between the RAN working groups

To explain this no-countering principle in more detail – while also looking at how the different working groups of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) had set out in their efforts when the RAN was inaugurated in 2011, and how their base assumptions and approaches have evolved since then through the experiences they collected in the process of RAN activities: At that time three RAN working groups were concerned with issues of “counter narratives”: the RAN working group on Internet and Social Media (RAN@), the

working group on Voice of Victims of Terrorism (VVT), and the group on Deradicalisation/ disengagement and rehabilitation (RAN Derad) which in many respects overlaps and coincides with RAN Prevent.

The RAN working group on Internet and Social Media (RAN@), at that time, rightly stressed that “the term 'counter-narrative' has come to be used in relation to a very wide range of activities” and that it is necessary to distinguish “between these different activities, because they require different approaches in terms of messages, messengers, tactics, partnerships ...”. The group therefore suggested to conceptualize a “spectrum”. However, RAN@ called this spectrum a “counter-narrative spectrum” thus stressing the element of *countering* very much. This counter-narrative spectrum was then conceptualized to consist of three strategies: (1) “alternative narratives”, which “put forward a positive story about social values such as tolerance, openness, freedom, democracy”, then (2) “government strategic communications” about “what government is doing, refut[ing] misinformation, and seek[ing] to forge (!) relationships with key constituencies and audiences” and finally (3) “counter-narratives ... that directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour.”⁴ Also, this spectrum’s audience/ target groups had focused on “online extremist groups” and thus assumed that deradicalisation of violent extremist persons could and should be a key dimension of counter narrative employment in the internet and social media.

Now, experienced first-line practitioners who had been working directly – face-to-face – with the young people of concern in disengagement (deradicalization) and targeted prevention since almost two decades and who were congregated in RAN Derad and RAN Prevent took issue with this stance. These first-line practitioners had always underlined that all three kinds of media products/ narratives are unlikely to have any positive effect on their clients – and may even exacerbate things. They also emphasized that countering is an ill-fated strategy to begin with which doesn’t work and tends to burn out activists. For sure, these practitioners conceded that video materials and the internet may be helpful in areas of awareness raising and resilience building among the general population; they may also be suitable in educational settings with young people who are *not* at risk of becoming fascinated by and being recruited into violent extremism(s) – but who may rather become a part of the solution in that they may be trained as skilled first responders. But, these practitioners stipulated that with those young people who are either generally vulnerable or acutely at-risk or even already recruited into violent extremist milieus and subcultures, such video materials will not be successful at all.

As was already highlighted above, the explanations given by the practitioners were that any practice areas of disengagement (deradicalisation) and targeted prevention work, being of an essentially emotional, biographical, psychodynamic and relational nature (and should therefore not be misunderstood as cognitive/ ideological issues), requires face-to-face, interpersonal settings. These settings would need to be situated in safe offline spaces and comprise physically present persons (as opposed to internet users). It also was mentioned that

4 Proposed Policy Recommendations for the RAN High Level Conference in 2012, by the RAN Working Group Social Media and Internet, and the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (in cooperation with Google Ideas); quoted in March 2013.

such setting basically resembles psychotherapy, an area of interpersonal activity in which it is entirely self-understood that one can't possibly practice it through the internet by watching (counter) narratives of any sort.

In the beginning of this process of methodological reflection the practitioners from RAN Derad and Prevent have mostly insisted on the more evident point, namely that videos and the internet are, above all, not suitable – and possibly counter-productive – for disengagement (deradicalisation) interventions. Only somewhat later has it become clear that prevention, too, functions pretty much along the same methodological lines as disengagement (deradicalisation).⁵ Hence, it was recognized that what is working well in disengagement is also working well in prevention – and vice versa with respect to what does not work well. Within the field of prevention work this realization has also contributed the insight, among others, that many prevent programs have been too intellectual and cognitive in their approach.

“Prevention” was thus increasingly understood as “targeted prevention” which specifically focuses on particular groups of young people which are, for specific reasons, considered vulnerable, susceptible, at-risk etc. – and not on youth in general. For it would be inappropriate to launch “prevention” strategies while implying that the totality of the young people is somehow at risk and vulnerable of being radicalized (since many young people are not – and, in fact, show vast potentials to become part of the solution rather than being a general problem). Hence, any initiative which focuses on the younger generations in general would nowadays rather be called “resilience building” or “awareness raising”.

The RAN working group Voice of the Victims of Terrorism (VVT) seems to have gone a similar way. RAN VVT first set out to develop settings and products in which survivors of terrorist attacks were engaged in producing interviews and “testimonials” which were assumed to be helpful in deradicalising young people who have gone down the road of violent extremist recruitment and criminal activity. During the exchange and discussion with practitioners from all RAN working groups RAN VVT then revisited its base assumptions to the effect that victim/ survivor testimonials may not be used in disengagement (deradicalisation) intervention for various reasons (which will be spelled out in more detail further down). Rather their scope of employment would be what was then called “prevention” – and what nowadays is increasingly viewed as “resilience building” and “awareness raising”.

⁵ Already in 2013 RAN@ partly anticipate some conceptual shift when it realized the limits of argumentation and persuasion: “Evidence may not achieve [much]” since it “can always be refuted and countered” – which indeed should make us think twice about “countering” altogether. The group also cautioned that “counter-narratives are not about winning the argument or winning over the target audience” but should much rather aim at a “gradual movement in the right direction”. Moreover, it was stated that an “appeal to human emotions” is needed. However, it is left unclear exactly how an effective and sustainable emotional appeal could be introduced by video input – while also avoiding the risks of sensationalism and a human touch style that might easily alienate the target group and raises questions in pedagogical respect. It was also left unclear how an emotional approach and a “gradual movement” of personal change could be set in motion – with an intervention strategy that is mostly goes through “information”, “ideology, logic, fact”. In particular it is unclear how a more subtle, careful and “gradual” mode of countering (which doesn't aim at persuading) would work in practice and how it could avoid to be perceived as being just a more crafty and manipulative sort of argumentation – which eventually aims at brainwashing.

As a consequence, RAN participants have gradually come to rethink the very base structure of the RAN and re-conceptualize the composition of its working groups (defining work fields, target groups, methods, practitioner types, and other field specific criteria) as it was put together in 2011 upon the RAN's inauguration. During this process of collecting and reconsidering their field experiences together with many dozens of colleagues in numerous RAN workshops, some RAN practitioners have come to the conclusion that the RAN working group on Derad and the one on Prevent really belong together. Because these two RAN sections seem to have comprised roughly the same kind of practitioners who have worked in both fields and with similar target groups (the spectrum of which spans from targeted prevention to disengagement/ deradicalisation) and follow the same methodological principles – one of them being that these interventions, first of all, need to be direct and inter-personal (i.e. offline) while media productions can play only a little if at all any role in this.

On the other hand it increasingly appeared that one working group was missing. This group would focus more on one sort of colleagues (and their work fields) who were thus far part of RAN Prevent but didn't really mix too well with those practitioners who were engaged in targeted prevention and disengagement. These colleagues are working in schools and educational institutions. They are teaching pupils and students of different sorts and ages – ranging from pre-school, elementary to secondary school, also young adult vocational or pre-vocational training. Aside of teaching certain subjects these colleagues are also engaged in educating their pupils/ students in terms of citizenship, life skills and possibly also resilience, awareness and first responder skills. As educational personnel they would also reach out to the general public on certain occasions.

Hence, it was felt by some that a working group RAN Education and Resilience Building could better cater to these colleagues' needs which arise in educational settings and organizational contexts and require specific methods and tools. A natural component of RAN Education/ Resilience would be the methods/ tools which are designed for the internet and social media – as they are worked on by RAN@ and RAN VVT. Because video products, interviews and testimonials are a classical tool of educational and awareness raising initiatives. Schools and educational/ vocational training institutions (and their settings/ class rooms) seem to be the most logical places where media methods/ tools are employed – while they evidently are of only little use and have many risks in targeted prevention and disengagement. Hence, teachers and tool producers would profit greatly and in mutual ways when being in one work context when working on common pedagogical objectives very often as, for instance, building 'digital literacy' and encourage 'media and critical thinking skills'. Aside of the classical settings of teaching the general public could also profit from these tools in terms of its resilience and first responder capacities (since teachers occasionally also address the general public).

Interestingly, this new conceptualization of prevention/ deradicalisation on the one hand and education/ resilience building on the other reflects how German academic research on issues of violent extremism and prevention had structured the subject matter already from the onset. This research distinguishes three levels of prevention with three gradually different, yet comparable target groups. These levels of activity are aimed at (1) slightly radicalized youth who show signs of violent extremism in some of their attitudes, (2) radicalized young people

who have acquired a violent extremist world view but are not (yet) acting upon it, and (3) strongly radicalized or violent persons who have already committed violent extremist acts and may be imprisoned.⁶ All other activities which engage general population or focus broadly at young people would not be considered to be part of prevention but would rather be referred to as educational or awareness raising initiatives – which intend to strengthen societal resilience.

However, aside of being backed by sound academic research, what some RAN practitioners appreciate most about such reconceptualization of the RAN working group structure is the fact that it would also send an important message to the global CVE community. It would signal a clear awareness that prevention and disengagement are an issue of humanistic/human engagement and human resource which needs to be embedded in direct interpersonal work settings and take place in safe and confidential spaces – and thus cannot be rolled out by technical means as media production initiative. These RAN practitioners feel strongly that Europe and the RAN would thus prove its quality by decidedly not following a current discourse.

xxx First conclusions, empirical evidence – and attached dilemmas

Coming back from here to the issue of counter narratives – or, to put it more widely, to media tool development for interventions responding to violent extremism – there are two key conclusions which follow from these recent insights into the field of prevent and disengagement interventions:

(1) Counter narrative video productions are unhelpful in targeted prevention and disengagement of violent extremism. The generally prevalent counter narrative ideology reflects a conceptual fallacy of quite some magnitude. Yet, the notion that if the internet is a major part of the problem it also will and must be part of the solution, is still most widespread, though it is erroneous. Hence, given these still current discourses in policy making, video production seems massively overrated and over-financed. On the other hand, relationship based face-to-face interventions seem underrated, under-recognized and under-funded.

This conclusion is strikingly reconfirmed by recent empirical findings which indicate that counter narrative media products in the internet do not even reach those target groups which they have expressly been designed for. (Entirely different from this is the methodological question of whether these videos could possibly have any positive effect if target group persons were to be confronted with them.) In December 2014, the Soufan Group's did the first solid inquiry on this question and looked at the 17,676 followers of the highly radicalizing aka@ShamiWitness account (by Mehdi Masroor Biswas, an account which has meanwhile

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Kurt Möller & Nils Schuhmacher: Soziale und pädagogische Arbeit mit rechtsextrem affinen Jugendlichen – Akteure, Projekte, Ansätze und Handlungsfelder, Publisher: Kontaktstelle BIKnetz, Juni 2014, http://www.biknetz.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Wissen/Wissensdatenbank/Langfassung_Expertise_Praxis.pdf

been closed down) and the 19,275 followers of the U.S. State Department's counter-messaging social media program called "Think Again Turn Away" (using the Twitter account @ThinkAgain_DOS) which by many criteria is a high-end and well thought through online counter narrative tool. As result the inquiry had determined: Among these roughly 37K users there was only a 2 % overlap and "and a large number of those were journalists or academics".

The analysts concluded that the two circles of followers basically do not intersect. "This is understandable since it is unlikely that vulnerable people feeling disaffected or disconnected from society would choose to follow an openly government-run social media account."⁷ The field practitioners from RAN Derad/ Prevent and similar fora would go beyond this conclusion and add the assumption that even if one could expose individuals from the main client audiences to these educational and informational video productions, this approach would not work regardless of who is figuring as producer. Hence, videos of this kind, or indeed any internet based videos, would not be able to have a positive impact on them (for psychological reasons that are elaborated in more depth in "Do we really need 'counter narratives'? And what would that be anyway?"; <http://cultures-interactive.de/publikationen-en.html>).

Interestingly, in another Intelligence Briefing (Intelbrief) of the Soufan Group network (which reported on the White House Summit on CVE, in Feb. 2015) the authors made a more principle remark about CVE policy making – which however seems to apply to media/ internet policies in particular. The authors do not only caution any unwarranted hopes and expectations about the internet as factor of deradicalisation. They also state in a more general perspective on current CVE discourses: "What briefs well in presentations to policy-makers likely won't work with the actual people who need the message". This seems to indicate that practitioners and field experts' doubts not only about online tools but also about other, yet unspecified issues of responding to violent extremism have been around for quite some time – but don't seem to be able the get heard by policy makers. There seems to be a curious communication lag between practitioners and policy makers – which also potentially entails a quality control lag. I will come back to this issue further down towards the end of the article, as I will also pick up the similar theme from the introduction above which referred to the considerable "robustness (of the) counter narrative ideology a fallacy".

(2) The second key conclusion is of a more general nature: The practitioner discourse within and beyond the RAN seems to indicate that what has so far been done in "prevention" (and disengagement) was based on approaches which have been too cognitive, intellectual, historical and information based, also ideological in some cases (and being based "ideology, logic, fact") – and have not sufficiently taking into account the emotional/ affective, psychodynamic, biographical, and familial/ intergenerational aspects of becoming violent extremist. Even for those interventions which are situated in more general educational contexts and aim at raising awareness and strengthening resilience (which may well be

7 Countering Online Extremism. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-extremism-online/>. The Soufan Group, September 2014, quoted March 2015.

supported by large scale media interventions) the question was raised if their due emphasis on informational and cognitive input does not also need to be complemented more by means/methods that aim at the emotional and narrative-biographical aspects.

These key conclusions (i.e.: counter narratives do not work, even countering as such does not work, and already “prevention” let alone disengagement has been done in too cognitive/intellectual ways) came as quite a surprise for many. Most surprising they were and still are for policy makers in the area of media and prevention strategies who grew accustomed to entirely different discourses. Yet, these conclusions seem to call for a complete turn-around in some lines of activities; and the called-for new strategies seem to need to be entirely dissimilar from any strategies of countering/ arguing and from working on the level of “ideology, logic, fact”. Understandably, the question of ‘What can we do at all’ came up and posed an unsettling challenge.

In one practical respect this question is further complicated by the fact that both media activists and prevent practitioners most often come from backgrounds of civic education, democracy pedagogy or political activism. They have been working primarily in educational settings or were engaged in political awareness raising and campaigning. For them the no-countering principle may seem almost paradoxical – or at least impracticable. These practitioners tend to feel: “If we may not be teachers, instructors, and educators anymore, and if we thus may not counter contestations, bring up counter arguments, support them by evidence, correct misinformation, expose fabrication, in a word employ ‘ideology, logic, fact’ – what else could we possibly be doing? What is left, as an approach, if we refrain from differentiating right from wrong and true from false and enlighten the public and particular student groups?”

Practitioners in the area of internet/media production and journalism may feel this way even stronger because the tradition of education and enlightenment – and political activism/resistance – is deeply ingrained in media and journalism work. Also, these colleagues generally have less direct contact and experience with persons of the key client groups than prevent workers, which may make it even more difficult to envisage what an alternative method could be – and how a no-countering approach would work.

xxx What then is the alternative to countering? – And what is a narrative anyway?

Where could we expect to get some answers and further assistance if we feel that the task of going beyond countering and arguments – and thus not focusing on “ideology, logic, fact” – leaves us greatly helpless? A most useful source of methodological inspiration lies in the empirical good-practice research which has recently been undertaken with various successful (offline) disengagement/ rehabilitation interventions throughout Europe. After all, this source had thankfully alerted us early on that countering (messages, ideology etc.) and leveling argumentations is largely ineffective and potentially detrimental in these processes. In any event, empirical good-practice research will certainly be a more appropriate source than the

analysis of extremists' internet and media campaigns – while it is not unimportant, indeed, but could not really tell us much about how to prevent and facilitate disengagement.

Therefore, one way of giving a brief answer to the question of what the alternative to countering/ arguing is, may lie in a short abstract of the results of this research⁸: Successful approaches to disengagement (deradicalization) and targeted prevention have been found to be open-process, relational/ interpersonal, and exploratory interventions that work in non-directive and non-argumentative ways, be based on trust, confidentiality, voluntary involvement, incremental buy-in and commitment, and may thus also engage in posing personal challenges.

Moreover, these good-practice approaches focus on the development of personal story-telling and emotional intelligence (hence much like counselling/ psychotherapy). They seem to unfold best within group settings and generally touch upon biographical, familial/ intergenerational, gender-related and power issues/ experiences and combine both accepting and confrontational modes of interaction. On occasion they touch upon or aim at political and religious issues, include youth cultural and peer education methods, sometimes also work with fictional media narratives and bring in representatives of family, community and civil society as far as possible. Such interventions are delivered by skilled, specially-trained non-governmental practitioners who have license to act independently within and across statutory institutions and are proactively assisted in their interventions by the institutional staff. Finally, these good-practice approaches are accompanied by state-of-the-art quality assurance and supervision.

For sure, there also is a very short and simple way of conveying what is stated by this most exhaustive, yet quite dense description of good-practice principles in prevention and disengagement interventions. Because one of these principles has a key importance among the others. Put in one phrase, good practice disengagement (deradicalization) interventions are *narrative* – hence they follow the principles of narrative interaction.⁹ What does this mean?

Narrativity, here, is understood in its strictly non-metaphorical sense – and is based on a consensual shorthand definition drawn from social sciences, linguistics and interdisciplinary narratology, including psychology/ psychotherapy.¹⁰ A narrative is thus defined as an activity in which an individual narrator/ protagonist recounts first-hand experiences and acts which

8 For a full presentation of the research results see reference in footnote 7.

9 The narrative principle and the Declaration..xx

10 Angus, Lynne E. / John McLeod (ed.). *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy. Practice, Theory and Research*. London: SAGE-Publications 2004. Herman, David et al. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge 2007.

s/he has personally lived-through and/or performed. Such narrative accounts usually relate occurrences and (inter-)actions whereby the narrator/ protagonist subjectively portrays her/himself and other characters and depicts contexts and thereby always refers to a perceived challenge, fate or conflict. Thereby s/he tells in sequential structure how the depicted situation evolved and led up to a certain initiative of her/him or another individual designed to solve the conflict or handle the challenge or fate; s/he will thereby also express certain feelings and evaluations about the outcome and anticipate future action.

Furthermore it is understood that people narrate their experiences out of the wish or need to mentally and interactively work through and make sense of certain experiences they had – and thus get a better grip on what these experiences mean for themselves personally, and possibly also on a more general level. Hence, there is an inherently therapeutic and learning function in narrating one's personal experiences – which is why children most avidly engage in recounting what they have experienced.

Moreover, a narrative in this strict narratological sense always implies co-narrativity, i.e. it is conceived of as a communicative and dialogic process which is, as it were, co-facilitated by the narrator and the listener/ interlocutor – who together, as two identifiable individuals with their subjective perspectives commonly drive an interactive process. Such co-narrative process/ dialogue (even if it unfolds purely mentally in the absence of another person and in a mental account to oneself) is dynamic, entails uncertainties and ambivalences and is thus open-ended in principle. It may therefore always be further supported and developed by questions. Intuitively or methodologically this may be done by way of so-called 'narrative follow-up questions' (developed by social/ biography research) which is particularly helpful if one wants to further propel the process of narratively working through a personal experience. In any event, narrative as interactive process implies a dialectic of ambivalence and clarification.

aaa While narrative questioning as a technique, and as attitude, is not entirely self-evident – and might not emerge naturally in usual conversations at least within Western culture – it can quite easily be acquired as skill through training. To give but one hint here, narrative follow-up questions generally are how-questions. They ask how events/ actions evolved and how they were experienced personally, step by step; or else they aim at expanding the narrative corpus and, for instance, ask which similar events/ experiences the narrator could possibly remember and relate. In turn, co-narrative interaction hardly ever uses why-questions or factual detail questions (which are much used in journalistic interviews and in natural conversations). Because why-questions and factual detail questions tend to lead up to discussing opinions or debating hypotheses about causes and effects. Such discussions and conversations lie on a more abstract level of logical reasoning and tend to fall out of touch with the person's immediate experience of lived-through events and actions.¹¹

11 Since narrative questioning is generally not practiced much in natural conversations, training workshops are available in fields of qualitative social research, especially with biography studies that convey the skill of biographical-narrative interviewing (c.f. Gabriele Rosenthal, footnote 10).

In summary, narratives are most appropriately explained as dialogic processes that aim to explore and express personally lived-through, possibly ambivalent experiences of occurrences/ actions – in a co-narrative modus. Narrators generally attempt to fathom these individual experiences in the greatest possible depth and focus on specific points, conflicts and challenges because they want to work through their experiences and intuitively make use of the inherently therapeutic and learning function of narrating.

It thus turns out: These (dialogic) narratives are precisely what we were looking for at the outset when we asked what the opposite of “countering”/ “discussing”/ “debating” might be – after having realized that such countering does not work well in disengagement (deradicalization) and prevention. Hence, the opposite of countering is: narrative interaction! – which unfolds between at least two individuals in a process of direct communication.

There is yet another important indication for the fact that narrative interaction in the strict sense is the methodological opposite of argumentations, both linguistically and psychologically – and that we thus need narrativity, i.e. facilitate narrative exchange and co-narrative processes in order to facilitate impactful disengagement (deradicalisation) and prevention processes: This indication is the quite simple fact that one cannot counter or argue with a narrative. Since a narrative is understood to be a first-hand account of a lived-through personal experience and since nobody can reasonably claim that what another person expresses as her/his personal experience is wrong, incorrect, invalid etc. implies: that a narrative cannot – and ought not – be countered. A personal narrative is always valid per se – as subjective and ambivalent as it may be. To argue the narrative would doubtlessly be highly inappropriate, disrespectful, most likely even abusive.

Hence, as listener or addressee of a narrative one may feel sorry, worried, confused or delighted or have any other personal reaction while following another person’s narrative and thus hear how s/he experienced a certain event/ action. Or one may have the impression that the narrator is embellishing or smoothing over what had in fact been her/his original experience at the time of the actual events. One may even disbelieve the sincerity and honesty of the narrator and thus doubt the authenticity of the presented narrative. Hence, in all these situations one may have doubts as to how exactly the expressed experiences unfolded and how they were subjectively registered by the person at the time. However, all such doubts may be voiced as questions and thus may propel a co-narrative process which is a key characteristic of narrative interaction.

As listeners/ addressee of such personal narrative we thus may always – and are supposed to – engage in a co-narrative interaction and be co-narrators which may be done by way of narrative follow-up questions, by expressing doubts or even by adding one’s own experiences to it. Or else we may exit from the narrative dialogue if doubts about authenticity and honesty persists in our subjective perspective. But one thing one cannot possibly do: One cannot counter nor argued against a personal narrative about a specific subjective experience, since this is evidently nonsensical and/or unethical. This is also why, from a practitioner’s point of view, there cannot be a counter-narratives really, at least not in the literal sense of the term.

xxx We do need a narrative approach after all

But we also made another important observation here: Not only did we realize that narratives in the proper sense are the very opposite of “countering”. At the same time we recognized that narrative interaction is precisely what we need in order to develop impactful methodologies of interventions.

Moreover, the key realization is that narratives are so impactful and effective in spite of – and even precisely because of – what could be called the intrinsic ambivalence and subjectivity of narratives. One well established truism from interdisciplinary narratology reconfirms: Anyone’s narrative about a personally lived-through event may – and most likely will – involuntarily embellish, smooth over, or rearrange what had in fact been her/his original experience at the time of the actual events. Every narrative has an interest – and if it is only about buttressing one’s own views and coping mechanisms. Any narrator will thus, for whatever reasons, miss out on rendering important aspects of her/his experience in the very moment the event took place – in other words, any narrator will always involuntarily do some kind of propaganda (in an entirely non-political and personal sense). This might even be the case to an extent that the narrator leaves the impression of being inauthentic or presenting contrived renditions. Be it as it may, any such more or less willful or involuntary narrative arrangement – or, as it were, ‘mental postproduction’ or ‘propaganda’ – is considered to be a quite natural and important feature of human story-telling (and memory). While it reflects a principle ambivalence and uncertainty, this essential characteristic of narrativity also attest to the constitutive openness, creativity, and productiveness of narratives and narrative interaction – reflecting the fundamental openness, ambivalence and indeterminacy of human life as such.

In more political terms, the openness, ambivalence, and relativity of narratives may also be perceived as plurality and diversity of subjective meaning(s). This then directly pertains to issues of (de-)radicalization, since all forms of violent extremism have in common that they repudiate plurality and diversity – socially and mentally/ psychologically – as they also repudiate any the openness, ambivalence, and indeterminacy. In turn, distancing oneself from extremism basically means to learn how to acknowledge diversity and ambivalence (and by that become more pro-social and psychologically more stable as person).

It is because of this very openness and ambivalence of narrative exchange that social sciences’ and psychology’s concepts of narration have come to differentiate between “factual accuracy of a narrative” and its “narrative truth(s)”, the latter of which focusing on the emblematic and symbolic significance that a narrative might possess for the narrator personally, vis-à-vis its matter-for-fact correctness. Furthermore, biography studies and narrative psychotherapy distinguish between an “experienced life-history” and a “narrated life-story”, thus defining a space between two poles within which human story-telling may unfold. Made operational in a methodical way these two interactive poles may fuel a dynamic and therapeutic process of mental negotiation – which may well include issues of hatred and violent extremism.

Such processes of narrative exchange which follow an instinctive intention to mentally work through and better understand/ integrate certain personal experiences may also be put in terms of what well-known psychologist and narratologist Roy Schafer once said about psychotherapy, namely that “psychotherapy is nothing else but the telling of the same story all over again, except that after some time you tell the story much better than before”. In other words, the dialogic enhancement and continuous development of the narrative is key in order to achieve its essential function of supporting personal development and change – be this with regard to issue of health or of criminal behavior. A narrative in this more profound understanding is not a static and monological text or video which is put out by means of a technical medium. Rather it is a facilitated process which is interactively shared between a narrator and her/his audience – and deals with personal experiences in a space of semantic ambivalence and diversity. It is for this very reason that it may have therapeutic effects and would always be inherently pro-social and deradicalising. Since wherever there is ambivalence and diversity – linguistically and socially – there cannot be extremism.

These considerations fully corresponds with what has been observed with young people who are vulnerable to violent extremism and other related personal risks: What these young people seem to lack most is the ability to express a narrative and interact on a narrative level, i.e. tell about a personally lived-through experiences and listen to somebody who recounts a personal experience. Hence, the young people tend to lack the base social and linguistic skills of participating in a dialogic process of exchanging personal narratives. Many of them have never had a chance to learn this during childhood and adolescence. Moreover, (co-)narrative interaction reflects relatively complex personal capabilities and requires a quite sensitive process of interaction with other people. This is why the target group of radicalized persons does not easily communicate on this most human level of interaction – and exchange narratives.

Out of these observations, some practitioners that were engaged in RAN and other good-practice research – especially those who follow more intense and long-term psycho-social deradicalisation approaches – agreed that, if asked to put it in one phrase what they aim for in their work, this than can be summarized as developing the clients’ ability to narrate – i.e. support their skills to articulate first-hand lived-through experience and enable them to actively partake in (co-)narrative exchange with others.

Hence, in our attempts to find sustainable solutions to prevent violent extremism we realized that narratives and narrative interventions in the strict sense is what we need. Since narratives – as the opposite of and the long sought for alternative for our futile approaches of countering – can do what arguments cannot: Narratives are able to deradicalize, hence facilitate disengagement processes. Even more generally, narrative interaction has been found to be a means and, in fact, an indispensable precondition for any sort of processes which entail personal change and development. However, facilitating narrativity successfully requires a shared relational process of person to person interaction, as we recognized by looking at good-practice research (which indicated that sustainable approaches are open-process, relational/ interpersonal, exploratory, work in non-directive and non-argumentative ways, are based on trust and confidentiality etc., as outlined above).

This is main reason why narrative interpersonal exchange of this sort cannot be substituted by audio-visual material – and why videos can only play a little role in these kinds of interventions.

xxx Is there such thing as an “extremist narrative” at all?

One further observation about our concept of narrative – and of co-narrative exchange – is worth mentioning here in order to further underline how important it is to be rather precise about what narrativity really means – and not to confuse it with the widespread metaphoric use of the terms “narrative” (meaning “rendition”, “story”, “contestation”, “argument” in a rather vague sense). When we went back to well-founded linguistic and psychological definitions of narrative one other issue became quite clear: What we generally refer to as “radicalizing media narratives” (propaganda videos, recruitment materials etc.) and what then some want to put “counter-narratives” against: these so-called “extremist narratives” are not really narrative at all! On the contrary. Hardly anything is so dissimilar from sharing first-hand, personally lived-through experiences than an extremist video and/or propaganda production. Nothing could be further from engaging in a dialogic and co-narrative process which exchanges follow-up thoughts, questions, and answers and delves into an individual’s biographical memory in a maximally detailed and truthful manner. And it would be a quite worthwhile yet difficult research project to look into face-to-face and group dynamic recruitment situations and determine in more detail how this communication is structured and whether it, too, does not contain any narrative interaction, while it may employ simulations of it.

From what we know today, also from looking at media products, extremists’ communications use quite fixed and prearranged messages and imply a fairly closed and un-dialogic mode of media communication. These are charged with certain emotional appeals or may even contain isolated elements of expressing experience, or simulations of it. Quite frequently this communication seems to present what might look like a story/ narrative in any more loose or metaphoric sense of the term. Rudimentary story patterns may refer to symbolic events, not so much to personal experience – or present a specific tale of history as such. Usually this comes down to a story pattern like: “We carry the truth and the rest of the world has always been against us and tries to destroy us, so that we have to fight for survival and bring the truth to the world ...” etc.

Hence, extremists’ communications are not narratives at all in their linguistic and psychological nature. They generally do not express any significant degrees of personally lived-through experience. Hence, they don’t carry any (co-)narrativity in a linguistic or psychological sense. Rather they seem to be hybrids which consist of motives, myths, some isolated arguments and much emotional charge. In fact, not only are so-called “extremist narratives” not really narrative at all, they actively avoid (co-)narrativity as best they can! For firstly, violent extremists of all denominations have always instinctively known: Narrative exchange deradicalizes which evidently is not in their interest – neither with respect to their

impact on others nor with respect to the steadiness and stability of their own conviction and fervent activities. Intuitively avoiding narrative communication is thus both a strategic imperative and a mental defense mechanism for violent extremist persons – which is why they generally tend to communicate in profoundly anti-narrative ways.

xxx We should never use the term “counter narrative” again

To sum up, both elements of the term “counter narrative” have proven to be unsuitable for this subject matter – as the term itself seems quite misleading and unhelpful for our efforts to respond to violent extremism:

As to the element of “countering” we came to realize – much to the surprise of most civic education and media pedagogy traditions – that a no-countering principle is key for having profound impact in disengagement (deradicalization) and prevention interventions. Hence, any approach that focuses on “countering”, “counter-arguing”, and/or “dismantling” extremists’ contestations will fail and even backfire, i.e. promote radicalization rather than work it through and dissolve it. Moreover, even in more general terms any methodological emphasis on “ideology, logic, fact” and other cognitive factors will not be successful.

As to the second element, the term “narrative”, we have come to realize that violent extremists do not really use narratives in the first place – and, in fact, intuitively avoid and work against narrativity. In most cases extremists would not even be able to easily engage in any activity of expressing a narratives; since the essential human skill to engage in narrative interaction and share and listen to the expression of personal experience is a capacity that tends to be lacking with persons who got onto a life path of violent extremism.

Hence, the term “counter narrative” is a most unfortunate misnomer indeed. What is more, professional discourses on deradicalization and countering, while having gotten accustomed to a merely metaphorical use of the term “narrative”, seem to not be aware of what a narrative really is, which methodological and institutional prerequisite need to be put in place in order to facilitate narrative exchange, and why it is that narrativity proper is really our greatest asset in the difficult endeavor to respond to violent extremism and terrorism. As a result of this absence of awareness about the nature of narratives, it is currently held that narratives could/should be countered (by so-called “counter narratives”), which, however, is nonsensical as such both in linguistic and psychological respects.

Realizing the multitude of conceptual fallacies which the term “counter narrative” seems to be fraught with and recognizing how much the ideology of countering got us onto the wrong path, the most appropriate conclusion for us to draw is: that we stop using this term “counter narrative” altogether. We may rather speak of narrative interventions – which, however, would entail entirely different sorts of methods, settings, and intervention strategies. In fact, never using this term “counter narrative” again and not engaging in counter narrative initiatives

anymore, may thus become the beginning of a better understanding of prevention and lead us to more effective and sustainable methods of intervention.¹²

xxx Terminological errors make for wrong methods – The countering fallacy and cognitive-behavioral approaches of deradicalisation (CBT)

In fact, not only is the term “counter narrative” a misnomer. Even more, it is quite confusing and misleading in methodological respects. For it suggests serious misunderstandings about how deradicalisation may or may not work – and what can and cannot be done via internet and social media. Even beyond the methodological deadlock of the countering fallacy there are numerous negative effects of the current ideology of countering – and rationalizing. To give but one further example: The fact that large areas of prevent work, civic education, resilience building, and also of deradicalization are still mostly informed by strategies of logic, ideology, fact, cognition etc. and thus practice arguing, countering, rectifying, rationalizing etc. is also reflected by the widespread use of cognitive-behavioral training approaches (CBT). This especially holds true where deradicalization is practiced within statutory institutions like prisons and schools. It seems that until quite recently a general CBT logic has governed the whole field of prevention and intervention.

Now, if one looks at cognitive approaches to therapy, counseling, and coaching, they attempt to assist the clients to overcome personal difficulties by identifying and changing “dysfunctional thinking” and/or “maladaptive”, “distorted”, “unrealistic and unhelpful thinking”. This kind of work is done on the level of “thoughts” and “thinking” patterns, and it is assumed that this then has profound and sustainable effects also for the clients’ behavior and emotional responses. To this end the clients are helped to develop skills of “testing beliefs” and “assumptions” and “modifying thoughts”.¹³

Strategies of this sort are bound to operate mostly in the area of ideology, logic, fact, arguments, and cognition. For sure, while the special context of psychotherapy may allow for neutralizing much of the confrontational and antagonizing dynamic of countering, the mode of communication here still remains to be one that above all employs reasoning, thinking, arguments/ counter arguments, etc. and is little informed by co-narrative exchange and relational exchange. The emphasis on cognitive procedures may then also allow for using “computer-based programs [of] CBT techniques to help individuals challenge their patterns and beliefs and replace ‘errors in thinking such as over-generalizing, magnifying negatives,

12 In our EDNA project – European Platform of Deradicalising Narratives – which I planned around the year 2010 and conducted between 2013-14 in the context of EU ISEC funding, I used the term “deradicalising narratives”, which today seems less the fortunate as a term; but it strictly refers to the narration of personal experiences which are modestly recorded with audio devices only and are designed to be one element in an offline setting of interpersonal pedagogic and socio-therapeutic intervention; see <http://derad-narratives.eu>.

13 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_therapy.

minimizing positives and catastrophizing’ with ‘more realistic and effective thoughts, thus decreasing emotional distress and self-defeating behavior’”.¹⁴

It therefore is little surprising that approaches which follow a logic of CBT have not had sustainable effect in deradicalization (and it is yet unclear whether they work in focused psychotherapy). Yes, disengagement interventions do compare to approaches of psychotherapy in principles, but they really only compare to *psychodynamic* approaches of psychotherapy. Moreover, disengagement processes tend to be even more challenging and fragile than psychotherapy, since in psychotherapy a base consensus and trust between client and therapist is a given and a mutual understanding that the intervention is necessary, useful, and promising is existent from the very outset. This base consensus is generally not as evident with violent extremists or hate crime offenders in prison or community settings who may enter the intervention with many doubts and reservations. It simply is not so evident for a violent extremist – or even for any vulnerable person – how it should be necessary, useful, and promising to change ones politically or religiously framed behavior, let alone change one’s world view. Such basic work consensus and trust first needs to be established in an interpersonal relationship and then maintained during the intervention. However, in a CBT logic of intervention this is hardly possible with this target group¹⁵ – as CBT approaches in general are hardly compatible with the good-practice principles of open-process, relational, trust-based and narrative interactions as have been outlined above.

It is thus little surprising what practitioner exchange workshops within RAN and in earlier research settings have concluded: that modularized cognitive-behavioral training programs (CBT) as they have been employed in the early days of British Prevent agendas are ineffective. On the contrary, in the CVE area these programs are likely to unintentionally avert direct (co-)narrative exchange (between facilitators and clients and among clients in the group).

Even more serious is the observation that these approaches, instead of furthering disengagement, tend to evoke obedience and compliance – and promote a Let’s-get-it-over-and-done-with attitude: One more recent study that emphasized the issue of obedience stated: CBT approaches “have been found to generate a ‘finishing line mentality’ with their clients” which is counter-productive for facilitating personal change. One of the interviewed deradicalization practitioner said: “Where this individual has this absolutist ideology, trying to come in with a generic toolkit (of CBT modules; H.W.), you have people that are working a finishing line mentality: ‘If I can

14 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_behavioural_therapy.

15 Moreover, even with cognitive-behavioral forms of psychotherapy “there is still controversy about the degree to which the traditional cognitive elements account for the effects” and whether it is not rather other “behavioral elements such as exposure” and other more relational, experience-based, and narrative elements that brought about these effects (footnote 13). This, in fact, is a general theme within debates about psychotherapy impact research. There too it seems that the positive effects that many short term cognitive, behavioral, and conversational therapy approaches have seem to be due to the on-the-side narrative and relational interaction between client and therapist rather than the cognitive core techniques that the approaches stand for.

get to the end of this, I'll be okay'. So what happens is that they'll sit there, take part in the exercises and put across what they think needs to be put across. What happens is that this only reinforces the absolutist mindset that 'we're living in the abode of war, this, what I'm taking part in is their control mechanism, I have to get through their control mechanism to get through the system'".

This unintentionally supported obedience, in the first instance, is motivated by the client's intention to comply with the explicit – or unspoken – rules of the training exercises themselves, which are possibly further buttressed by incentives. However, obedience may also be induced as a general attitude vis-à-vis institutional and situational powers – which is an especially sensitive issue if the training is conducted within statutory contexts as prison, probation, schools. Yet, obedience and compliance in this sense is the very last thing one should aim for in any disengagement or prevent interventions. For obedience and compliance is how extremist organisations work themselves to a large extent. Plus, obedience gets in the way of building trust and personal relationship towards new kinds of people which, however, is needed when processes of sustainable personal change should be promoted.

Hence, looking at the widespread but ill-advised use of cognitive-behavioral interventions makes it even more evident how erroneous the strategies of countering, intellectualizing, reasoning, re-thinking are, and how much this also applies to counter narrative campaigns – one quite well-known of which is, tellingly, called "Think Again".

xxx Anger management or anti-aggression trainings

There are at least three particular approaches – or strategies – of disengagement (deradicalization) that may claim to represent the methodological opposite of working with cognition/ logic, reasoning, ideology; two of them may even claim to be narrative in a sense which is conceptually more profound, or at least not as evidently erroneous as strategies around the counter narrative term are. One of these approaches uses victim testimonials, another one attempts to employ elements of humor/ ridicule. These will be discussed further down.

The third approach, anger management and anti-aggression training, can be found in specific interventions with violent offenders (who are very often also part of subcultures of group hatred and/or violent extremism). These approaches may at first sight seem to be the very methodological opposite of working with "ideology, logic, fact, [and counter-argument]" – and of cognitive behavioral training programs. Moreover anti-aggression trainings seem to recognize that human emotions and affect are key. For, these trainings focus exclusively on one emotional issue: the handling of affects of anger and aggression. They usually contain various sorts of provocation exercises. There the clients are put into situations in which they are irritated, provoked, or insulted – sometimes even touched – in order to learn to not lose control and not strike out in physical violence. In its most intense variant this approach is

called the Hot Chair Method because the individual clients are placed on a particular chair in the middle of the participants group where they then face the provocations and insult.

Critics have long held that this approach is ineffective and even counter-productive – not only because it does evidently not contain any element of (co-) narrative exchange and in-depth exploration of personally lived-through experience. (However, some more recent anti-aggression trainings have begun to integrate elements of biography work especially about experiences of violence.). Most of all, these anger management trainings are counter-productive and detrimental because the clients learn what they have known all along and what has never been good for them: to suppress and suffocate their feelings – until it eventually will break through anyhow, as tends to be the case with suppression strategies. Moreover, to the degree that the other members of the training group are used to be the provokers the clients learn or deepen their skills of – and taste for – provoking others. However, more or less subtle or drastic forms of provoking others have always been a key factor in the group dynamic of hate crime and extremist violence and should not be additionally trained by any intervention.

xxx The victim testimonial approach

The approach of victims' testimonials seems to be the only variant of what is usually subsumed as counter narratives which may rightly claim to be narrative – at least as far as the speech genre of the interviewee is concerned with whom the video is produced. As opposed to “alternative narratives (positive stories about social values such as tolerance)”, “government strategic communications”, and countering-interventions based on “ideology, logic, fact”, these interviewees – victims/ survivors of acts of terrorism – usually recount first-hand, personally lived-through experiences; and this is mostly the main subject of the testimonial. Hence, these interviewees do what we have come to understand as the essence of narration: They recount (inter-)actions, events, and occurrences; they portray other actors, depict the context – in view of what they have personally experienced at and since the attack. They may also express themselves on how this lead up to certain follow-up actions designed to solve the conflicts or handle the challenges and they may give a personal view on the actual outcome and anticipate future action. Surely, it largely depends on the approach and the questioning techniques of the interviewers whether and to what degree the created testimonial is indeed narrative in the sense that it contains lived-through experiences.

Moreover, the assumption that victim narratives in particular can have a moderating and deradicalizing influence on people that are at-risk of or involved in violent extremism, does not seem unreasonable to begin with. Therefore, the RAN working group Voice of the Victims of Terrorism (VVT) states that victims may “share their experience” and “show on a human level what the consequences are of acts of violent radicalization and terrorism”. The victims can thus most convincingly “create a story that people can relate to”. Hence, RAN VVT concludes that “testimonies of victims are useful tools” on all levels of prevention – “in an educational program for young adults, in a program for prisoners, and in the dissemination of counter narrations on internet and social media”. They may, thus was originally the

assumption, be applied both “with a broader public” to promote resilience and awareness and with “people involved in or attracted by radical or terrorist organizations”¹⁶ – i.e. in deradicalization and hate crime perpetrator rehabilitation.

In any event, under the condition that these assumptions were to prove valid, any moderating or even deradicalizing effect on the audience would be due to the fact that these testimonial is truly (co-)narrative in nature – and not discussing, arguing, educating, promoting etc. As already alluded to above, even victim testimonials are not per se narrative. The degree of narrativity which any testimonial eventually acquires may vary largely. It depends on many variables of the testimonial project’s concept, its actual questioning method, as well as its strategies of post-production and pedagogical embedding in an offline intervention setting. To give but a very simple example, a testimonial in which an interviewee is asked and/or encouraged to put forth thoughts, debate issues of public awareness or even implicitly lobby certain policies is not narrative at all; it is argumentative. However, in all likelihood victims tend to draw from their personal experience and create narratives. Also, testimonial approaches tend to follow methodologies of biography research and oral history and thus apply techniques of narrative follow-up questioning that encourages the interviewee to recount lived-through experiences rather than discuss issues or arguments.

Yet, there is one psychological matter that renders the employment of victim testimonials in deradicalization interventions a quite difficult and maybe even ill-advised strategy: Recent research and intervention practice clearly shows that violent extremist or even only at-risk individuals most often react quite averse and defensive to victim testimonials. This is due to the simple fact that virtually all violent extremists, hate crime perpetrators, and terrorists have been substantially victimized themselves in their life-history in one way or another – be it through violence, abuse, denigration, and/or deprivation/ abandonment.¹⁷ Plus, they are largely unaware of this and/or in strong psychological denial of their biographical victimization issues – and as a consequence instinctively act-out on these victimizations in hateful, denigrating, and victimizing manners against others. In fact, clinical research has shown that perpetrators tend to experience their violent act in a way that is quite similar to a traumatic event in clinical terms (dissociative symptoms, brain activities etc.) and may in fact coincide with the state of mind in the actual victimization experiences.¹⁸

16 http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-vvt/index_en.htm.

17 See: Saskia Lützing (2010). *The Other Side of the Story. A qualitative study of the biographies of extremists and terrorists*. Final project report with supplementary information on field research. German Federal Office of Criminal Police. Research Dept. http://www.bka.de/nn_194552/EN/Publications/Other/other__node.html?__nnn=true.

Ferdinand Sutterlüty (2003). *Gewaltkarrieren. Jugendliche im Kreislauf von Gewalt und Missachtung*. Institut für Sozialforschung. Frankfurt/M.: Campus.

Heitmeyer, W. & Hagan, J. (Hg.) (2002). *Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

To be sure, the fact that extremists and hate crime perpetrators most often react quite averse to victim testimonials does not mean that issues of victimization do not or should not play a major role in disengagement and prevention interventions. On the contrary, they are key. Looking at good-practice research in this area has produced the insight that these interventions will most likely bring up not only issues “of unstable family conditions, dysfunctional parenting, and chronic relational stress at home” but also uncover events and situations of serious “deprivation, denigration” and dehumanization and of “violent victimization”. While the main objective of perpetrator rehabilitation is to deal with the violent offenses and with the often quite cruel acts they committed, touching upon their victimization issues at some point – as far as deemed appropriate and feasible by the clients – has proven to be an important impact factor with many of them.

Most importantly, however, in these kinds of good practice interventions the clients are not – and must not be – systematically confronted with victimization issues, let alone with victim testimonials. Nor is the exchange about their biographical victimization issues at all prescribed by these approaches in the sense of a fixed program module. Since good practice in disengagement is open-process and nondirective in principle (as well as being relational, trust-based, narrative etc.), these issues rather come up at their own pace and may at any moment be calibrated in scale and intensity by the clients themselves, which will always be respected by facilitators and co-clients. However, in any generic victim testimonial approach which is built around the production and screening of testimonials, these methodological precautions and calibrations can hardly be procured. There the victimization issues would always be up-front and figure as the main subject of the intervention. Thus victim testimonials would come up in a more or less scheduled way – which will alienate the clients and aggravate their already agitated and defensive state of mind. It might even have impacts of a re-traumatizing nature and thus involuntarily fuel violent extremist reactions rather than soften and dissolve them.

Aside of this rather principle methodological problem, another more general risk needs to be mentioned that any project of media production faces: the temptation of maximum distribution and multi-direction dissemination which aims to reach out to as many different audiences as possible – and to pursue different purposes with the same materials. This usually has the effect that one underestimates how much the different objectives and target groups require different sort of media approaches and materials. The most important risk, however, is that the producers and/or users of the testimonials overlook how detrimental such confusion

18 Dudeck, Manuela; Spitzer, Carsten; Gillner, Michael; Freyberger, Harald J. (2007): Dissoziative Erfahrungen während der Straftat bei forensisch-psychiatrischen Patienten – Eine Pilotstudie. In: Trauma und Gewalt, Heft 2 / 2007; 1. Jahrgang, S. 34 – 41: „Studien im forensisch-psychiatrischen Kontext zeigen, dass psychisch kranke Straftäter und Gefangene die eigene Straftat traumatisch erleben können, ein hohes Ausmaß an dissoziativen Symptomen zeigen und bis zu 24 Stunden nach Delikt eine dissoziative Amnesie aufweisen.“ („Studies in the forensic and psychiatric context show that perpetrators and inmates with psychological disorders may experience their criminal act as traumatic event, show a high degree of dissociative symptoms and dissociative amnesia up to 24 hours after the offense”).

of audiences and purposes is for our key objective. For instance, the purpose of producing testimonials as tools for educational work with students – which is challenging enough in itself – might be totally poles apart from various other purposes that may also seem worthwhile to be pursued with the same video materials, as for instance the purpose to provide good journalism, promote public awareness, or have impact on stakeholders and on political decision making, i.e. pursue lobbying (of victims rights, certain intervention methods etc.). Not to speak of the risk of being used – or implicitly produced – for purposes of media sensationalism or of being misappropriated by political actors for their own ends.

xxx Humor and/or ridicule as a prevent and deradicalization strategy?

Sometimes “humor” is discussed as an additional factor of deradicalization and of so-called “counter-narrative”.¹⁹ Under the heading “Humour entertains” the RAN working group on Internet and Social Media notes that “especially from credible sources, humour can be a disarming way to share the counter- narrative” and that “careful ridiculing [...] can be used to undermine the cache and coolness of extremist leaders.” This then once again leads to the assumption that “counter-narratives” are best defined as “directly or indirectly challeng[ing] extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humor.”

Moreover, the more recent and innovative approaches to civic education have been looking for new methodological options that may lead beyond the confines of working on cognitive, educational, and informational levels. They sometimes aim at bringing in humor as a lighter, more relaxed and less cerebral way of talking about oneself, one’s life-world and about historical, political or religious issues. There, humor is intended as strategy to explore an alternative attitude that may differ from the bitter and spiteful seriousness with which violent extremist individuals generally handle issues of identity, politics and religion. The authors thus claim that humor and self-irony promote self-consciousness, self-reflectivity, a sense of relativity and ambivalence (as has been said about the acknowledgement of “narrative truth” which was discussed above) – always also reminding us of the very limits of the human condition. In other words, humor and self-irony is assumed to support the ability to not take oneself too seriously and allows for laughing together about oneself/ ourselves in order to alleviate tension, facilitate conflict resolution – and facilitate disengagement (deradicalisation).

In this view, humor and self-irony is more than a methodological ploy; it is a key component of civil society – in a sense, even its epitome. It thus goes without saying that building on this concept of humor, if applicable in practical terms, would fully correspond with the principles of good-practice disengagement (deradicalization) which were pointed out above (open-process, relational, along trust-based and narrative modes of interaction, fostering a sense of

19 Also see: RAN working group on Internet and Social Media: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm. And: J.M. Berger & Bill Strathearn: How matters online; Measuring influence, evaluating content and countering violent extremism in online social networks, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR_Berger-and-Strathearn.pdf.

reflexivity, relativity, and ambivalence). Unsurprisingly, such humor does come up in good-practice interventions – and whenever it comes up it is indeed an indication of good progress.

Yet, humor and self-irony of this kind can never be mobilized on command; and even less feasible it is to set off and facilitate such humor by way of online material. Humor happens – and such happening is only possible within open-process offline settings.

Moreover, when it comes to our target group, trying to employ humor as a methodical element would entail great difficulties and risks. For, violent extremist individuals tend to not have much humor, if at all any. In fact, the state of being violent extremist may well be understood as equaling a radical absence of humor – and of the accompanying ability to deal with ambivalence, relativity and reflexivity. For this reason it seems hardly applicable to have humor as the center piece of a methodological approach here. The only thing one can do is: work with a sound methodological approach, e.g. the narrative approach, be attentive to moments of potential humor and try to carefully moderate them whenever the occasion arises – thus attempting to support a sense of humor and self-irony on the side. Under such premises one may indeed be able to facilitate valuable moments within an intervention in which the clients and facilitators laugh together about themselves in a way that alleviates tension and facilitates conflict resolution. But, as indicated above, this is for evident reasons restricted to direct inter-personal work which follows open-process, non-directive approaches.

However, there is another more principle reason why so-called strategies of humor are entirely unsuitable for this area of work. This is because of the fact that what civic education practitioners and media activists mean by humor really is ridicule and mockery. However, ridicule/ mockery are a quite different from humor and self-irony. Laughing together about oneself/ourselves in a way that alleviates tension and mediates conflict is one thing, laughing about others in a way that makes them appear silly and inapt – and thus most likely increase tension and conflict – is an entirely different thing. Missing out on this key difference is bound to cause major damage to any intervention approach.

Even more importantly, ridiculing a type of person that has little sense of humor, tends to take everything very personal and fundamental, and is most sensitive to – and aggressive about – any challenge or potential affront, is the most ill-fated and explosive prevent/ disengagement strategy one could possibly lapse into. Simply speaking, you make a joke about a violent extremist and s/he will throw back a bomb at you. Or more concretely speaking, you draw a caricature about Mohamed and you could be killed in return by a believer and follower of Mohamed (cf. the Theo van Gogh killing in the Netherlands in 2004 and the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015).

aaa Looking at this subject from yet another angle, it might be helpful to more closely consider the fact that violent extremists and hate crime perpetrators seem to be using a form of humor themselves which, however, is a cynical, even sadistic and ultimately inhuman mode of ridicule. As is widely known since the German neo-Nazi death squad Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU) was incidentally uncovered in 2011, this terrorist cell was producing a cynical kind of 'funny videos' about the killings and the killed victims using the Pink Panther carton. These videos were designed to be viewed by the considerable circle of rightwing terrorist sympathizers and must therefore be considered a sub-cultural

practice of humor – how abnormal, bizarre and inhuman it may ever appear to anyone outside these circles.

This should be warning enough to anybody who wants to approach our target groups with humor. Because there a smirk, a grin or a laugh even if it is about a mockery against oneself²⁰ most likely indicates an impulse of the above mentioned cynicism and sadistic humor (which violent extremists may indeed also direct against themselves on occasion) – and is far from signaling reflection and self-irony. Since the personality structure of violent extremists (roughly modeled around clinical concepts of malign narcissism and/or borderline syndrome) is typically organized along dissociative and incoherent modes of operation rather than associative and coherent ones, any momentary affect (of laughter or any other reaction) cannot easily be taken at face value but would need to be evaluated more carefully.

Looking at all these observations about ridicule/ humor and violent extremism begs the question of how we could ever have had such an unfortunate idea as to try using ridicule in prevention and disengagement (deradicalization). One reason might lie, once again, in the logic of countering, arguing, campaigning, “dismantling”, and “undermining” (footnote 1, Omar Ashour) which seems firmly entrenched in many strategies of responding to violent extremism. The general prevalence of logics of countering needs to be seen before the backdrop of a long tradition of political struggle, activism, and partisanship which goes back in the history of civil society since the 19th century. For this history of political parties, debates, and electoral campaigning also was a history of political satire, caricature (e.g. by cartoons), hence ridicule.

Stemming from these traditions, practices of ridiculing, mocking, and caricaturing the political adversary are still deeply ingrained in western culture – which thus always depended on a shared sense of humor and self-irony and on a common acceptance of humorous communications in the field of political antagonism. However, while this shared sense of political humor may have been granted in these early days of – mostly national – politics, it seems more questionable today whether ridiculing and caricature can still be a viable means to respond to the more global and intercultural political challenges of the 21st century.

In any event, recent practice research in prevention and disengagement leaves no doubt that humor and ridicule – and their implicit approach of struggling and countering – are unlikely to lend themselves to good-practice interventions – and bear serious risks of backlash and negative side effects.

xxx The robustness of the counter narrative ideology – and the industrialization of PVE

Now, overlooking the different sections of this paper, it may have become clearer how the strategies of counter narrative campaigning through the internet and, in an even wider perspective, the strategies of countering have been quite erroneous – and also quite

²⁰ Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm; as in footnote 18.

unfortunate in some of their side effects on both offline prevent methodologies and on the general population's awareness and resilience.

In the introduction to this paper I have also alluded to the astonishing robustness of the counter narrative fallacy and its discourses, after observing that practitioners and experts have pointed out this fallacy many times – but hardly anyone seemed wanting to listen and engage with the reasons given. Proponents of countering strategies have sometimes proven quite unwilling to engage with any evidence which may raise doubts about their base assumptions. By and large policy makers, politicians and counter narrative producers often leave the impression that they are intent to just go on with their agenda whatsoever – which is an agenda that seems to have emanated from a rather closed loop between policy making and related providers. Generally speaking, up to quite recently there seems to have been only very little interest to exchange with face-to-face prevent/ disengagement workers on these issues in any meaningful way – which has changed a bit and will likely change more profoundly through the work of the European Commission's Radicalisation Awareness Network.

One effect of this unwillingness can be directly observed with the above mentioned 2014 study of the Soufan Group, comparing the followers of the radicalizing aka@ShamiWitness account and the "Think Again" counter narrative campaign – which proved that there is basically no significant overlap and that counter narratives do not reach their target group (see above footnote 1). One most interesting and easily overlooked aspects about this inquiry is the point in time when it was done: December 2014. At this time intense counter narrative lobbying was well under way for a few years. Apparently nobody ever wanted to check – and thus this fairly simple inquiry setup was not employed until very recently. Also, the Soufan Group, not having any vested interests in counter narrative campaigning, may not count among those organizations which should have felt the obligation to investigate the impact of their promoted interventions. Hence, it cannot be excluded that stakeholder interests played a role in this reticence to engage in sound quality control – and this was certainly not good for the cause.

In this context we came across another, more general observation by one of the authors of the Soufan Groupe who stated in a short but dense remark on CVE discourses and policies: "What briefs well in presentations to policy-makers likely won't work with the actual people who need the message". Even beyond the specific issue of counter narratives and internet, there seems to be a hard to surmount divide between those who publically speak and decide on issues of violent extremism and prevention/ response and those who actually work with it on the ground. Hence, important practitioner lessons don't seem to get heard by policy makers. This impression has been reverberated countless times in the exchange between field practitioners in this area throughout Europe which were summoned in workshops and conferences under the umbrella of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) (while the very mission of the RAN is to act primarily as a practitioner network which thus effectively tackles this divide and authoritatively feeds back to all levels of policy making).

Why is this? Why do policy makers sometimes not listen very well? And why is it that the erroneous counter narrative ideology is still so relatively prevalent although much has been done to inform politicians and policy makers. One quick and short-hand answer is: This

comes from “industrialization”. The concept of “industrialization of societal initiative” refers to all phenomena that usually occur when a subject is suddenly receiving much public/ political attention and financial investment.²¹ This is presently the case with the CVE field which has increasingly become a focal point of political and media awareness and of policy writing and has also enjoyed significant rises in budgets. Doubtlessly this development is propelled by the fact that violent extremism and terrorism have caused much concern and anxiety among the general population(s), which in turn increases the pressure on political parties and governments to raise the issue and deliver action.

The mechanisms of “industrialisation” are manifold – and they seem widely un-acknowledged and un-researched. To give but some examples from general experience: When much attention and finances come into a field some of the relevant organisations will put an emphasis on expansion, marketing, lobbying and business development. A dynamic of cartel formation unwittingly sets in. The more ambitious organisations generally begin to stake claims and expand their services in more sectors of work than were originally their expertise. These organisations then also tend to buy out small and well field-embedded practitioner organisations and integrate their work into their portfolio. As a consequence most of the time staff is restructured and personnel/ training is reduced and streamlined, often resulting in more functionary kind of employees and less experienced field practitioners/ experts.

Additionally, the more ambitious organizations tend to make more compromises with politics and funders in terms of procedures and methodologies. However, politics and funders tend to request quick action, output oriented measures, and graspable/ presentable results irrespective of the actual needs and complexities on the ground. Sometimes business consultants and lobbying experts are brought in (often by foundations/ associations) which further propels the described dynamic of “industrialization”.

A particularly detrimental effect of “industrialization” is ‘hostile double production’. For instance, if the latest topic in the field is: We need an international network and/or formulate practice guidelines, then quite a few organizations will become highly active in this and try to build such international networks and undertake efforts to formulate practice guidelines – and they will not cooperate on this, rather they will act competitively. This is detrimental because an overburdening of the practitioner organizations (as potential network partners and research subjects) and a general loss of trust in networks and guidelines will be the results. Consecutively, the quality of the work done on the ground will decrease and brain drain and loss of good practice methods will occur since relevant methodologies/ organizations tend to drift into the background and experienced practitioners leave the field. Here, we haven’t even considered the fact that with approaches which focus on internet and social media, a specific industry is implied which may further intensify this dynamic.

Governments, ministries and policy makers sometimes unwittingly support such “industrialisation” in that they generally prefer dealing with a small number of well acquainted contractors (who tend to compromise) rather than with many practitioners with a

²¹ Industrianlisation xx.

solid vision of work requirements and quality. Sometimes ministries even outsource entire sectors of work to one contractor.

Hence “industrialization of societal initiative” is a serious and hardly acknowledged concern. – Yet there doesn’t seem to be any evidence based knowledge available, while much anecdotal experience can easily be gathered – and should indeed be systematically collected for a start. In my second contribution to this volume, the essay “Its lobbying, stupid! – the industrialization of PVE and its side effects”, I attempt to begin such collection by sharing own experiences.

For this article here, however, it may suffice to resume that correcting the counter narrative fallacy and mitigating its many negative side effects, is a highly complex but most worthwhile issue which calls for our joint efforts. Getting a better grip on such difficult issues of PVC will also significantly hinge on developing a better understanding between policy makers/ politicians and first-line practitioners²² who tend to not know each other very well and most often also not trust each other much – but would need to work together closely in order to facilitate sustainable responses to the challenge of violent extremism.

²² Why are we still messing it up? A new Marshall Plan for preventing violent extremism – youth work, gender, mental health. In preparation, submitted to *Per Concordiam*, the quarterly journal of the George Marshall European Centre for Security Studies. See also xx