

“Its lobbying, stupid!” – the industrialization of PVE as ‘added damage’ through increase of funding

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My first contribution to this volume “Confronting the counter-narrative ideology. Embedded face-to-face prevention – and youth (media) work”, I dealt with various aspects of the current counter narrative discourse which is still quite predominant in policy making and in politicians’ rhetoric when speaking about violent extremism and responses to it. There I pointed out strong evidence and arguments which support the conclusion that the strategies of counter narrative campaigning and, in an even wider perspective, the strategies of countering have been erroneous and need to be considered to be a fallacy – which, as a consequence, also had quite unfortunate side effects on both prevention methodologies and on the general population’s awareness and resilience against violent extremism.

The paper closed with the observation that, in spite of the overwhelming evidence, the counter narrative discourse has been fairly robust. Proponents often seemed quite unwilling to take into account any data and arguments which question their base assumptions and indicates that the promoted measures and tools are ineffective - or even detrimental - on the ground. In fact, the counter narrative discourse often seemed almost beyond any considerations of quality control - and firmly intent to just go on with its agenda whatsoever.

While pondering about the reasons for both this robustness and the reticence against any checks on impact and quality, and while considering some indications to the effect that vested stakeholder interests and lobbying activities may play a role, I came to suggest the tentative concept of “industrialization of societal initiative”. This concept is intended to refer to all phenomena that occur when a societal subject is suddenly receiving much public/ political attention and financial investment - which evidently is the case with issue of CVE and PVE since recent years. The purpose of the “industrialization” concept is to raise awareness and facilitate further research about this kind of phenomena, since they always threaten the very logic of impact and quality assurance - and good governance - and thus endanger the success and sustainability of our work.

After having tentatively discussed a few possible factors and consequences of industrialization and lobbying in PVE at the end of this paper (a new emphasis on

marketing, business development/ expansion and lobbying on the part of prevent actor organizations, hostile double production/ competitiveness, restructuring and streamlining of personnel, loss of independence from funders, loss of quality, brain drain, etc.), it became quite evident that this topic is virtually un-researched – as it also is widely unacknowledged at this point in time (while industrialization in security and military related initiatives seems to be somewhat more acknowledged¹). On the other hand, much anecdotal experience seems to be available on this topic – and should indeed be systematically collected.

Hence, wanting to make a start by way of this little essay here beneath, I went through my memories and came across one recent experience which might pertain to the issue of industrialization and lobbying and which I will therefore recount in the following. It occurred on an international conference about CVE/ PVE (including media campaigning) which was organized outside of Europe. On this conference, after having presented on some issues of prevention I suddenly found myself in the midst of a little incident which I first didn't quite understand. What had happened?

Having been invited to this conference as a first-line practitioner of disengagement/ rehabilitation, distancing and preventive interventions (representing the RAN Derad working group which consists of several dozens of colleagues working in this field of activity), I did as I usually do when the topic of counter narratives and media campaigns comes up. I emphasized that my first-line practitioner colleagues from RAN Derad and RAN Prevent (all working similarly in direct, face-to-face, and relationship based settings) have overwhelmingly come to the conclusion that counter messaging and counter narrative videos don't work – even backfire. Also there is some research which indicates that counter narratives don't even reach the target audience which they are designed for.² I also state that countering as such, and as intervention strategy doesn't work; it makes things worse rather than better.

Then I usually point out some of the observations and reasons why we first-line practitioners have come to think that video and media messages don't work and why countering doesn't work – the main reason being that disengagement/ rehabilitation (deradicalisation) and targeted prevention can, in principle, only work in direct, face-to-face, and relationship based interventions which are situated in trusted offline spaces. To underline this I sometimes ask the audience whether they have had any experience in psychotherapy. Of course, I ask this rhetorically only – in order to make the point that disengagement/ rehabilitation processes (also second level prevent/ distancing processes) amount to a degree of change in personality which is quite comparable to

1 beltway bandits

2 <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-extremism-online/>, 2013, quoted March 2015. In its recent report on the White House Summit on CVE (in Feb. 2015) the authors from the Soufan Group (while cautioning high expectations about the internet and prevent) quite nonchalantly say: "What briefs well in presentations to policy-makers likely won't work with the actual people" on the ground. Countering Violent Extremism: Challenges and Solutions, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-violent-extremism-challenges-and-solutions/?catid=3>. The Soufan Group, February 19, 2015, quoted March 2015.

what happens in profound long-term psychotherapy. Then reminding the audience that nobody ever does psychotherapy through internet video resources by watching (counter) narratives of any sort, is often quite helpful to raise awareness of the fact that face-to-face settings are a base requirement here.

I usually end up by emphasizing how important it is for both policy makers/ experts and the general public to understand that direct, face-to-face relational interventions are the only way to go – and thus invest in human resource rather than videos (as I did here above in my paper on how to confront the counter narrative ideology).

On this quite dynamic international conference in a non-European country I actually had the opportunity to comment to this effect on several occasions.

After I had presented a colleague spoke up who works for an organization which is quite active in counter narrative campaigning and asked me: how I could be so sure about my area of direct relational work. Furthermore the colleague claimed that face-to-face prevent and disengagement work as I practice it may be viewed as being quite questionable, because there is no way of evaluating it. Also, the person continued, with these kinds of face-to-face approaches one cannot reach out very quickly to large numbers of radicalized young people. Thereby the colleague implicitly pleaded that, since there are so very many of these young people threatening our security, we as experts and policy makers must find speedy ways to instantly reach out to all of them if we possibly can.

Now, these were quite peculiar statements to be made by anyone who is part of the VE prevention arena today (which, however, was not the case with large parts of this particular conference audience). So I was entirely perplexed in this moment, didn't quite know what to say – almost feeling dumfounded. Because, firstly, nobody ever said something like that to me. Secondly, the statements were given quite nonchalantly and thus seemed persuasive. But, thirdly, both of these statements were plain wrong; and they were wrong even in a double perspective, if one also considers their underlying assumptions. Since they suggested in an unspoken way that an internet based counter narrative strategy would be able to outdo any of the face-to-face interventions in that it, for one, manages to reach large numbers of young people quickly, and second, also can be evaluated (by click numbers and viewing times).

Doubly wrong these statements were for the following reasons: Of course, one can evaluate the effectiveness of an offline intervention which is conducted with physically present and identifiable individuals (according to defined criteria which were found to indicate a decrease of susceptibility to violent extremism or an increase of resilience). In fact, similar evaluations have been done for the longest time in all sorts of interpersonal interventions (while, admittedly, the criteria for prevent and disengagement interventions still warrant further development). On the other side, however, what indeed cannot be evaluated very easily are: online campaigning programs emitting counter narratives and counter messages through the internet! Since with anonymous audiences any assumptions about what certain click numbers

and viewing times really mean in terms of impact is bound to remain highly speculative.

Even more, contrary to what the colleague suggested, face-to-face interventions can very well have an impact on large numbers of young people. This only depends on how much funds are invested in such measures – and how intelligently they are synergized with available social services by way of inter-agency cooperation. On the other hand, any widespread counter narrative or counter messaging campaign through the internet, even if it has massive outreach (given its click numbers) may well have no impact at all on anyone from our key target groups, given the observations which experienced first-line practitioners have made. Hence the colleague's statements were doubly misleading – and all the more perplexing to me.

In support of this point I often refer to one empirical example, namely the Danish city of Aarhus which has encountered most significant radicalization problems in the past but today may count as the most impressive success story throughout Europe in terms of preventing travel to Syria. Aarhus had systematically invested in a face-to-face prevention strategy on several levels of community interaction, following a sophisticated inter-agency approach (including intelligence services). In so doing Aarhus managed to fix its foreign fighter problem in no time, lowering the number of Syrian travelers from 30 in 2013 to only one in 2014.³ The point which is important for this topic here: Within the quite complex Aarhus approach, internet or social media played no role at all – because it is, in principle, face-to-face interactions which count in disengagement and targeted prevent work. öö

Moreover, the Aarhus success model is doubly intriguing for us because of the time it took. The stretch of one year (2012-2013) is much shorter than the mandate of any elected official who may feel – and may have been lead to believe – that an internet based counter narrative campaign will be the only speedy way to produce tangible results with big numbers of young vulnerable people in a time that is viable also in political respects.

Looking back from here at the colleague's statements at the plenary discussion: The most intriguing and peculiar aspect for me personally in this moment was not that these statements were entirely wrong and misleading. More intriguing was that, aside of being wrong, they also seemed in an almost miraculous way quite well placed – and highly effective. Because what these – wrong – statements successfully achieved in this moment was to interrupt the process and divert the audience from further thinking about counter narrative videos, whether and how such videos and messages might indeed be less effective than assumed and may at times even backfire, how that could possibly be mitigated, how further viable solutions could be found, or what would otherwise follow from this practitioners' feedback for future CVE policy planning.

3 <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/28/world/europe/denmark-syria-deradicalization-program/>

One detail should be added here: Had the attendants of this conference been from the classical CVE and prevention community, the colleague's statements would most likely have been perceived as quite odd by many. Because, as already alluded to above, the CVE community is generally quite cognizant about the fact that face-to-face interventions with identifiable individuals are, in principle, quite approachable for evaluation while internet based interventions are not. However, the most part of the conference's audience was not from the CVE community but from a neighboring field. All the easier it must have been, I realized in retrospect, to bring in these – wrong but miraculously well-placed – statements and thus effectively interrupt the process of experts' discourse that was underway.

Now, what went on in this moment of an experts' discussion? How come that a potentially fruitful controversy was interrupted in this way and could thus not be further pursued? This is a quite worthwhile question which promises important lessons to be learned on how to exchange and cooperate across different disciplines and areas of CVE and how to maintain quality and good governance in something as volatile as an experts' discourse. Certainly, to really find out more about this and similarly typical situations one would have to research the matter more closely – and employ a suitable setting of in-depth exchange and micro analysis (which would, for instance, bring together professionals from the two different sectors of face-to-face interventions and media production).

Not yet having such setting at our disposal, we are left to speculations: It seems fair to assume that both the colleague from media campaigning and myself, the first-line practitioner, lacked sufficient understanding about the other's field of activity – while both are part of their own area of PVE measures, i.e. direct face-to-face interventions and counter narrative production. This, for sure, makes it more difficult for both to engage in productive lines of exchange.

The second – and complementary – hypothesis that comes to mind is that stakeholder and business interests played a role in one way or the other. If a representative of an organization with pronounced activities in counter narrative media campaigning attends a conference on which a field practitioner repeatedly claims that counter narratives don't work and explains how most first-line field practitioners have always known and said this – this is likely to create some unease with the colleague from media campaigning. Feelings of anxiousness with regard to the own agenda, loyalty towards one's organization, a strongly internalized corporate mission etc. – all these motivations may understandably come up; and they may then inspire the urge to do something. Such emotional situation may also have inspired the above mentioned statements which effectively disrupted the discussion.

Now, when my puzzlement had abated after the conference I was convinced that this little peculiar episode was more or less a misunderstanding and pretty coincidental. It was only later through talking to a trusted friend of mine that I started wondering whether all this was not of a more systematic nature after all. Because what my friend

basically said about this incident was: “Its lobbying, stupid! ... how come you didn’t know?” Well, even at the time I did know roughly what lobbying meant – and I even had some intuitive notion about an experiences with "industrialization" in my field. But my colleague than explained in detail from her/his work background how lobbying works, how to recognize the first warning signs and how to tell for sure that lobbying is operative, what the possible damage is, and which pull and push factors in a field may trigger organizations to go down the pathway of lobbying and industrialization – while, unfortunately, leaving me without any answers on how to best respond to and prevent lobbying and how to mitigate its negative effects.

My friend thus proceeded to clarify: “If you want to spot lobbying you need to be watching comments which seem oddly out of context – or sound peculiar in any other way.” Because lobbying, s/he continued, at least the more visible acts of it tend to produce interventions which sometimes are somewhat odd – and only really make sense if one knows where they come from and which interest they promote. Then my friend said that one may spot lobbying also by way one’s own emotional reaction (i.e. by counter transference reactions) just as one does in derad and other therapeutic or prevent work: “So, if you felt puzzled, dumfounded, irritated and didn’t quite know what to do, this is exactly it”. Furthermore, my friend noted that every so often one will also sense a significant drop in the quality of the ongoing conversation when lobbying is around – or emotional reactions occur, because some people will unconsciously sense that something is going on and may then react in funny ways.

Another thing that I learnt from my friend was: An organization which has embarked on the pathway of lobbying and industrialization invests much in placing representatives in all sorts of policy settings with the single mission to be present there – and to issue specific lobbying statements. This also means that these colleagues often do not otherwise engage much in the discourse – and may therefore even leave a somewhat pale impression. Hence, one early warning sign of lobbyism is when there are persons who don’t say much otherwise, except for the interventions which they place for lobbying reasons. This also means that if an organization embarks on the pathway of industrialization and lobbying, it will significantly change its operations to the effect that it will tend to hire persons with a more functionary type of profile and lesser so colleagues with practice experience.

In the end my friend totally baffled me when asking me: “How come you didn’t know better” and then extrapolated: “I wonder how you as a PVE person could be so unaware about all this ... because, lobbyism and industrialization really has some similarities to how violent extremism itself works”. In response to my perplexed “How so?”, s/he explained: “Well, as with extremism the strategy of lobbyism is totally focused on one single objective and is entirely self-centered on the own organization. While it claims to be about a bigger cause, it really is firstly and mostly about power”. Also, as is true with extremism, lobbying “would, in principle, be quite ready to violate current ethical norms about honest and issue driven exchange.” Moreover, s/he added, that, when being confronted about such ethical issues, lobbyism, as

extremism, would regularly bring forth certain real or perceived grievances – claiming, for instance, that politics and policy making is so ill-fated and unreliable that it justifies these means (of systematic and aggressive lobbying). “To be fair”, my friend added, “governments and ministries often do unwittingly support the dynamics of industrialisation and lobbyism, because they generally prefer dealing with a small number of well acquainted contractors (who tend to compromise) rather than with many practitioners with a solid vision of quality standards”.⁴

In fact, in the end my friend got all excited and edgy about the topic. S/he even said things to the effect that lobbyism, industrialization and other forms of business driven egotism really are “the most important root causes of violent extremism to begin with”, and: how cynical this is, in view of the (third world) country in which I just attended the conference, because: “first Europe colonized and exploited the whole world and now it is trying to sell some counter narratives to them which don’t work anyhow ... Its all capitalism’s and imperialism ... the prevent CVE and PVE industry is all post-colonialism ... in the end extremists will take over prevention, and everything will go downhill” etc.

Now, I wasn’t quite sure about all those latter conclusions. But I certainly felt quite embarrassed by my friend since I must have appeared – and in many senses was – quite ignorant about the actual operations of lobbying. However, I realized quickly that I knew much more about it than I was aware of; I only didn’t register it under the label of lobbying or industrialization. For instance, a couple of times I saw how certain issues which we first-line practitioners pursued and communicated to policy level just never registered there. As if we had talked to death ears. Other things on policy level happened with an almost uncanny unanimity while they didn’t make too much sense in terms of practice.

Moreover, I certainly knew enough about it to be aware that lobbying/ industrialization is certainly not restricted to media production enterprises (while it does seem to me that media focused organizations have a particular propensity for it). Already some time ago I had noticed that lobbyism happens on many different levels of CVE – also where one would least expect it: in first-line practitioner organizations. I had seen directly what it means internally when a practitioner organization suddenly begins to hire P&R and press relations staff or business consultants – instead of further practitioners. I knew what this then can do to the organization itself. In fact, I could attest to my friend’s comments in the sense that the process of industrialization in such organization sometimes may indeed feel pretty much how radicalization must feel like. There is a growing in-group versus out-group polarization, a ‘you are either for me or against me’ style, and also an increase in authoritarian, charismatic leadership etc.

⁴ Some observations therefore indicate that a closer cooperation between the very different communities of security and prevention professionals would be able to mitigate the risks of industrialization; cf. Harald Weilnböck: *Why are we still messing it up? A new Marshall Plan for preventing violent extremism – youth work, gender, mental health*, which will shortly be published on <http://www.cultures-interactive.de>.

Most importantly, industrialization also seems to have a high price for the whole field. Some of my experiences suggested that once one or two organizations of a particular field go down the pathway of industrialization, a dynamic of cartel formation unwittingly sets in. Then the more ambitious organizations begin to stake claims and expand their services in more sectors of work than were originally their expertise. They also tend to buy out small field-embedded practitioner organisations, incorporate their expertise – while at the same time lowering or changing quality standards or compromising in other ways with good practice and governance (often following directives from politics and funders).⁵ These organizations then also tend to restructure and streamline personnel to the effect that, as mentioned above, a more functionary type of employees is preferred. Brain-drain, lowering of quality, loss of focus in experts discourses etc. are the inevitable result of this.

Another thing I had realized was that these organizations tend to become more litigious, i.e. have lawyers and be ready to send them in whenever they view a danger to what they define as their interest. In fact, when talking to my friend I suddenly recalled that it was only weeks ago that I myself was threatened with a lawsuit on such grounds.

What was also well reflected in many of my experience is my friend's assessment that governments and ministries often unwittingly support such lobbying and industrialisation. Because the public sector, having had a difficult relationship to NGO practitioners in many countries, prefer dealing with a small number of well acquainted contractors – who then over time become more dependant and therefore tend to compromise – rather than with many organizations of practitioners having a solid vision of quality standards.

So, evidently I already knew a lot intuitively about industrialization and lobbying – without having been aware that is what I experienced in the above described moment of a conference. And it seems that hardly anybody is fully aware, because almost nobody in the field talks about it, and certainly nobody has researched and written about industrialization and lobbying in CVE and its side effects.

Another thing which I now realized through my freshly revisited memories was: It seemed that some organizations are more susceptible to go down the pathway of industrialization and lobbying than others, even if their general contexts are quite similar. In other words, there seem to be generalizable push and pull factors which make organizations vulnerable to embark on industrialization. For instance, it seemed that, generally, organizations which pursue methods that do not correspond with good-

⁵ A possible reference source for quality criteria is the (draft version of) the *RAN Derad Declaration of Good Practice – principles of good practice interventions in disengagement and rehabilitation (deradicalisation) from involvement in violent extremism and group hatred*, 2015, on <http://www.cultures-interactive.de/publikationen-en.html>. For the first publication on this research see Harald Weilnböck: *The Narrative Principle: Good Practice in Anti-Hate Crime Interventions, within the Radicalisation Awareness Network*. In: *Right-Wing Extremism in Europe Country analyses, counter-strategies and labor-market oriented exit-strategies*. Ed. by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2013, p. 379-408.

practice principles⁶ are more susceptible (while this, however, seems to be not a compulsory criterion). Also it appeared to me that organizations in which the CEO is not and has never been a first-line practitioner her/himself are more prone to resort to strategies of industrialization and lobbying than those in which leadership consists of first-line practitioners (but this, too, seems to not always apply as criterion).

Now, looking back towards the particular issue which had spurred all my thoughts to begin with, some hypotheses came up also about the side question regarding organisations which are invested in internet/ media production and counter narratives: Here my questions was: Is it maybe the case – and how may it be the case – that internet and media production organisations are especially prone to the risks of industrialization and lobbyism?

For sure, the first thought which comes to mind is that these organisations would certainly interact with the media and internet industry to quite some extent. This makes much sense in order to strengthen prevention – but may also entail side effects of industrialisation, since professional business are very much industrialized themselves and tend to induce such industrialization on business partners. On second look, however, this seemed to be not too compelling a thought, at least in view of the policy makers which any such CVE organisation needs to communicate to. Because, policy makers still operate in a logic which is quite different from any industry and may also be on reserve towards third-sector initiatives.

Yet, considering this very logic of policy making more closely, brings up a more helpful line of thought about why policy making (and politics) in the area of security may be more prone to follow the counter-narrative rhetoric/ ideology - and thus respond well to lobbying which suggests that large IT based media strategies are needed and effective. For, today's policy making in CVE and counter terrorism is still largely dominated by a logic of surveillance/ intelligence, policing and law enforcement – while prevention comes in only slowly and still seems quite incompatible to many who work in the CVE security policy area. Now, such surveillance/ policing logic has always implicated large scale technical and IT based solutions – and it does so in an increasingly intensive way. As has become quite evident since the ongoing NSA scandals, counter terrorism may almost be equated with large scale IT technology solutions.

What does this mean for our question? If the CVE/ counter terrorism community is habitually disposed to think in terms of large scale technical IT solutions, the idea of a large scale “counter messaging machinery” – as one proponent likes to put it - will most likely appeal to them strongly. A strategy of massive media campaigning may, at this point in time, be the only kind of “prevent stuff” which one can easily sell to surveillance and policing oriented CVE policy making. To put it somewhat differently, CVE policy making, which originally has been and still is situated in security policy departments, often still doesn't really believe in prevention. It sometimes tends to

⁶ See footnote 5.

believe that prevention doesn't work anyhow or is too slow for that matter – but also feels that one can't easily say this aloud nowadays. For such reasons, a “counter messaging machinery” may be exactly the thing that CVE policy making colleagues may feel they could settle for – and they would probably even pay a considerable price for it (and if only out of bad conscience towards the field of prevention).

To add another aspect in support of the above: CVE policy making, being situated in security policy departments largely, is not unlikely to still be attached to impulses of “lets strike back” and “hit them hard (militarily)” – an impulse which inevitably came up after 9/11 but, upon closer view, is so tragically violent extremist itself in some respects. All the more prone CVE policy making may be to any implicit offer which basically says: “Lets strike back through counter messaging – and try to hit them hard by quantity and appeal of counter messaging. ... If IS manages to send out 900K twitter messages a day we must become able to do at least as well. ... If they have high quality messaging videos we need even better ones”. However, these powerful impulses than unfortunately make us forget all more sober evidence indicating that such kind of antagonistic – and somewhat adolescent – bench-marking effort will most probably not get us anywhere in this challenge.

Be this as it may – and not knowing whether any of my and my friend's subjective observations about counter narratives, industrialization and lobbyism reflect any reality – one thing might hopefully have become clearer: It seems recommendable to both raise awareness and do more in-depth research on phenomena of industrializations in PVE. Such empirical research would analyze the mechanisms, contexts, push and pull factors, and consequences which the organizational dynamics of industrialization and lobbyism have in the particular field of PVE. This would then set the stage on which mitigation strategies and action plans to prevent against accompanying risks could be worked out.

Eventually, research in industrialization would help us to better understand how a field of societal governance like prevention of violent extremism is just quite different from other, more production and profit oriented areas of activity. The field of PVE is just not like food industry, cars, pharmacy or any other industry in which PR and business consultancy do and may come in at any point without necessarily putting at risk the do-no-harm principles which are so important in areas of societal initiatives. Here, it really matters a lot in which style and logic administrative and managerial process are dealt with, how policy making leadership and quality assurance come to bear. Because the interaction dynamics from there invariably filter down to the level of first-line practice and have impact – either in support of or damaging these quite sensitive process of relational work. And they will filter down to the general population which is a key actor in this subject and needs to be a resilient and capable first-responder.

