

Responding to violent extremism needs more investment in human resources/ practitioners, less in videos and internet

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(summary of article(s) on the subject, on: <http://cultures-interactive.de/fachartikel.html>)

Whenever politicians, policy makers and related institutes of 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!

(1) 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 (which is empirically proven¹). And if we were to make them see these videos and messages, in all experience they would tend to make things worse rather than better, because counter narrative videos rather create distrust/ disbelief and cynicism with these kinds of our young people. They would look at this and smirk – and then they would 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, 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

1 <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-counteracting-extremism-online/>, 2013, quoted March 2015.

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.

(2) Secondly, not only do we not need counter narratives, because they don't work. We should not emphasize so much on all this "countering" to begin with! In fact, field practitioners always had to realise quickly and painfully: countering doesn't work. They tend to say: As a practitioner you must not counter, or else you will fail. Impactful practice much rather builds than counters. Hence, when the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF) states that we need to "combat" and "counter" and therefore produce "counter-narratives" which promote "an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative", this is entirely the wrong way to go – because it will fail when put to the task. It much rather shows how violent extremism may inadvertently radicalize its adversaries into a kind of "counterism" and thus hamper even those among us who are determined to prevent and to safeguard liberal and free societies.

One only needs to ask oneself: Have you ever countered or argued with an extremist – or with an extremist kind of person? How was it? – It didn't get anywhere? You were all frustrated and annoyed afterwards? The extremist seemed much more pleased with the encounter than you? Well, it is always like this. Extremists love countering, they feed on it, and you will never have any profound effect on them. Now, why should that work any better online than it does offline?

So, just imagine if teachers, parents, neighbors absorb what is presented as counter messages and counter arguments and then walk up to the young people of their concern and try to act as counter messenger agents. Many unfruitful clashes and tension are bound to come up - which would further support radicalization more than anything else. Or even worse, imagine our mainstream and liberal young people were to be put into the position of such counter messenger agents; then you have fractions of our young people pitted against each other.

Hence, given what field practitioners (throughout RAN Derad and similar fora) have persistently been saying over the last few years, 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 centre 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.

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By contrast, what is almost never said by politicians, policy makers and related institutes: We need practitioners, we need skilled mentors who are trained to facilitate sustainable interventions on the level of personal (not private) work relationships. We need talented social workers, mental health practitioners, youth workers – hundreds of them, dedicated to our most at-risk young people. 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 second level prevent/ distancing processes – amount to a change of personality which is quite comparable 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 a quite robust one. In fact, many proponents of countering – and of launching counter narrative videos in the internet – appear quite disinterested in any evidence which raises doubts about their base assumptions. There almost seems 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 consistent. While 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 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.

Why it is this way and how it came that such communicational blockage arose, this would have to be studied in more depth – in order to secure quality of process and good governance for future CVE strategy building. Yet, the assumption seems valid that business interests play a role. Also, in a more psychological dimension it might be helpful to investigate whether the fact that CVE and counter terrorism are still largely dominated by security policy thinking is important here. Because counter terrorism and surveillance always also imply large scale technical and IT solution – which seems to naturally correspond with the idea of a large scale, all-encompassing “counter messaging machinery” (as one counter messaging proponent likes to put it). In other words, massive counter narrative campaigning may, at this point in time, be the only kind of “prevent stuff” which one can easily sell to security oriented policy makers who still tend to think that prevent doesn’t work anyhow or is too slow, for that matter, but also have the feeling that one can’t easily say this loudly nowadays. A “counter messaging machinery”, however, is something that these colleagues may feel they could settle for.

Hence, behind the communicational blockage between face-to-face disengagement/ distancing workers and video producers there may lay an even stronger and far-reaching blockage – a cleavage rather, which keeps the security/ surveillance people and the prevent people from exchanging and cooperating.

All the more timely it seems to insist that responding to violent extremism doesn't need much videos and internet. It needs more investment in human resources in both prevention and security. In security with need more targeted surveillance of individuals of concern; and in prevention we need more practitioners who are trained to facilitate face-to-face, interpersonal interventions of disengagement and distancing. Plus, these two sectors of person targeted work need to cooperate trustfully. Hence, cross the board more human resources is needed in many areas that are close to the young people of concern.

To close with some empirical evidence, the Danish city of Aarhus systematically invested in a multifaceted strategy of inter-agency prevention, including intelligence. Aarhus has developed 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 – but it had no internet or media component in its approach.

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 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 seems to has 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”.