Briefing Paper 1

Working Group 1: Counter-Narratives and Communications Strategy

A counter-narrative is a message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda or pushes back by deconstructing, delegitimising or demystifying extremist narratives. The term has come to include a wide range of activities, from government strategic communications campaigns to targeted interventions that discredit the ideologies and actions of violent extremists.

Action points

- Globally there remains a large gap between the volume and quality of counter-narrative campaigns and the propaganda of extremist groups.

- There is a need for creative strategic communications campaigns, and local governments have the means, resources, and motivations to take a lead in their delivery.

- Partnerships with communities, industry, and the third-sector can help deliver effective programmes through concentrating expertise and resources in amplifying messaging.

- Assessing the impact of communications campaigns remains difficult. We need to find new methodologies to evaluate the impact and reach of campaigns.

Starting points for cities

- **Consider** current communications programmes within your municipality and the potential for new programmes.

- **Assess** the success of these programmes.

- **Ask** how these programmes can be made more effective.

The need for stronger communications

Booming social media use amongst 'millennials' (individuals under 30) and the growth of new communications technologies represent a valuable opportunity to extremist groups to radicalise, recruit, and broadcast their actions. The strong, coordinated online campaign waged by extremists needs robust and credible responses which challenge and provide credible alternatives to extremist messaging.

Da'esh is notorious for its use of dedicated recruitment teams, who disseminate the group's propaganda, proselytise about life within the group, and give practical advice to individuals wishing to travel to Iraq and Syria.

Social media companies, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have stated their commitment to removing extremist material and the accounts which spread this material.

However, such measures are reactive and only partway towards a solution. Strong, coordinated strategic communications programmes in the form of counter-narratives represent a proactive response to extremism, and when partnered with reactive measures, enable a holistic approach to the growth of radicalisation within communities.
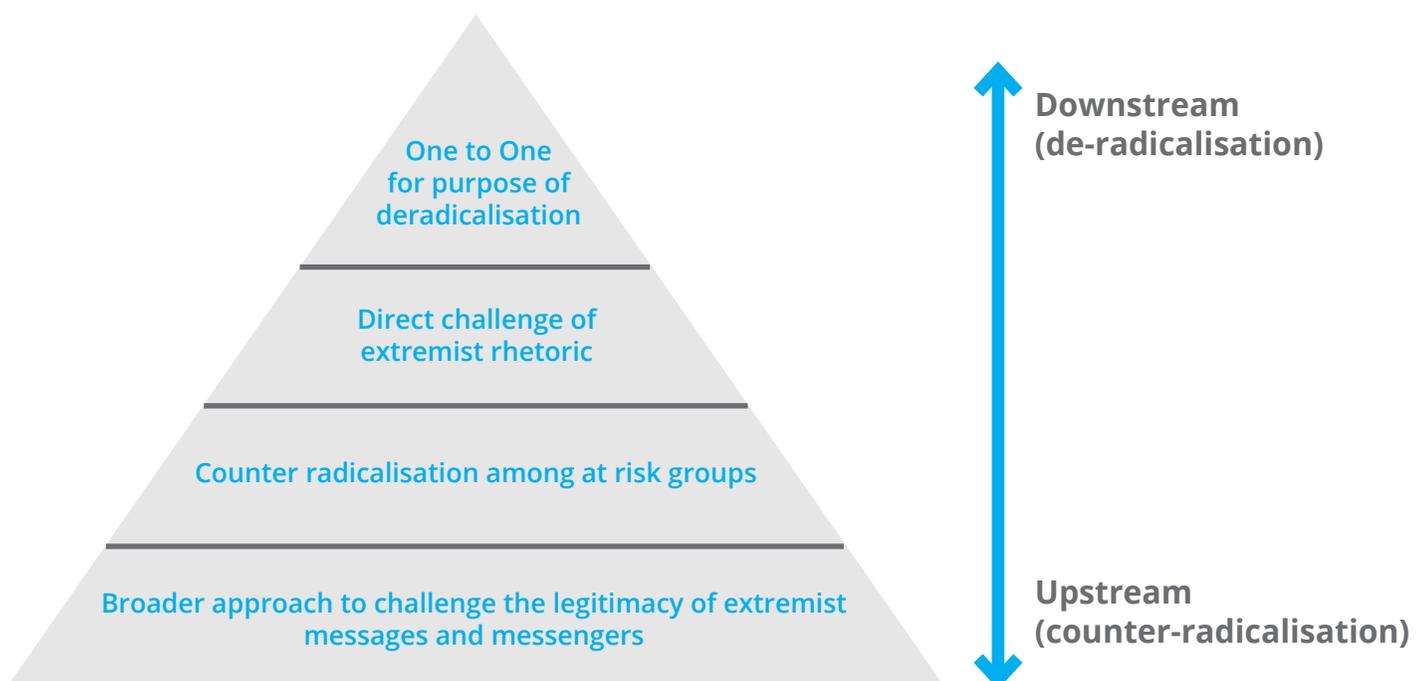
The counter-narrative spectrum

Counter-narratives represent a spectrum; different activities require different approaches in terms of messages, messengers, tactics, and partnerships. This spectrum covers:
- **Counter-narratives:** directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour.
- **Alternative narratives:** counter radicalisation towards violence by putting forward a positive story about social values, such as tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy.
- **Government strategic communications:** actions to get the message out about what government is doing, refute misinformation, and seek to forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences.

Counter-narratives have been developed and delivered by a variety of state and non-state actors ranging from grassroots civil-society, youth campaigners, NGO's, and government strategic communications. The content of these campaigns varies depending on audience, ranging from 'upstream' preventative campaigns which educate a broad audience to 'downstream interventions with people holding extreme views.'

Programmes can either be CVE focussed or CVE relevant. CVE focussed programming is explicit in the way it challenges the issue of extremism, whilst CVE relevant programming implicitly tackles extremism through addressing its root causes, such as alienation and lack of positive identity.

One to One
for purpose of
deradicalisation

Direct challenge of
extremist rhetoric

Counter radicalisation among at risk groups

Broader approach to challenge the legitimacy of extremist
messages and messengers

**Downstream
(de-radicalisation)**

**Upstream
(counter-radicalisation)**

Strategic communications: the role of governments

Communications strategies range from nationwide initiatives to small-scale, highly focussed programmes targeting key demographics. Municipal infrastructure and established

relationships with communities mean cities are well suited to locate and amplify credible local voices against extremism. Government communications are a useful tool for building trust within communities and if successfully implemented can be used to forge long-standing and meaningful relationships with key communities.

Government has a clear role in building and managing their own strategic communications, and they should also be at the forefront of alternative narratives. There are two key streams of work which local governments can engage with, both of which are needed in order to maximise success. Governments can strategically facilitate the organic development of communications through empowering civil society and grassroots action, either through financial support, or the provision of expertise. Governments can also lead their own strategic campaigns through proactively focussing on issues such as polarisation within communities, however these depend on building strong community relationships and securing grassroots endorsement.

Members of this working group are encouraged to scale up current communications initiatives, and when needed forge new partnerships with the aim of delivering more counter-narratives.

Planning a campaign

There are no strict rules for creating counter-narrative content. Creators are encouraged to try a variety of approaches, styles and formats, and where possible should work closely with members of the audience to generate material. Campaigns do not have to be high-budget to be successful, however national and international funding streams can be unlocked by cities with the potential of massively increasing a campaign's duration and reach.

Success	Risks
The success of a counter-narrative is reliant on a number of factors including: • The credibility of the messenger delivering the narrative. • How engaging the counter-narrative material is. • An in-depth understanding of the audience targeted. • How focussed the goals and objectives of the campaign are.	If left unheeded the following risks and obstacles can damage the success of a campaign, and the reputation of those delivering it: • If messages are un-credible they risk worsening community relations and exacerbating issues of extremism. • If communities feel unfairly targeted then campaigns may cause distrust of local authorities. • If unfocussed, then campaigns can drain resources without delivering impact.

Delivering and evaluating a campaign

Partnering with communications institutions such as Google, Facebook and Twitter can allow local authorities to unlock new technologies for a campaign's use. Recent partnerships between Google, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, and content creators Average Mohamed and ExitUSA provide examples of how municipalities can partner with local content creators and tech partners to deliver effective and engaging communications campaigns. Partnerships between local authorities and private bodies represent an opportunity to unlock and focus a wide range of expertise and resources for the delivery of communications campaigns.

Evaluating success

The success of online communications campaigns can be measured through awareness, engagement and impact. These criteria are made-up of metrics available for quantitative and qualitative analysis. Combining numerical data with testimonial evidence allows for a comprehensive evaluation process.

Awareness is necessary to assess the success of the campaign in reaching its target audience. It can be quantified through reach (the number of individual users shown campaign content) and in the case of online video campaigns video views, and video viewer retention.

Evaluating the engagement of users indicates whether the content was resonating with the reached audience. Assessing the quantity of engagement provides an opportunity to analyse the success of paid advertising in increasing user engagement with the organisation, which can inform future advertisements. Engagement can be measured through comments, likes, and shares of counter-narrative material.

Assessing the impact of a campaign is difficult, but qualitative analysis of users' comments- particularly sustained engagements, either constructive or antagonistic- can provide insight into a campaigns' impact on its target audience.

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Working Group 1: Case-book

The content and application of counter-narrative campaigns varies relating to the unique challenges posed by violent extremism at a local, national, and regional basis, the audience of a campaign, and its intended outcomes. The following case studies represent a cross-section of initiatives, and illustrate the differing forms counter-narratives can take.

Abdullah X

Abdullah X is a counter-narrative created by a former Islamist extremist who uses his experiences and insights to dismantle extremist narratives through the character of Abdullah X, a young male living in the UK. The character talks about current events in the news, as well as issues that many youth can relate to, including topics such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks and the rise of ISIS. The videos are a mix of styles ranging from longer and more animated ones, to chat-show style videos.

Although the content is primarily video animations, Abdullah X now features in graphic novels alongside his female counterpart, Muslimah X. Abdullah X videos can be found on YouTube, which acts as a hub for all the videos, as well as a dedicated website (www.abdullahx.com), as well as Facebook and Twitter profiles to reach its audience. Abdullah X was featured in the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism.

Key lessons: In order to maximise success, counter-narratives need to be accessible to their target audience.

Mediums such as animations can be produced quickly, meaning they can react to current events.

Extreme Dialogue

Extreme Dialogue is a series of videos and educational tools for teachers to help facilitate safe classroom discussions around extremism and radicalisation. The videos have also been promoted on Facebook and YouTube in order to raise awareness about violent extremism. The project was funded by Public Safety Canada, a government agency devoted to protecting Canadians from a range of risks, including the threat of terrorism.

Combining multi-media educational resources with short documentary films, Extreme Dialogue aims to develop students' critical thinking skills and resilience to radicalisation, explore shared values, and challenge all types of extremist propaganda and ideologies. The films tell the personal stories of people who have been profoundly affected by violent extremism and include testimony from former members of extreme groups as well as survivors.

Extreme Dialogue began in Canada in 2015, and will be launched in the UK, Germany, and Hungary in 2016 with new films and resources featuring the stories of people from these three countries.

Key lessons: the testimony of formers and surivors of extremism's experiences allows extremism to be approached from multiple angles.

Public institutions such as schools are established channels which can be used to deliver communications campaigns.

Jordan: Hero-Factor

Hero-Factor is a graphic novel created by Suleiman Bakhit, a Jordanian comic-book artist. Hero-Factor comics were produced and printed with financial support from the Jordanian government, and in 2011 over 1.2 million were sold in Jordan. The book filled the existing need for Arab superheroes, and presents a positive role model for young Arabs, promoting heroism as an antidote to extremism. Hero-Factor is an alternative narrative intended to counter the "adventure-seeking" narratives of extremist organisations. It also offers powerful role models to rival the notoriety of extremist figure-heads.

In addition to following the adventures of heroes, Hero-Factor also tells stories of prominent Islamic historical figures. This gives the stories cultural and historical credibility among its target audience, and rivals the often-historically inaccurate worldview of Islamic extremist narratives.

Key lessons: credible, engaging mediums can be used to maximise dissemination of counter-narratives.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for relaying messages and building resilience amongst younger audiences.

Mombasa: Countering violent extremism through multimedia and forum series

Implemented by the Kenya Community Support Centre (KECOSCE) this project targets young people in Mombasa County aged between 15 and 25. The project uses dialogue and multimedia to engage youth with key CVE messages countering the narratives of Al-Shabaab. These messages were disseminated through radio discussions facilitated by credible individuals from within Mombasa's communities, including religious and community leaders, local government, and youth activists. These discussions were broadcasted on a local radio station with a listenership of 300,000 individuals daily, and discussed current terrorist activities, the dangers of Al-Shabaab, and the advantages of cooperation with moderate Muslim institutions and the government of Kenya.

Running in tandem with radio discussions KECOSCE conducted forums which sought to raise awareness of Violent Extremism amongst young people. These forums consisted of screening a film (Watatu) that depicts the experience of a young Kenyan man who becomes radicalised and recruited by an Al-Shabaab affiliate. The film highlights the dangers of participation in violent extremist groups, and stresses the un-Islamic nature of Al-Shabaab ideology. Following each screening a discussion is held with audiences which are recorded for analysis.

The forums are attended by a minimum of 200 youth and it is anticipated that it will reach 1,200 youth within six months, who will in turn disseminate the skills and knowledge acquired at a community level.

Key lessons: counter-narratives should be tailored according to audience in order to maximise their impact.

Several methods of dissemination can be adopted as part of a broader strategic campaign.

USA: EXIT USA

EXIT USA is a non-governmental organisation developed and run by former white-power extremists. It performs outreach work dedicated to aiding individuals involved in white-power and far-right extremist groups in the United States to leave these organisations and start new lives. EXIT USA provides a safe platform for individuals to reach out and seek help either for themselves or someone they know to leave far-right groups.

In addition to outreach services EXIT also runs counter-narrative campaigns serving to raise awareness about far-right and white-power extremism. A video campaign consisting of 4 short videos used former extremist (formers)'s testimonies to deliver messages which challenge extremist narratives and highlight the realities of involvement in the far-right, with two individuals reaching out directly for support in response to the campaign.

Key lessons: former extremists can act as powerful messengers for challenging extremist narrative.

Consistent engagement on social media can enable new audiences to be reached and facilitate the stimulation of discussion.
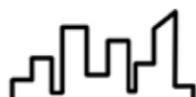
UK: Radical Middle Way

Radical Middle Way is a grassroots initiative operated by Islamic scholars and civil society activists. Operating online and offline Radical Middle Way connects young British Muslims with authentic Muslim scholarship and offers a safe space for young people to seek guidance and engage in open debate, whilst promoting cohesive communities and civic responsibility.

Online, Radical Middle Way serves as a hub, and seeks to foster a moderate community. They produce and promote a range of audio-visual content and leverage social media to expand their impact. Offline they have organised over 170 events with content and guests ranging from Islamic scholars to hip hop artists. The group is active within Muslim communities globally, and has worked on engagement activities in Mali, Pakistan, Sudan, and Indonesia.

Key lessons: social activism and popular culture can be combined in order to maximise reach amongst younger audiences.

Counter-narratives can move beyond countering extremist discourse by providing the opportunity for audience members to become involved in social activism.