



COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COMMUNICATIONS POSITION PAPER

Key points

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.

Whilst municipalities may not be an appropriate face for campaigns in every case, their involvement and partnership can:

- Better identify locally pertinent extremist messaging and narratives and the grievances they draw upon
- Improve understandings of at-risk and vulnerable demographics
- Link local initiatives to national or global campaigns and those leading them
- Identify and promote credible voices from within local communities

Starting points for cities

- **Identify** key issues, narratives and propaganda driving radicalisation and recruitment in your city.
- **Locate** credible voices within your community who can offer a powerful alternative narrative.
- **Build** partnerships with organisations, experts and platforms that can help amplify these voices.
- **Evaluate** the reach and impact of campaigns to understand whether they are reaching the target groups, limiting the impact of extremist narratives and driving attitudinal and behavioural change.

Partners

Counter-narratives have been developed and delivered by a variety of state and non-state actors ranging from grassroots civil society groups, youth campaigners, NGOs, 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.

The role of municipalities

Campaign strategies range from global and nationwide initiatives to small-scale, highly focused programmes targeting key demographics. Municipal infrastructure and established community relationships mean cities are well suited to locate and amplify credible local voices against violent extremism. Government communications are a useful tool for building trust within communities and if successfully implemented can be used to forge longstanding and meaningful relationships with key communities.

Local 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 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. The reach and impact of these campaigns depend on building strong community relationships and securing grassroots endorsement.

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, but if national and international funding streams can be unlocked by cities they have the potential to massively increase a campaign's duration, reach and impact.

The success of a counter-narrative is dependent 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 focused the goals and objectives of the campaign are.

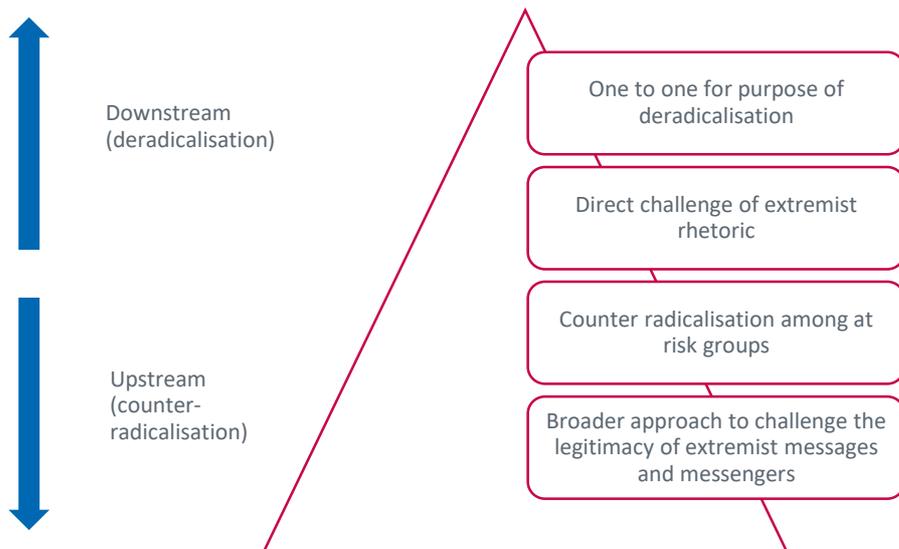
For detailed guidance on planning a counter-narrative campaign see ISD's [Counter-Narrative Handbook](#) and our free [Counter-Narrative Toolkit](#).

Delivering a campaign

Defining the type of narrative for a given campaign is key to both its strategy and delivery. The term counter-narrative represent a broad spectrum of products and 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:** aim to convey government positions and influence their public reception, refute misinformation, and forge relationships and trust with key constituencies and audiences.

Programmes can either be explicit or relevant for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). P/CVE-explicit programming directly challenges the issue of extremism, recruitment and terrorism, whilst P/CVE-relevant programming implicitly tackles extremism through addressing specific drivers.



Evaluating success

The success of 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 resonated with the target 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 online can be measured through **comments**, **reactions**, **shares** and other metrics of campaign material.

Assessing the impact of a campaign can be incredibly difficult, but qualitative analysis of users’ comments – and particularly sustained engagements – can provide insight into a campaign’s impact on its target audience. For both online and offline campaigns, demonstrating behavioural or attitudinal change through a combination of pre- and post-surveys, focus group discussions and control trials offers the strongest evidence of impact.

For detailed guidance on evaluating campaigns and counter-narratives, see ISD’s [Counter-Narrative Monitoring & Evaluation Handbook](#).



Benefits and risks

The following represent key benefits and risks associated with the involvement of local governments and municipalities in developing counter-narrative and alternative narrative campaigns:

Benefits	Risks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Targetting: municipalities have a better sense of the extremist narratives that gain traction in their communities - as well as those they target - than national governments and major multinational platforms. Their contextual understanding can inform the focus, content and form of future campaigns to improve impact.•Local voices: municipalities are well positioned to identify and empower credible voices from within the local community, potentially increasing engagement and impact.•Amplification: local initiatives and messengers often require support and training, partnerships which municipalities can help facilitate across multiple sectors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Credibility: if messages and messengers are not credible they risk worsening community relations and exacerbating issues of extremism.•Trust: if communities feel unfairly targeted, then campaigns may cause distrust of local authorities.•Impact: if unfocused, then campaigns can drain resources without delivering impact.



COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND COMMUNICATIONS CASE BOOK

The following is a brief library of examples which illustrate what counter-narrative and alternative narrative campaigns can look like in practice, and includes four examples of SCN member city campaigns. They demonstrate the diversity of initiatives in scope, scale and reach and provide a starting point for municipalities wishing to pursue such work, as well as lessons which can be learned.

CASE STUDY 1: Stray Bullets (Tripoli, Lebanon)

CONTEXT	The global Small Arms Survey estimates that as of 2017 in Lebanon, 1,927,000 civilians possess firearms. With a population of 6,105,000, almost one-third of Lebanese civilians own a firearm. According to the Permanent Peace Movement , 90 people were killed in 2017 alone due to stray bullets fired at weddings and other celebrations. ¹
CATEGORY	Counter-narrative
CAMPAIGN	<p>In Lebanon, the SCN city of Tripoli delivered a campaign focused on celebratory gun violence. Youth campaigners constructed a staged wedding scenario in downtown Tripoli during which the groom is injured by a stray bullet. The entire scene was filmed and professionally edited showing people's reactions on the street. The campaigners then emerged with their banners and signs calling for an end to celebratory gun violence and the campaign's hashtag.</p> <p>The campaign was born out of a joint 3-day workshop between youth and members of SCN's Tripoli Community Prevention Network (CPN) in May 2018. <i>Stray Bullets</i> is an example of a campaign that draws on local and national audiences. Funded by ISD's Young Cities initiative, the campaign was planned by youth activists and Tripoli's CPN focal point.</p>
MUNICIPALITY'S ROLE	The CPN's focal point is also a municipal employee; this helped the youth campaigners expedite municipal level permissions for setting up a public street performance.
EVALUATION	The video has been viewed more than 221,000 times online on the campaign's Facebook page, with more than 3,200 reactions . <i>Stray Bullets</i> campaign organisers have since been interviewed by local radio channels.

Key lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working at both a local government and grassroots level accelerates campaign progress.• Using a combined online and offline campaign strategy widens audience reach.
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See the *Stray Bullets* campaign video [here](#).



CASE STUDY 2: Wedding Busters (Oslo, Norway)

CONTEXT	The anti-child marriage campaign 'Girls Not Brides' estimates that 1 in 5 girls are married before the age of 18. With over 650 million women globally to have been married as children today, the issue of child marriage is a global challenge.
CATEGORY	Counter-narrative
CAMPAIGN	Inspired by anti-child marriage youth campaigners in Bangladesh, youth activists in Oslo, Norway campaigned for raising the age of marriage from 16 to 18 years of age in Norway. Until recently, it was legal for a child aged between 16 and 17 to marry with consent from their parents and approval from local authorities. Youth campaigners travelled to schools across Norway gathering thousands of signatures of students in opposition to this law. Youth campaigners in both Bangladesh and Norway were supported by the NGO Plan International.
MUNICIPALITY'S ROLE	When young Norwegian Wedding Busters activists marched into the office of their local county governor to question the protected legal status of child marriage in Norway, the governor took notice. With over 9,400 signed letters by young people across schools, the governor pushed the campaign to a national political level.
EVALUATION	The campaign received national media coverage, and in May 2018, politicians in Norwegian parliament overturned the law by raising the age of marriage to 18 in Norway.

Key lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scaling campaigns that address a targeted issue can be effective when adapted to their local context.• Drawing on best practice from other cities and their experience can strengthen a new campaign.
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Learn more about the Wedding Busters campaign [here](#).



CASE STUDY 3: Washwasha (Saida, Lebanon)

CONTEXT	Saida is home to Ein El Helweh; Lebanon’s biggest Palestinian refugee camp. Ein El Helweh faces different challenges than the city of Saida, often resulting in stereotypes of the camp as an extremist space for youth.
CATEGORY	Alternative narrative
CAMPAIGN	From the same workshop that produced <i>Stray Bullets</i> , youth campaigners and Saida’s SCN CPN came together to create <i>Washwasha</i> . An online YouTube show, <i>Washwasha</i> aims to break down stereotypes of Palestinians from Ein El Hilweh refugee camp in Saida. By inviting non-Palestinians into the camp, innovative and creative youth from Ein El Hilweh were able to share their stories with the Saida community. The <i>Washwasha</i> YouTube series puts the narrative of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in their own hands.
MUNICIPALITY’S ROLE	While the municipality was not involved directly with the <i>Washwasha</i> campaign, campaigners were able draw on their municipal expertise through the Saida CPN.
EVALUATION	Each episode lasts approximately 3 minutes, increasing the likelihood of viewers clicking on videos. <i>Washwasha</i> ’s Facebook page has attracted more than 4,700 likes with videos ranging from 15,000 to 48,000 views . Campaign organisers have since been interviewed on Palestine Today TV to talk about their campaign.

Key lesson	Long term creative online content builds campaign sustainability, giving the opportunity to address an array of local issues under a targetted aim such as breaking down stereotypes.
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Learn more about the Washwasha campaign [here](#).



CASE STUDY 4: film forums and multimedia (Mombasa, Kenya)

CONTEXT	Kenya's most active terrorist organisation is the Al-Qaeda affiliated group Al-Shabab. Established in the 1990s, the Islamist group has maintained a presence in Kenya carrying out attacks including the Garissa University College which killed 148 people.
CATEGORY	Counter-narrative
CAMPAIGN	<p>In the SCN member city of Mombasa, the Kenya Community Support Centre (KECOSCE) used a film forum and radio media to engage youth with key P/CVE messages to counter the narratives of Al-Shabaab. This P/CVE project targets young people aged between 15 and 25.</p> <p>Using a radio platform, local Mombasa community leaders, religious leaders, youth activists and local government dissect Al-Shabab messaging through a P/CVE lens, discussing the advantages of cooperation with moderate Muslim institutions and the government of Kenya.</p> <p>In tandem with the radio discussions, KECOSCE organised film forums screening the film <i>Watatu</i>. The film depicts the experience of a young Kenyan man who becomes radicalised and recruited by an Al-Shabaab affiliate. <i>Watatu</i> 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.</p>
MUNICIPALITY'S ROLE	While the County Government did not work on this project specifically, the Mombasa Police department has been involved in other projects with the Kenya Community Support Centre in the past.
EVALUATION	The discussions were broadcasted on a local radio station with a daily listenership of almost 300,000 . The forums were attended by hundreds of youth within the first 6 months of the project.

Key lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Counter-narratives should be tailored to their target audience in order to maximise their impact.• A mix of counter-narrative methods can be adopted as part of a broader strategic campaign.
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Learn more about this campaign [here](#).



CASE STUDY 5: Black Crows

CONTEXT With Daesh recruitment growing, producers of the Black Crows saw a need to put forward a direct counter-narrative for the MENA region. Aired on a primetime Saudi Arabian channel, the series brought together male and female actors from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon.

CATEGORY Counter-narrative

CAMPAIGN Black Crows is a TV drama series focused on life under Daesh. The 30-episode series dramatizes Daesh practices such as sexual abuse, slavery, paedophilia and military training of children and executions. In often graphic scenes of violence, Black Crows contextualises the motivations of characters joining Daesh and their subsequent experience of regret. The series also depicts the more sinister nature of characters that have joined Daesh and revel in participating in its violence.

EVALUATION Black Crows was screened during the holy month of Ramadan on MBC 1; one of Arabic media's biggest channels on satellite television.

Key lesson	Subverting Daesh's use of violence, the series' use of real-life inspired stories, particularly those of regret, creates a powerful counter-narrative for vulnerable potential recruits.
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Learn more about this campaign [here](#).



CASE STUDY 6: EXIT USA

CONTEXT EXIT USA is a project of the US-based non-profit organisation Life After Hate, developed and run by former white supremacists and neo-Nazis. 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.

CATEGORY Counter-narrative

CAMPAIGN 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 four short videos used the testimony of former extremists 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.

EVALUATION Direct impact in target community, helping extremists exit far-right groups.

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| Key lessons | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Former extremists can act as powerful messengers for challenging extremist narratives.• Consistent engagement on social media can enable new audiences to be reached and facilitate the stimulation of discussion. |
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Learn more about EXIT USA [here](#).

¹ Nourhan Nasser and Yomn Al-Kaisi, 'Activists in Lebanon are taking on the country's stray bullet problem', Global Voices, 29 November 2018, <https://globalvoices.org/2018/11/29/activists-in-lebanon-are-taking-on-the-countrys-stray-bullet-problem/> (last accessed 12 December 2018)