



Lessons Learned from Alternative Narrative Campaigns

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Introduction

The alternative narrative is one of several “soft” approaches to preventing and suppressing radicalisation to violence ⁽¹⁾. In this way, it is informed by perspectives that view “the narrative” as a pillar of radicalisation, one that facilitates the maladaptive cognitive restructuring necessary for radicalisation to occur ⁽²⁾. Distinct from its sister strategy, the *counter*-narrative, an alternative narrative is not intended to directly challenge the content of violent extremist rhetoric. Instead, it serves to undermine its “predominant assumptions” ⁽³⁾. Ultimately, an alternative narrative tells a different story, focusing on what society is “for” rather than “against”, whilst remaining completely distinct from the “discourse and influence” of a dominant, problematic narrative ⁽⁴⁾. The aim of this paper is to take stock of the work on alternative narrative campaigns by the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) and others in recent years, noting new developments and considerations that need to be taken into account, before presenting concrete lessons learned and recommendations for practice.

Developments and trends in alternative narrative campaigns in P/CVE

The function of an alternative narrative is to change the direction of a particular conversation, and introduce something novel where outdated, offensive or even seemingly irrelevant narratives may have, thus far, dominated. Indeed, outside the world of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), the phenomenon can unfold organically, particularly amongst more isolated communities where certain societal values tend to emerge independent of mainstream discourse. Amongst communities in the Central Pacific, for instance, alternative narratives have been identified in relation to the climate crisis, ones that are rooted in these communities’ dominant Christian faith ⁽⁵⁾. To give an example, a typical counter-narrative to greener economic policies, practices and initiatives would be that it is “too late” to reverse the damage done by global warming. One of the alternative narratives observed in the Central Pacific is that only God can influence the planet. In other words, the alternative narrative is founded upon *fundamentally different assumptions* to dominant discourse, rendering it “alternative”. However, although the concept is not a novel one, it is a relatively recent addition to the P/CVE toolkit, prompting a number of key debates as to its conceptual potential, its true distinctiveness from the counter-narrative and the exact nature of its relationship with dominant discourse.

Key debates

Conceptual potential

Although alternative narratives can be observed organically across a range of contexts, the *conceptual potential* of the approach in reducing radicalisation remains subject to debate. Noted as being an inherently “uncool” approach to dismantling extremist narratives ⁽⁶⁾, any alternative narrative campaign will, ultimately, be committed to “the status quo”. Indeed, in the absence of “meaningful change” in the broader context ⁽⁷⁾, it has been suggested that the potential for alternative narratives to rival extremist narratives (without using comparable, manipulative techniques ⁽⁸⁾) is limited.

⁽¹⁾ The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2354 (2017).

⁽²⁾ Kruglanski et al., *The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks*.

⁽³⁾ Gavin, *The social construction of the child sex offender explored by narrative*, p. 398.

⁽⁴⁾ Adame et al., *Beyond the counter-narrative: Exploring alternative narratives of recovery from the psychiatric survivor movement*, p. 160.

⁽⁵⁾ Farbotko, *Wishful sinking: Disappearing islands, climate refugees and cosmopolitan experimentation*.

⁽⁶⁾ Berger, *Making CVE work: A focused approach based on process disruption*, p. 7.

⁽⁷⁾ Such as support for minority rights and opportunities for belonging, see: Radicalisation Awareness Network, [Preventing radicalisation to terrorism and violent extremism: Delivering counter- or alternative narratives](#), p. 528.

⁽⁸⁾ A characteristic of counter-narrative campaigns that has faced criticism. See: Carthy et al., *Counter-narratives for the prevention of violent radicalisation: A systematic review of targeted interventions*, p. 30.

In the past, strategies that challenge the underlying assumptions of dominant discourse have been met with mixed reactions, both from their targets as well as academia more broadly⁽⁹⁾. Ultimately, any attempt to undermine a pervasive narrative runs the risk of stereotyping specific groups, particularly if the sensitivities and concerns of the target audience are not sufficiently understood⁽¹⁰⁾. This is an important point in the development of the alternative narrative concept, and one that will be considered in subsequent sections.

Differentiating between alternative and counter-narratives

Another important debate amongst practitioners and researchers alike is on the utility of differentiating between an alternative and counter-narrative at all. On one hand, it could be argued that a counter-narrative “presupposes” an alternative narrative, as it provides the fulcrum to create one⁽¹¹⁾. In other words, by countering a narrative, the audience may be spurred to create an alternative one. In this way, it is logical that both would be referenced collectively⁽¹²⁾. This tends to be the norm amongst RAN working groups, with counter-narratives and alternative narratives often subsumed under the acronym AN/CN.

However, it could also be argued that both strategies are informed by distinctive (even divergent) theoretical frameworks. The counter-narrative concept is informed by theory and evidence on *counter* arguing, whilst the alternative narrative is better informed by resilience-building frameworks (e.g., forewarning and critical thinking). This, in turn, has created confusion about the intended audience for an alternative narrative campaign, and whether it differs from the target audience for a counter-narrative campaign. Indeed, this forms part of a broader debate on the ultimate *goal* of an alternative narrative in terms of audience attitudes.

Response-making, -changing or -shaping?

In general, it is a lot easier to create or reinforce new or almost-new attitudes (“response-making” or “response-shaping”⁽¹³⁾) than change a person’s mind altogether (“response-changing”). This can depend on several factors:

- If an individual feels more psychologically “safe” with their baseline attitude⁽¹⁴⁾.
- If an individual is not motivated to change their mind⁽¹⁵⁾.
- If an individual simply does not wish to engage with the appeal⁽¹⁶⁾.

Response-changing strategies frequently result in resistant responses, or no change at all. After all, who enjoys having their mind changed? A case in point is the counter-narrative, which frequently encounters difficulties of this nature. Conceptualised as a strategy intended for individuals “further along the path to radicalisation”, the counter-narrative is an example of a response-*changing* strategy⁽¹⁷⁾. As such, its targets have already formed baseline attitudes, and any attempt to change this equilibrium is more likely to reinforce problematic attitudes or result in no change at all. This has been observed in experimental settings where participants who were exposed to a counter-narrative upon exposure to extremist propaganda were more likely to align with the propaganda⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, with the alternative narrative strategy, the relationship between the alternative narrative campaign and dominant discourse is less clear. Specifically, the question remains, is the alternative narrative intended

⁽⁹⁾ Plaisance & Lee, The propaganda war on terrorism: An analysis of the United States’ “Shared Values” public-diplomacy campaign after September 11, 2001.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Ritzmann, [Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMA+\)](#), p. 2.

⁽¹¹⁾ de Latour et al., [WE CAN! Taking action against hate speech through counter and alternative narratives](#), p. 79.

⁽¹²⁾ As “counter- and alternative narrative (CAN) campaigns”, for example. See: Schlegel, Storytelling against extremism: How fiction could increase the persuasive impact of counter- and alternative narratives in P/CVE, p. 195.

⁽¹³⁾ Tate, Developments in communication theory, p. 64.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Wegener et al., Multiple routes to resisting attitude change.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Festinger, A theory of cognitive dissonance.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Rucker et al., Individual differences in resistance to persuasion: The role of beliefs and meta-beliefs, p. 83.

⁽¹⁷⁾ Briggs & Feve, [Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism](#), p. 12.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Carthy & Sarma, Countering terrorist narratives: Assessing the efficacy and mechanisms of change in counter-narrative strategies; Frischlich et al., The power of a good story: Narrative persuasion in extremist propaganda and videos against violent extremism.

to create a new attitude, shape an existing one or change one completely? As well as determining its target audience, this distinction will also determine its overall goal. As will be discussed in more detail below, it is considered good practice to include a “call to action” in any strategic communication campaign, but, if an alternative narrative is not inherently response-changing, can it be conceptualised as behaviour *change* at all? After all, its premise is to remain completely distinct from the discourse and influence of the dominant, problematic narrative. As such, the necessity of a behaviour change mechanism has not always been clear and the relationship between the alternative narrative and dominant discourse remains ambiguous.

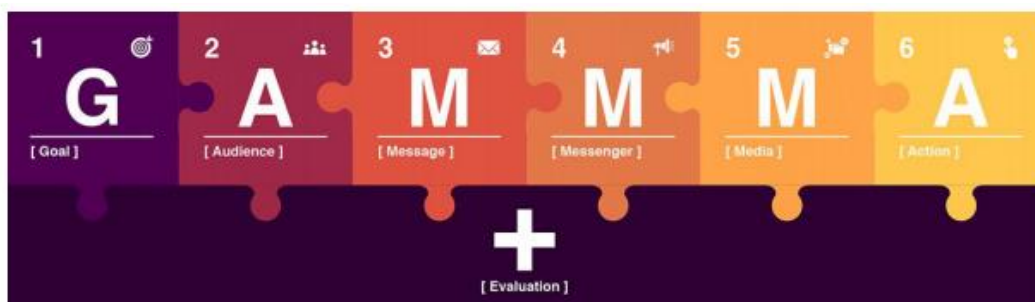
The following section will consider these debates whilst presenting some salient developments in the approach over the last number of years.

Developing alternative narratives

Since its inception, the practical side of developing an alternative narrative has become more refined, aided in part by the development of the GAMMMA+ model. The GAMMMA+ model offers practical guidelines for developing effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. The model has been promoted by the RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (RAN C&N) since December 2017 and, in its most recent iteration (November 2019), is comprised of seven key elements: Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media, Action plus Monitoring and Evaluation.

Through the development of these elements, the aims, objectives and logic of alternative narrative campaigns have, too, evolved. Most pertinently, the concept has become less ambiguous in terms of its overall goal and its target audience.

What is the goal?



In recent years, more clarity has been provided on what “happens” to extremist messaging once an alternative narrative campaign is introduced. As an alternative narrative does not

directly counter anything, it has been suggested that the strategy should “displace” extremist messaging, rendering it redundant by removing its relevance or place in society ⁽¹⁹⁾.

To this end, the GAMMMA+ model stresses the importance of including a call to action in both alternative and counter-narrative campaigns. Indeed, in other areas of strategic communication, including self-efficacy mechanisms is considered best practice, particularly with campaigns that use fear arousal ⁽²⁰⁾. However, as mentioned in earlier sections, the relationship between an alternative narrative and attitudes emerging from dominant discourse has not always been clear, questioning the utility of including a call to action in a strategy that is not designed to change attitudes at all. So, what is the goal?

In 2018, RAN C&N elaborated upon this call-to-action element and stressed the importance of using communication strategies that also drive offline or in-person work ⁽²¹⁾. The goal of the alternative narrative, they advised, was not to replace the good work done by local practitioners but serve as an “overarching umbrella” promoting shared values and beliefs. On this point, it has become clearer that the goal of an

⁽¹⁹⁾ Beutel et al., Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives, p. 35.

⁽²⁰⁾ Carey et al., The impact of threat appeals on fear arousal and driver behavior: A meta-analysis of experimental research 1990–2011.

⁽²¹⁾ Verdegaal, [How can online communications drive offline interventions?](#), p. 2.

alternative narrative strategy is not to contradict an extremist message but to *tell a story that cannot sustain it* in the broader social ecology. In such a way, the extremist message still exists, but becomes less relevant.

Who is the target audience?

Early iterations of the alternative narrative concept implied that the target audience for such campaigns should include those who may be sympathetic towards extremist causes ⁽²²⁾ (selected by means of a “priority indicator”, for example ⁽²³⁾). These would be classified as “at risk” of radicalisation. It was also suggested that those already radicalised may benefit from the strategy (producers of hate speech, for example ⁽²⁴⁾). However, in more recent conceptualisations, a distinguishing feature of the alternative narrative strategy is that it is designed to resonate with a wider population.

In this way, there seems to be a notable shift towards designing campaigns that target a broader audience. After all, [as noted by Linda Schlegel](#) in her weighing of “narrowcasting” versus “broadcasting” approaches, even the most tailored narrative will still be interpreted differently by different individuals. In line with the broadcasting approach, it has even been suggested that implementing alternative narrative principles into civic education programmes, for example, would target a more diverse audience and, in turn, even more diverse *outcomes*. For example, targeting prosocial outcomes such as voter registration and participation, whilst encouraging civil engagement, may also bolster individuals against extremist narratives by providing non-violent routes to political change ⁽²⁵⁾.

Ultimately, when observing the development of the concept over time, it seems that the target audience of an alternative narrative campaign will inevitably include those who have never (and may never) encounter an extremist message, *as well as* those classified as at risk of radicalisation. It is important to note that this is not necessarily a defining component of the alternative narrative, but it most likely reflects its conceptual novelty in P/CVE. In time, the target audience(s) of such campaigns may become more refined. Regardless, as demonstrated below, the variability of the target audience has been an important feature of both successful and unsuccessful alternative narrative campaigns in the last number of years and has inevitably increased the depth and breadth of techniques that can be incorporated into the former.

What makes a “successful” alternative narrative campaign?

Taking a closer look at which types of alternative narrative campaigns are commonly considered good practices or successful, a number of common elements emerge.

Theory of Change (ToC)

In order to create an effective alternative narrative campaign, a key recommendation by RAN C&N is not only to invest enough time, money and expertise in the evaluation phase, but also to establish a proper baseline assessment and theory of change (ToC) that will inform the overall campaign ⁽²⁶⁾. It is important to reiterate that an informed campaign will make use of its ToC at each available juncture. The first is in determining the “active ingredient” of the strategy.

What are the active ingredients?

As mentioned earlier, an alternative narrative does not directly counter anything but is designed to “displace” extremist messaging, rendering it redundant by removing its relevance or place in society ⁽²⁷⁾. From here,

⁽²²⁾ Briggs & Feve, Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism, p. 12.

⁽²³⁾ RAN Centre of Excellence, [One-to-one digital interventions](#), p. 2.

⁽²⁴⁾ de Latour et al., [WE CAN! Taking action against hate speech through counter and alternative narratives](#), p. 77.

⁽²⁵⁾ Beutel et al., Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives, p. 38.

⁽²⁶⁾ Ritzmann et al., [Effective narratives: Updating the GAMMA+ model](#), p. 3.

⁽²⁷⁾ Beutel et al., Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives, p. 35.

the question resurfaces as to whether an alternative narrative campaign is meant to “change” anything at all, or to simply stop it from happening.

Earlier, a debate was presented as to the function of an alternative narrative campaign and whether it is intended for use as a response-making, -shaping or -changing strategy. In the case of the first, robust, informing theories would include those that bolster an individual against an incoming violent extremist narrative, fostering critical thinking ⁽²⁸⁾. Here, the active ingredient can be operationalised as critical thinking. For example, this is a component of the Extremely EUnited [Extremely Critical](#) campaign that targets the critical thinking skills of young people through “videos, podcasts, drawings and other tools”. [One video](#), for example, describes how dichotomous thinking develops, presumably to empower young people to cognitively reflect.

On the other hand, if the strategy is intended to be delivered to those whose attitudes have already been shaped, it may be more appropriate to incorporate specific, radicalisation frameworks or even broader communication theories.



Image 1: The message that appeared once the shirt was washed: ‘What your T-shirt can do, you also can do – We help you to free yourself from right-wing extremism. EXIT-Germany’.

Here, the nature of the campaign was to eliminate peer influence and encourage engagement with another story, and it managed to do so in its design. This is an example of integrating a robust, theoretical idea (i.e., peer influence) into an alternative narrative, and using it as one of its active ingredients (i.e. removing the audience from this influence).

Using a ToC to inform evaluation and monitoring

A robust theoretical framework does not just determine the active ingredient in a campaign. It is also an important consideration in the evaluation phase. However, it is important to note that campaigns of this nature are notoriously hard to evaluate, and uptake is tentative. Indeed, when synthesising knowledge and good practices in piloted or established alternative narrative campaigns for the current report, it was not always clear if the intended impact of certain campaigns was defined as part of the planning process at all, rendering it difficult to conclusively demonstrate success after implementation. Ultimately, there seems to be a disconnect between the ToC informing the campaign and evaluation informed by these theoretical components. For example, in interviews with 53 civil society organisations (CSOs) from Europe and beyond in 2016 ⁽²⁹⁾, it became clear that there was a tendency amongst campaigners to rely upon metrics such as the number of “views”, “shares” and “likes”, despite their remoteness from radicalisation. In many ways, this is not surprising; capturing the elusiveness and ambiguity of radicalisation proximity in any evaluation toolkit presents a daunting task. However, when baseline assessment is well informed, this task becomes more straightforward.

⁽²⁸⁾ For example, inoculation theory has been used in this way to reduce the effectiveness of violent extremist narratives in laboratory settings. See: Braddock, Vaccinating against hate: Using attitudinal inoculation to confer resistance to persuasion by extremist propaganda; Carthy et al., Countering terrorist narratives: Assessing the efficacy and mechanisms of change in counter-narrative strategies.

⁽²⁹⁾ RAN C&N, [Lessons Learned: What to do and what not to do](#).

For example, if an individual's adoption of a violent extremist narrative is to be understood through the lens of searching for personal meaning, an alternative narrative campaign should establish personal meaning-making as its active ingredient as well as its outcome of assessment⁽³⁰⁾. In the area of deradicalisation, for example, a number of prison-based interventions use personal meaning as their ToC. One rehabilitation programme in Sri Lanka incorporated spiritual programmes like yoga and arts activities to encourage individual expression and provide another avenue for personal meaning, one that did not relate to their collective group membership in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam⁽³¹⁾. A reciprocal outcome of assessment for such an intervention would be the extent to which participants gained personal meaning from the programme or its activities, measured over time or even between audiences that did and did not receive the alternative narrative⁽³²⁾.

Similarly, if informed by theoretical frameworks that place emphasis on role models or group dynamics, an alternative narrative strategy may promote "positive identities" with a different role model in the alternative narrative and measure identification in the evaluation phase⁽³³⁾. Evaluating an alternative narrative campaign using outcomes identified in an overriding ToC also reduces the likelihood of response biases through obvious "direct questions"⁽³⁴⁾.

Indeed, this equilibrium of using a robust ToC to inform not only the design of the strategy but also the evaluation phase has been observed in other areas of radicalisation prevention, with some success. 'Beyond Bali' was an educational intervention that broadly targeted radicalisation in schools⁽³⁵⁾. Informed by moral disengagement theory, the intervention was designed to encourage students to choose to behave morally by exerting self-influence. In this way, there was a clear ToC informing the active ingredients in the intervention (i.e. promoting moral engagement). Therefore, the evaluation phase was concerned with determining the extent to which the programme promoted moral engagement. In other words, both the design and evaluation phases of the intervention were theoretically informed.

Audience research

Differences versus similarities

Having an in-depth understanding of a campaign's target audience has always been an important component of the GAMMMA+ model and tends to resurface in outputs from RAN C&N⁽³⁶⁾. In 2016, based on the interviews with European CSOs mentioned above⁽³⁷⁾, it became clear that although most interviewees said they knew a lot about the audience they wished to target, many could not identify key characteristics of their intended audience, nor were they confident about how to effectively reach them. One campaign, for instance, was targeted at a "general European population", but one interviewee noted that this audience was ultimately too broad. Because of an overemphasis on similarities rather than differences between Member States, the content, they argued, did not receive enough visibility. Delivering a Europe-wide campaign in English, for example, will inevitably overlook key differences in language across Member States and fall into this trap⁽³⁸⁾.

⁽³⁰⁾ This is the premise of many needs-based theories that have been used to inform what we know about radicalisation. For example, *Terror Management Theory* (Becker, 1973), *The Meaning Maintenance Model* (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), *Uncertainty-Identity Theory* (Hogg & Adelman, 2013; Hogg & Wagoner, 2017), and *Reactive Approach Motivation Theory* (McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013).

⁽³¹⁾ Dugas & Kruglanski, The quest for significance model of radicalization: Implications for the management of terrorist detainees, p. 435.

⁽³²⁾ Such outcomes could be constructed by the campaign team or (to more confidently determine change over time) adapted from existing scales. For example, see functions of the SoMe questionnaire or Schnell, The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to demographics and well-being.

⁽³³⁾ Beutel et al., Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives, p. 41.

⁽³⁴⁾ Ritzmann et al., [Effective narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#), p. 3.

⁽³⁵⁾ Aly et al., Moral disengagement and building resilience to violent extremism: An education intervention.

⁽³⁶⁾ RAN C&N, [Lessons Learned: What to do and what not to do](#).

⁽³⁷⁾ Ibid.

⁽³⁸⁾ Thus far, the role of language in developing successful, alternative narrative campaigns remains unclear. Whilst it is intuitively suggested that campaigns should be delivered using the target audience's language style, dialect(s) and slang, there are no empirical comparisons of alternative narrative campaigns delivered in different languages, so the extent to which language moderates effectiveness is still not known.

Whilst it seems logical to select a target audience based on traits or characteristics that bind them together, an important component of the development of social identity is what is termed *intergroup differentiation*; perceiving one's group to be different than an out-group⁽³⁹⁾. By attending only to apparent similarities, there is the potential to obscure discrepancies in the population at large and miss some pertinent *dissimilarities* that contradict the underlying assumptions of the alternative narrative. Gaining a better understanding of this nuance, according to RAN C&N, cannot be achieved by desk research alone. Inviting a member of the target audience to be part of the design team, for example, will ensure a richer understanding of the target audience.

Using shared morals and values to undermine predominant assumptions

In earlier sections, it was noted that a defining feature of an alternative narrative is its relationship with dominant discourse. Rather than trying to "reason with" the arguments put forth in a dominant narrative, an alternative narrative attempts to undermine its predominant assumptions whilst remaining completely distinct from its central arguments. One approach to achieving this goal is to root the alternative narrative in *morals* (learned characteristics of correct behaviour, usually under societal influence) or *values* (inherent principles that motivate and guide behaviour). However, this pursuit is not as straightforward as it seems, particularly if resistance or "backfire effects" are to be avoided⁽⁴⁰⁾.

In the academic literature, it becomes clear that radicalisation trajectories can be rooted in a spectrum of moral preferences. Indeed, a defining feature of radicalisation is one's willingness to subordinate other needs and devotions to a more abstract ideal (this is often conceptualised as *counterfinality*)⁽⁴¹⁾. For example, it has been observed that "devoted" actors do not easily yield their "sacred values" (those which individuals refuse to trade off for material or monetary compensation) in favour of typical human values (e.g. family, health or human life)⁽⁴²⁾. In other words, radicalisation causes individuals to reprioritise their needs, sometimes to the point that they value extremism *over* typical human values. When "blanket" morals and values (such as the importance of respecting human life) have been pre-emptively countered within a certain audience, it becomes illogical to incorporate them into a campaign.

This was observed in a [notable interaction](#) with Ali Shukri Amin (a teenager who operated a pro-ISIS Twitter account and provided material support to the so-called Islamic State between 2014 and 2015) and the United States (US) State Department's "ThinkAgainTurnAway" campaign. According to the SITE Intelligence Group, the ThinkAgain user tweeted at another pro-ISIS user that "those who follow #Bin Laden's path will share his faith" before posting a list of deceased fighters. Amin replied, "these men are martyrs, insha'Allah, with their souls in pure ecstasy roaming the vastness of eternal paradise". In other words, the campaigner assumed that typical human values (such as wanting to stay alive) would unconditionally resonate. However, at least one member of their target audience no longer upheld this value, as their response illustrated.

⁽³⁹⁾ Lalonde, Testing the social identity-intergroup differentiation hypothesis: 'We're not American eh!'.
⁽⁴⁰⁾ Resistance can manifest in several ways, including reactance (strengthening one's initial position, see Brehm, 1966), inertia (resistance to change itself, see Heider, 1946; Moyer-Guse, 2008, p. 417), distrust (directed towards the source, Knowles & Linn, 2004), and scrutiny (critical analysis, see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).
⁽⁴¹⁾ Schumpe et al., Counterfinality: On the increased perceived instrumentality of means to a goal.
⁽⁴²⁾ Gómez et al., The devoted actor's will to fight and the spiritual dimension of human conflict, p. 674.



Image 2: Screenshot of a YouTube video by Jamal al-Khatib

narratives during the “peak phase” of Daesh. Their experiences form the basis for the content of videos, in which alternative narratives to Islamist-jihadist propaganda are conveyed. The goal is to establish a level of communication on various social media platforms with hard-to-reach target groups. The aim is to address issues that are as close as possible to the reality of the target group’s lives, while at the same time spreading interpretation about different Islamic concepts and terms that are misused by extremist actors on platforms for their own purposes.

Return autonomy to the audience

There is an extensive body of evidence demonstrating that audience involvement in messaging (also referred to as “elaboration”⁽⁴⁴⁾) reduces the likelihood of attempts to undermine it being accepted. In other words, the more an individual thinks about an idea, the harder it becomes to counter or displace that idea. Certainly, this phenomenon can be used to the *advantage* of an alternative narrative campaigner whose audience’s exposure to an extremist message is minimal. For example, the AfVT ([Association française des victimes du terrorisme](#)) delivers an alternative narrative campaign to high school students that encourages elaboration through debate. Through classroom sessions moderated by victims of terrorism, the campaign is designed to tell a story for the first time (i.e. the victim’s story), whilst also encouraging the students to engage with the story. Attempts to undermine students’ take-home message later on are, therefore, less likely to be successful.

However, if an audience member has already thought about the reasons behind a particular event or concept communicated through an extremist narrative, the mental model they create is likely to bias the processing of “new” information, such as an alternative narrative⁽⁴⁵⁾. This was demonstrated in the Shared Values Initiative, a campaign initially piloted across several Muslim countries as a means of diluting the prevailing narrative that America was not a welcoming place for Muslims in the post 9/11 era. The strategy (a series of video clips depicting Muslims living happily in the US) was an attempt to promote what the US was “for” without directly challenging specific narrative components. When the videos were shown to international students enrolled at Regent’s College in London in 2003, the majority considered the videos to be “biased” or “one-sided”. Fewer than half of those who viewed the videos considered them believable, and an even greater number expressed doubt that the videos would be considered believable or credible by those living in the targeted countries⁽⁴⁶⁾.

Indeed, in strategic communication research more broadly, the ambiguity of the “right” message has been subject to criticism for a lack of specificity⁽⁴³⁾. It may be the case that terms such as “European” or “democratic” values add to this ambiguity. A successful campaign will consider the relativity of societal morals and values and avoid using a “catch-all” approach. The online campaign project “Jamal al-Khatib” includes the perspectives of former extremists and other young individuals who had shown

resilience to jihadist



Image 3: Screenshot of a YouTube video by Jamal al-Khatib addressing experiences of discrimination and racism

⁽⁴³⁾ Schmid, Al-Qaeda’s “single narrative” and attempts to develop counter-narratives: The state of knowledge.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ As outlined in the elaboration likelihood model. See: Petty & Cacioppo, The elaboration likelihood model of persuasion.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Chan et al., Debunking: A meta-analysis of the psychological efficacy of messages countering misinformation, p. 1544.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Kendrick & Fullerton, Advertising as public diplomacy: Attitude change among international audiences.

In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the topic of anti-Muslim racism in the US was inescapable. The audience were likely to have already elaborated upon some of the main themes in the alternative narrative,

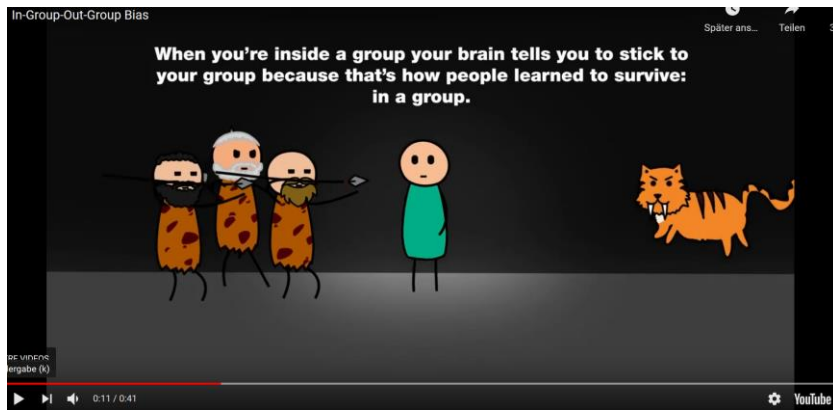


Image 4: Screenshot of a video example by PRECOBIAS on in-group-out-group biases

increasing the likelihood of boomerang or backfire effects. In other words, the likelihood of an audience member having already developed a mental model of the dominant discourse may have impacted the reach of the alternative narrative campaign.

One way of addressing this is to better consider the role of [elaboration](#) and encourage the audience to take an active role in targeting extremist messaging themselves. This may form part of the design phase, whereby a representative sample of the target population is involved in determining the likelihood of the audience having already created a mental model of the concept being targeted. For example, [the COMMIT project](#) is an ongoing initiative to prevent radicalisation amongst young people in Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria. Although not yet in the delivery stage, the project plans to involve young people (aged 13-25) in the identification of online extremist content as well as the co-creation of alternative narratives.

Alternatively, the campaign itself may include a *participatory element* as part of its ToC. In experimental settings, it is generally accepted that attitude or behaviour change interventions are more effective when they contain participatory elements. For example, when evaluating an intervention targeting media-induced violent tendencies, participants who took part in an activity after the intervention (i.e., reflecting upon what they had learned) reported less aggressive tendencies than those who did not participate in an activity post-intervention⁽⁴⁷⁾. In the field of counter-narratives, a number of laboratory-based experiments have demonstrated how, if individuals are warned of an impending persuasive appeal (explicit forewarning⁽⁴⁸⁾), they are spurred to elaborate upon the content and create counterarguments (refutation⁽⁴⁹⁾), ultimately increasing resistance to an incoming appeal⁽²⁸⁾. This approach is also a key component of the forthcoming [PRECOBIAS](#) (Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness on Cognitive Biases) project. Through social media campaigns, the project aims to enhance “digital resilience and critical thinking” of radicalised and at-risk young people by inviting them to better understand their own errors in judgement, particularly those that can emerge from quick, intuitive thinking.

Lessons learned and recommendations for practice

Based on the outputs of RAN C&N and Civil Society Empowerment Programme events, projects and papers in the last 5 years, as well as work by other researchers and practitioners in the field, below is a list of recommendations for those currently tasked with implementing or planning to implement alternative narrative campaigns in P/CVE. They are broadly grouped according to the ‘Goal’, ‘Audience’, ‘Message’, ‘Media’ and ‘Evaluation and Monitoring’ components of the GAMMMA+ model.

Goal

Don’t: *Become fixated on undermining the extremist message.* The goal of an alternative narrative strategy is not to contradict an extremist message or point out its inaccuracies. It should tell a story that cannot sustain the extremist message in the broader social ecology. In such a way, the extremist message still exists, but it no longer becomes relevant.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Wilson et al., *The choices and consequences evaluation: A study of Court TV’s anti-violence curriculum*. See also: Byrne, Media literacy interventions: What makes them boom or boomerang?

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Compton, Inoculation theory p. 221.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ McGuire & Papageorgis, The relative efficacy of various types of prior belief-defense in producing immunity against persuasion.

Do: *Identify goals that are integrated into a broader framework.* The goal of an alternative narrative is not to replace the good work done by local practitioners but, rather, serve as an overarching umbrella promoting shared values and beliefs. In this way, it is best implemented as part of a broader, prevention framework. For example, the 2011 '[Operation Trojan T-Shirt](#)' campaign was implemented alongside the work of EXIT-Germany. Its goal was to encourage calls to their helpline, and this was signalled in its call to action.

Audience

Don't: *Assume baseline literacy.* In the past, alternative narrative campaigns have overlooked a number of audience-based characteristics, such as the length of time an audience member will expose themselves to a campaign as well as the medium of communication⁽⁵⁰⁾. Audience literacy (i.e., the competencies or knowledge required for understanding) is a key component of any communication campaign, and it should be determined ahead of time.

Do: *Select your audience based on message content.* Audience segmentation is a statistical analysis technique that can help to identify clusters of the populations based on a range of demographic variables as well as specific needs, attitudes and, namely, values. In other words, within each group (or cluster), baseline data can determine if members of that group share the same inherent principles that motivate and guide their behaviour.

Don't: *Overestimate the capability of audience analysis.* Although audience segmentation and other methods of determining audience characteristics provide insight, overestimating the capacity of these techniques to understand the complexity of an audience will lead to unintended effects. As mentioned in the first section, an important lesson learned from previous campaigns (as well as counterterrorism policy more broadly) is that any strategic narrative may be perceived as stereotyping specific groups, particularly if there is not a sufficient understanding of the sensitivities and concerns of the target audience. For this reason, determining the shared morals and values of an audience should be incorporated with informed message design.

Do: *Invite a member of the target audience to be part of the design team.* This will ensure a richer understanding of the target audience.

Don't: *Ignore potential differences in the target population.* An important component of the development of social identities is what differentiates one group from another. While considering what binds a target population together, also consider what may set them apart.

Message

Do: *Consider the difference(s) between the audience's values and the designers' values.* There is evidence to suggest that crafters of strategic messages unintentionally incorporate their own moral values, instead of values unique to their target audience⁽⁵¹⁾. However, the ambiguity of the "right" message has been subject to criticism for a lack of specificity. It is important that any attempt to undermine the predominant assumptions of a dominant narrative uses moral foundations that are compatible with the target audience, and not rooted in moral relativism.

Don't: *Use blanket values that may seem to apply to everybody.* Radicalisation is a complex process during which an individual's basic decision-making principles become disordered. A component of the process is the shifting of focal and alternative goals to the point that an individual may perceive that forgoing seemingly sacrosanct values (such as the one's health, relationships or career development) will increase the likelihood of them achieving their focal goal. The extent of the imbalance between the focal goal served by the extreme behaviour and other everyday goals marks the extent of the violent radicalisation process. Therefore, the use of blanket values that may seem as though they would resonate with everybody may not be the most appropriate.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Ritzmann et al., [Effective narratives: Updating the GAMMA+ model](#), p. 3.

⁽⁵¹⁾ Feinberg & Willer, *From gulf to bridge: When do moral arguments facilitate political influence?*, p. 12.

Media

Do: *Select a platform that allows the audience to take an active role in targeting extremist messaging themselves.* If the audience is already aware of the concept being targeted, there is a possibility that they have created a mental model that is difficult to replace. By encouraging the audience to elaborate upon the alternative narrative (e.g., by contributing or discussing), they are less likely to dismiss it.

Don't: *Accidentally render the campaign two-sided.* An alternative narrative does not counter anything and is designed to remain completely distinct from the discourse and influence of the problematic narrative. Inadvertently rendering it two-sided (by attracting unintended or disruptive audiences on the media platform, for example) should be avoided.

Evaluation and Monitoring

Do: *Use a clear theory of change to inform the evaluation phase.* A key challenge in evaluating any strategic communication campaign is to identify the most salient outcomes to measure. Whilst practitioners may wish to design and implement a campaign that targets radicalisation more broadly, it is recommended that campaigns use the informing theoretical framework to conceptualise the outcome(s) they measure. For example, if misunderstandings of religious texts are theorised to explain, to some degree, the problematic behaviour(s) being targeted, targets' understanding of religious texts should be included as an outcome measure.

Don't: *Overestimate the gauge of certain outcome measures.* On a practical level, it is not always possible to implement standardised outcome measures for radicalisation-related outcomes in the evaluation phase of a campaign. This has been noted in the area of counter-narratives where the evaluation components of campaigns more often reflect campaign feasibility, rather than its effectiveness. Metrics such as views, likes, comments, "bounce-and-exit rates" and shares, for example, may indicate levels of audience engagement or awareness⁽⁵²⁾, but they cannot be interpreted as empirically supported risk factors for violent radicalisation. Similarly, whilst common evaluation metrics like social network analysis⁽⁵³⁾ and sentiment analysis or "tracking"⁽⁵⁴⁾ may certainly elucidate important campaign functions, it must be considered that their predictive power in the context of radicalisation prevention is limited.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to report and reflect on recent developments in alternative narrative campaigns in recent years, both by RAN and other actors from research and practice. As an approach to countering extremist rhetoric, the alternative narrative is not intended to contradict an extremist message and point out its inaccuracies. Instead, it should tell a story that cannot sustain the extremist message in the broader social ecology. Notwithstanding some key debates in the area at large, the concept of the alternative narrative, and how it may operate effectively in the context of radicalisation, has become clearer. However, for such a campaign to resonate, certain criteria need to be met.

From the offset, it is critical that designers establish a proper baseline assessment and **theory of change (ToC)** that will inform the overall campaign. From here, *active ingredients* can be identified, and effectiveness on a target audience better determined. Indeed, the **target audience** for an alternative narrative campaign is not always immediately apparent, and those tasked with delivering alternative narratives should consider not only the similarities but also the *differences in the target population*. In the past, alternative narrative campaigns have espoused particular values in the absence of in-depth knowledge of their specific target audience, increasing the likelihood that such values will not resonate. A successful campaign will *consider*

⁽⁵²⁾ Denaux & Rollo, [Counternarrative campaign for preventing radicalisation](#), pp. 7-8.

⁽⁵³⁾ Hedayah & International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague, [Developing effective counter-narrative frameworks for countering violent extremism](#), p. 4.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ McCants & Watts, [U.S. strategy for countering violent extremism. An Assessment.](#)

the relativity of societal morals and values and avoid using a catch-all approach. Ultimately, many of these points can, at least in part, be addressed through incorporating **audience involvement** in both the design and implementation of the campaign.

Further reading

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