

PROPOSED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE HIGH LEVEL CONFERENCE

FROM THE RAN @ WORKING GROUP (DECEMBER 2012)

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1. About RAN@

There are very many areas of potential focus for the working group, but RAN@ will focus on 'positive' rather than 'negative' initiatives and will hone in on two areas of activity in the first 1-2 years: counter-narratives and private sector collaboration. This approach underlined the agenda and composition for the first meeting, which was held in London on 14 November 2012. The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Explore examples of good practice in relation to counter-narratives on the Internet and social media - why do they work, how can they be replicated, how can they be scaled up?
- Identify a series of practical challenges that need to be solved through partnership between the private sector, community organisations and others.

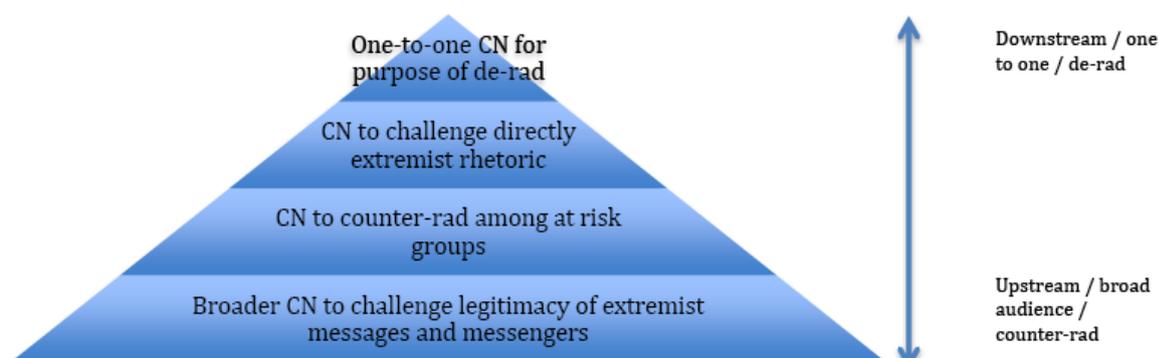
2. What are counter-narratives?

The term 'counter-narrative' has come to be used in relation to a very wide range of activities, everything from government strategic communications to targeted campaigns to discredit the ideologies and actions of violent extremists. It is helpful to distinguish between these different activities, because they require different approaches in terms of messages, messengers, tactics, partnerships, and so forth.

There is a counter-narrative spectrum:

- Counter-narratives: directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour
- Alternative narratives: counter radicalization 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

Within the category of counter-narrative (CN), there is a wide range of activities that span upstream counter-radicalisation through to downstream de-radicalisation. Each requires a distinct approach.



3. What are we trying to counter? Examples of online extremist narratives

Popular online extremist propaganda often has one or more of the following characteristics: high production value, excitement through pace and / or music, a compelling narrator, and a call to action. They all centre of three types of thought pattern: black and white thinking, distance/alienation, and de-humanisation. Some examples include:

- German Neo-Nazi video - 63k views <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7bbPQGIYgfY>
- UK Far Right Social Network Community Page - 37k likes <http://www.facebook.com/pages/EDL/258616132923>
- Global White Power Chat Forum - 258k members, 9.5M posts <http://www.stormfront.org/>
- Islamist content: www.youtube.com/user/MuslimKnight91
- Digital flash mobs on Al Jazeera Talks forums

4. Examples of counter-narratives

There are very few examples of effective counter-narratives, and it is difficult to establish 'good practice' as we still do not understand enough about what works. But a number of case studies can be presented to highlight the kinds of approaches that are being taken, with each appealing to a different part of the counter-narrative spectrum outlined above.

"Exit Deutschland" T-shirt campaign against Neo-Nazis

What: Exit Deutschland is an organisation that provides counseling for neo-Nazis seeking to leave the movement. In 2010, they used music, clothing and social media to scale their impact. They distributed 250 white power t-shirts at a neo-Nazi music festival that when washed just once changed their logo to "if your t-shirt can do it, so can you" and included the Exit brand. The initiative made the headlines, online / offline, mainstream and in far right forums.

How: Taskforce of private sector (to advise on making a t-shirt that transforms with one wash), former neo-Nazis (to advise on effective t-shirt messaging), NGO (distribution), social media experts (on amplifying the 'win').

Online Impact: 30M Facebook likes, Exit's offline membership went up threefold and extensive television, print and online coverage (equivalent of €500,000 worth of media coverage). Far right chat forums even temporarily shut down because of the positive reaction to the initiative (promo video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSibsHKEP-8)

"Hope Not Hate" Online Community mobilisation

What: Hope Not Hate is a grass roots anti-fascism anti-racism campaigning organisation. It uses offline and online community mobilization approaches to expose the hypocrisy and violent values of the UK far right and get people active within their own communities.

How: Seeded an active online community supporting their campaign through sustained and integrated_online engagement. Daily content creation takes the form of social network posts, weekly investigative journalism pieces, and videoed interviews of far right leaders. The integration across platforms - through links and widgets, and consistent branding - makes content discoverable and maximizes its reach.

Online Impact: Facebook group has 54k likes (www.facebook.com/hope.n.hate?fref=ts), www.hopenothate.org.uk website, <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk>, YouTube channel has 376k views www.youtube.com/SearchlightInfo. Because of existing network, able to generate momentum around specific events or 'asks', e.g. a FB status update on the night Mo Farrah won his second gold Olympic medal generated 16k shares, and they managed to get 12k people to sign an online card for Malala Yousafzai.

Exit Sweden

What: A group that provides support and rehabilitation for neo-Nazis who want to leave - a lot of their work is one-one-one counseling. As the radicalization and community bonding processes moved online, so did their efforts.

How: Former neo-Nazis enter chat rooms under pseudonyms to establish minimal neo-Nazi credentials that enable participation in the debate. The approach is about evaluating ideological status and over several months using individuals' own worldview to plant seeds of doubt. Crucially, the objective is to move the debate, not win it, per se, by introducing doubt.

Online Impact: case-by-case, this method is effective at removing black and white thinking and alienation and humanization of those outside the group. Success is subjectively evaluated by following the degree of aggression exhibited by targeted individuals following the online engagement.

Viral Peace:

What: a programme to build social media capacity among those who could counter extremist messages.

How: the US State Department is targeting up and coming social media leaders for a 2-day training course to improve their social media, communication and campaigning skills. It also teaches them how to recognize extremist material and hate speech online. It is targeted at countries where there is a risk of radicalisation

Online impact: the programme is still in its early days, so results are still emerging.

5. How do we measure success?

Online interactions have many types: page views, video playbacks, group memberships, comments, and FB 'likes'. In one respect, measuring reach is much easier online than offline. But online metrics can be opaque and superficial: without additional detail and content, numbers alone tell very little other than at the day-to-day tactical level. It is difficult to know whether they refer to the intended target audience or not, or whether they have or will change offline behavior.

The graphic below captures the three levels at which decisions are made, and the corresponding information needed to make those decisions effectively. Data such as clicks, views, tweets and follower count are useful on a tactical level, providing feedback on daily activities and tracking individual interactions. At the strategic level, data focuses on the combined impact that individual interactions have had on the network or complex system; in effect, whether there has been any influence on macro-behaviours.



Identifying impact and emergent behaviours in a complex system often necessitates gathering different types of data and finding ways to triangulate them. In relation to counter-narratives, impact analysis might look at the following and their relationship to one another:

- Social media metrics to identify common terms, and high volume users
- Unobtrusive large-scale data collection informed by the metrics, analysed using techniques including network analysis or GIS to identify the macro-behaviours identifiable within the system
- Qualitative in-depth interviews of those found to be key actors within the specific complex system, to provide insights into the questions raised by the previous analysis.

Understanding impact and the extent to which counter-narratives are successful is made more difficult by the fact that we still don't fully understand the relationship between online and offline behavior. In general, there is a lower sense of propriety and self-censorship online than offline - the 'Online Disinhibition Effect'. We see evidence of online huddling and group dynamics that resemble the offline world. That presents an opportunity for reach if a group can be penetrated, but it means that clustering around mainstream narratives will often be mainstream circles.

6. Emerging 'lessons learned'

A number of lessons can be learned from apparently successful and unsuccessful attempts to produce and disseminate counter-narratives. However, it should be noted that these lessons are not universal; what is an essential ingredient in activities at one level of the counter-narrative spectrum might be counter-productive at another. Further work is needed to refine the spectrum and assign these lessons to their relevant part of the spectrum.

A) *General approach*

Clarity of goals is essential

As is exemplified by the counter-narrative spectrum, there are many distinct targets for counter-narrative work, which require different types of campaigns, tactics, and approaches.

It 's not about 'winning '

It is important to remember that counter-narratives are not about winning the argument or winning over the target audience; they are about gradual movement in the right direction.

Emotions are more important than evidence

Given the three thought patterns that extremists adopt, success is not achieved in counter-narrative terms through evidence, which can always be refuted and countered. Instead, they need to appeal to human emotions.

Sustained rather than sporadic activity

Be it maintaining an online community, a twitter following, or a chat room relationship, the engagement must be sustained.

Professionalism is essential

Successful online counter-narratives share in common with their target content an effective branding campaign, often effective use of music, polish in production quality and compelling stories

Viral is a red herring

Viral is not quantifiable, and even when qualifying invokes the notion of having spread like a virus in an unplanned - unpredictable - manner¹. Extremist online narratives can be a concern with just hundreds of individuals having engaged with them, and rarely have gained traction with millions.

Forum is also key - deep one-on-one work in a chat forum may take months and have a profound impact on only one individual, while an counter-narrative video (like this one encouraging Muslim moderation in response to the Innocence of Muslims video: <http://www>

¹ There is growing knowledge in this area. Some useful work is being conducted by Prof. Sandy Pentland at MIT <http://web.media.mit.edu/~sandy/>

[.youtube.com/watch?v=I6zuKbBlmRo](http://youtube.com/watch?v=I6zuKbBlmRo)) may have a much wider less penetrating impact on hundreds of at-risk individuals

Counter-narratives can evoke counter-counter-narratives

Online counter-narrative work is not without its risks. Efforts to tackle extremist ideologies can be attacked by extremists with false and conspiratorial claims about motives, and even worse online and offline threats. Countering things can also make them more attractive.

B) Tactics

Online/offline link is critical

Online success does not generally come in isolation; the success stories are generally linked to offline activities - e.g. community mobilization (Hope not Hate), radical activism (Exit Deutschland's T-shirt campaign), or with Ali Nouman's appeal following the recent Islamist fueled uprising <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6zuKbBlmRo>). Online activities are often successful when they respond to real time/real world events (e.g. Hope not Hate Facebook status update about Mo Farrah generated 16k likes).

Piggybacking off what works

It can be effective to link to narratives that are already popular online as it takes the counter-narrative directly to the target audience. This may be by posting an "In response to" video on YouTube linking to the extremist content, or by penetrating an extremist group through the music they like (e.g. Exit Deutschland).

Messenger suitability depends on target destination

Government has a clear and important role in capacity building and managing its own strategic communications. It should also be at the forefront of alternative narratives. Legitimate voices are context specific. For example, it might be only a former neo-Nazi that can reach a radicalizing youth, or a religious leader who can engage in deep theological counter-narrative about jihad. In some cases, the most effective messages are delivered through anonymous or faceless messengers (e.g. EXIT Deutschland t-shirt example, online cartoons, etc.). Messengers should also have credibility, charisma, and leadership qualities.

Humour entertains

Especially from credible sources, humour can be a disarming way to share the counter-narrative. In the Exit T-shirt example, even neo-Nazis themselves conversed online about the humour behind the campaign. We also see religious individuals, and here a religious NGO creating humorous content to expose extremism: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzIVODquxJ8&feature=fvwr>

We also see in Hope Not Hate's careful ridiculing of BNP and EDL how humour can be used to undermine the cache and coolness of extremist leaders.

Shock tactics can work

Shock tactics can be effective because they provoke people into a debate. A good example of this is Operation Christmas run by the Colombian military, who decorated an enormous Christmas tree in the jungle to reach out to the FARC guerrillas.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/colombia/8211354/Colombian-army-gives-militants-giant-jungle-Christmas-tree.html>

7. Next steps

The meeting generated useful thinking about what counter-narratives are, offered a number of practical examples as case studies, and identified some generic lessons learned for those conducting counter-narrative work.

In terms of next steps, a number of areas were identified:

- **Refining the counter-narrative spectrum:** more thinking is needed on the spectrum and which activities, messages, messengers and lessons learned are appropriate for each level of counter-narrative.
- **Resourcing counter-narrative efforts:** resources are needed to increase the capacity of the most effective messengers to conduct effective counter-narrative work. This might be in the form of financial resources or pro bono support from private sector social media organisations. It could also take the form of a social media toolkit for practitioners.
- **Private sector collaborations:** it is important to widen the circle of private sector organisations represented within the working group. This should first extend to tech sector companies, but thought also needs to be given to brands associated with extremist movements and whether they could be engaged.
- **Investigating the many-to-one options:** research further the possibility of having targeted, crowd-sourced, interventions against the most popular online extremist groups to complement the one-to-one and one-to-many efforts that dominate the counter-narrative space.
- **Support development of online analytical capabilities:** more support is needed to develop these technologies, and also ensure that they are accessible to the people and organisations that need them.
- **On-going support from RAN@ members/participants :** it would be useful to explore who has time and interest to progress ideas that were discussed at the meeting, either to help advance a current initiative, or to start a new counter-narrative campaign.