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RAN C&N meeting: A psychological and neuroscientific perspective on how extremist propaganda works and how to effectively counter it.
7 and 8 February 2018 Vienna (AT)

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Checklist of relevant mental biases and mechanisms for developing counter or alternative narratives

Summary

How to incorporate and effectively use psychological and neuroscientific insights when developing a counter or alternative narrative campaign was the focus of the C&N Working Group meeting in Vienna on 7 and 8 February 2018. This ex post paper provides a condensed version of the methods, tips and ideas shared and developed during this meeting.

Human Nature…

Humans are flooded with information and cannot possibly take the time to carefully process each piece of information to form an unbiased conclusion. Actually, people need to process information quickly to protect themselves from constant confusion**.** An interesting set of biological algorithms, often referred to as 'motivated reasoning', comes into play here. It describes a set of biases and mental shortcuts (heuristics) that defend us from switching values, groups and allegiances every time we see a professional and appealing propaganda clip. Subconscious functions of the mind, like confirmation bias and active information avoidance, pre-select information that confirms existing beliefs over new information challenging our beliefs.

During this RAN C&N meeting, we looked into several common psychological and neuroscientific explanations of how people process information, and discussed how and when to incorporate these insights in counter and alternative narrative campaigns. Using the outcomes of the meeting, we developed a checklist for use when starting to plan a counter or alternative narrative campaign.

In this checklist we follow the RAN C&N-GAMMMA+ Model (Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media, Action and Monitoring plus Evaluation) and list the most common relevant insights per element of the GAMMMA model. For each insight, we explain briefly what it is, what the effects are and how to deal with this effect.

This checklist is for first line practitioners; practitioners who are developing alternative and counter narratives and who are in direct or online contact with (young) people who might be susceptible to radicalisation, or who are radicalising into violent extremism or terrorism (the target audience). We believe that the use of this checklist will help them shape their goal, message and call to action, as well as choice of target audience, messenger and medium.

A **detailed explanation of the GAMMMA + model and an overview of 10 relevant scientific studies studies** is also available.

Note: We appreciate your feedback and tips. If you think, based on your experience, that the checklist should be adapted or complemented, please e-mail us your ideas: m.meines@radaradvies.nl.

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Checklist of relevant mental biases and mechanisms for developing counter or alternative narratives

Element	Insight	Impact	How to deal with negative impacts
G Goal ***What is your goal?*** *What do you really want to receive?*	***Stigmatisation*** Any intervention can have unintended consequences. If you single out one group specifically, that group can feel stigmatised. They might ask "Why us?", "Do you think there is something wrong with us?" This is particularly relevant for primary and secondary prevention work, where the audience is not radicalised yet. For example: you might want to target 'young Muslims aged 12-21' in a campaign against terrorism. They might be approached from different sides with different projects and messages at the same time. Are you aware of the sensitivities of your target audience?	***Antagonising the target audience jeopardising your goal.*** By choosing an audience because you think these people are most likely to be targeted by recruiters of violent extremist or terrorist groups, you might unwittingly send out a message that you believe the targeted audience to be in favour of terrorists or violent extremists. This may be perceived as discrimination or stigmatisation.	***Clearly formulate, with carefully chosen words, why you want to achieve your goal – and what that goal is.*** Formulate very clearly what goal you want to reach in smart and measurable elements. Use messages that are neither antagonising, opposing nor excluding messaging when describing the target audience of your campaign. *Theory of change* "Too often well-meaning efforts result in unintended and counterproductive impacts. The gap between intent and impact is a challenge facing all organizations who make assumptions about how they can intervene. A theory of change is about how some driving or mitigating factor identified in a CONFLICT ASSESSMENT can be changed with some INTERVENTION PLAN to achieve an IMPACT that prevents violence or builds peace." Link:

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			http://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/FINAL-Theories-of-Change-in-PB.pdf
A Audience **What is your target audience?** *Who do you really want to reach out to?*	***Cognitive dissonance*** Cognitive dissonance (or disharmony) is a state of conflict in the mind, whereby someone has two opposing views simultaneously. The theory suggests that the mind naturally wants to eliminate dissonance where possible. How can it do this? By changing the way someone feels about or perceives certain things (changing the attitudes and beliefs). Cognitive dissonance is normally strongest when someone thinks about him- or herself in a certain way, and then does something that contradicts that belief. To reduce the internal	***Confrontation or confrontational messages can cause cognitive dissonance and the impulse to not believe your message.*** **Identity and values (the will to fight and die)** Human beings may form their strongest (and potentially most expansive) political and religious ties to an abstract ideal. The more radicalised the audience is, the more their individual identity, morals and sacred values are 'fused' (identical) with that of the extremist ideology or group, and the less likely it is that confrontational approaches will work. Atran, S., Gómez, Á., López-Rodríguez, L., Sheikh, H., Ginges, J., Wilson, L., Waziri, H., Vázquez, & A. Davis, R. (2017). The devoted	***Invest in getting to know your target audience.*** You should be clear about how 'invested' your audience is in the beliefs they hold. Do they just lack better, more accurate information or an alternative perspective? Are you challenging their core believes and identity? An audience that feels threatened by your intervention might actually become more radicalised ('backfire effect'). Be sure you do no harm and that you do not stigmatise communities and therefore foster polarisation. • Can you narrow down and clearly identify your audience's age range, gender, cultural background, 'group language' and place of residence?

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conflict that follows, this person may start to justify this opposing behaviour.[1]	actor's will to fight and the spiritual dimension of human conflict. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1(9), 673. Link: https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-017-0193-3	• Do you understand why they would care about your intervention, why would they interact with you? • Do you understand what could change their thinking and behaviour? • Where are their echo chambers that you need to access with your message? • If your aim is to reinforce the resilience of your audience, understanding them also means understanding their vulnerabilities. What makes them vulnerable?
Backfire effect The 'backfire effect' is a strong, psychological aspect. It is used to explain how, when someone is confronted with information and facts that contradict something they believe, instead of changing this view or forming a new opinion, the original beliefs will often be strengthened. The backfire effect is a manifestation of the confirmation bias (see below).	***When dealing with strong convictions, you may strengthen them still further…*** The more radicalised someone is, the less likely it is that confrontation will work, and the more likely it is that the backfire effect will kick in. Your target audience – when not chosen with sufficient care – will be even more convinced of their beliefs than before you confronted it with your message.	***Know your audience really well.*** Choose a specific group or groups of persons you want to reach, and learn all you can about them. You should be clear about how 'invested' your audience is in the beliefs it holds. If your target audience is highly convinced about, for example, its worldview, a message that would make it impossible to keep up this worldview, is unlikely be accepted, and may indeed have the opposite effect. Try an alternative message that is less confrontational.

[1] https://psychohawks.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/cognitive-dissonance-made-easy/

			Another option is to use a more confrontational message but over a longer period. You would have to form a constant stream of messages on the same topic or issue to have a chance of affecting the beliefs of someone at some point. Link: https://www.skepticalscience.com/docs/Debunking_Handbook.pdf
M Message **What is your message?** *What are you talking about?*	***Motivated reasoning*** Motivated reasoning is a form of reasoning in which people access, construct and evaluate arguments in a biased way to arrive at or endorse a preferred conclusion. People are emotionally attached to their predetermined positions and beliefs. When these positions are challenged by evidence, they're motivated to create new rebuttals to	***The message will not be received or listened to, and may have no effect whatsoever.*** An important trigger for motivated reasoning is the confrontation with a certain threat to the self or one's identity. The stronger the beliefs and the more these believes are attached to someone's identity or worldview, the more likely it is that someone will reason against your message. Hence, if your message contains information which counters beliefs and	***Know the effect your message will probably have on your target audience and find a way to make the message less confrontational and more accessible.*** Be as aware as possible of the effect your message will probably have on your target audience. Test the message and its effect, for example on someone from the target audience. If it is perceived as too confrontational, try to change the wording or the way the message is disseminated and reaches your target audience. *Moral reframing* Many conflicts are based chiefly on differing moral preferences, and not so much on detailed

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protect their position, even when they're obviously wrong. The term 'motivated' in motivated reasoning refers to the fact that people use reasoning strategies that allow them to draw the conclusions they want to draw (i.e., are motivated to draw). Of course, people are not always motivated to confirm their preferred conclusions. However, the term 'motivated reasoning' refers to situations in which people want to confirm their preferred conclusion rather than to situations in which people's reasoning is driven by an accuracy motivation.[2]	may pose a threat to the identity or self-image of an individual, the impulse of that person to not believe it or not want to listen to it will increase.	political or religious issues. If that is the case, consider reframing your message so it can connect to the moral foundations of the targeted audience. Link: "From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?"
Confirmation bias The term 'confirmation bias' refers to the tendency of people to selectively	*People actively look for information that supports their beliefs and views.* Your message will be found by those who were already looking for it. If you want to	*Choose the wording of your message in a way that it could also attract those who might have an opposing view (if this is your target audience).* If you want to reach people who are not likely to look for your message, you might want to

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[2] http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/attitudes/motivated-reasoning/

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	search for and consider information that confirms one's beliefs.[3] Some research that suggests that exposure to more information makes it more likely for people to seek information that is consistent with a prior decision or belief. For example, during an election season, people tend to seek positive information about their favoured candidates to confirm their choice.	achieve behavourial change or encourage someone to reconsider his or her views, you will probably need to reach out to people who will not, under any circumstances, be waiting for your message.	consider reframing your message or starting with an opinion or message that *does* immediately resonate with your target audience. Alternative or counter narratives are more likely to resonate with such an audience if you take an indirect approach, for example using surreal contexts like those of science fiction/adventure/mystery (Green 2017): since this does not feel like an attack on their morals and identity, individuals remain open-minded, to some degree, to new input (Kaplan 2016) *How to (help) people change their mind* Use narrative persuasion and 'transport' • Transport refers to the feeling of being so absorbed in a story that connection to the real world is lost for some time. • For individuals who have a 'fused' identity in particular, an indirect approach, for example using surreal contexts like science fiction, adventure and mystery, might not feel like an attack on their identity, and could therefore render them more open-minded to new input.

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[3] http://www.psychologyandsociety.com/confirmationbias.html

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			Green, Melanie C. & Fitzgerald, K. (2017). Transportation Theory Applied to Health and Risk Messaging. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication Link: "Transportation Theory Applied to Health and Risk Messaging"
M Messenger **Who is your messenger?** *Who is speaking or delivering the message?*	***Authoritative messengers*** The credibility and therefore effectiveness of your messenger, is determined solely by your target audience. You need to be clear about why the targeted audience would listen to and believe your chosen messenger.	***Address the needs of your audience*** Since most extremist groups and ideologies claim that there is an existential crisis and that their group is under attack, people with limited tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity might find comfort and stability in the promises of extremists. This specific audience appreciates authoritative, clear-cut and mostly binary/black and white messages that reduce uncertainty.	***Provide alternative authority*** "Attempts to challenge extremist ideologies online, for instance via so-called counter-narratives should therefore address uncertainties and the transmission of authoritarian attitudes. Particularly authoritarian sources transmitting peaceful values can foster peaceful instead of hostile inter-group attitudes under conditions of existential threats." Rieger, D., Frischlich, L., & Bente, G. (2017). Propaganda in an insecure, unstructured world: How psychological uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist internet propaganda. *Journal for Deradicalization*, (10), 203-229. Link: http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/88

M Media	Active information avoidance	Most people will not volunteer to look for information that might upset or unsettle them.	You need to find a way to motivate people to read your message or information.
What is your medium? *(Can be multiple)* *How are you reaching the audience?*	Also known as 'Ignorance is bliss'. Information avoidance refers to the fact that people tend to sidestep communications or data that could help them to make better decisions if they think the information might be stressful or painful to receive. This form of behaviour is especially applicable to information that is freely available, for example online. For example, research has shown that investors are less likely to check their portfolio online when the stock market is down than when it is up. Most social media platforms use algorithms to make sure people find more of the same information and feel confirmed in their beliefs for precisely this reason. They want to comfort people and not unsettle them. If information is perceived as too	Your carefully designed and well documented website with information will not be visited by the people you would like to reach without any additional actions on your part.	Have a good dissemination strategy fitting with your audience, the goal of your campaign and the message (content and tone of voice). Make sure the right people are reached by your message. You can do this for example by entering online chat fora where your target audience is active, by targeting specific people via the so-called advertising tools most social media platforms have, or via ambassadors within the peer group of your target audience.

	unsettling, people might start avoiding the platform.		
A Action **What is your call to action?** *What do you want your audience to do?*	***Replace old actions or beliefs with new ones.*** If you want someone to change his or her mind or actions, you need to provide a new or alternative belief or action for that person. This will make it more likely that she or he changes her/his mind.	***Old beliefs or actions will not disappear unless there are replacements.*** When there is no alternative or new believe to replace the old one, the old one might stick and nothing changes.	***Offer alternative or new options when trying to eliminate old ones.*** • People are less likely to accept the debunking of old/false beliefs when they are merely labelled as wrong; instead, they should be countered with new evidence. • The new messages should also offer a new model for understanding information (identity/ideology) • Elaboration and discourse increase the likelihood of replacing an old/false model with a new one. (Conspiracy thinking/Vaccination) A regular stream of messages has a higher likelihood of being effective. Research indicates that about 30 % of your information stream needs to contain alternative/counter messages if you are to (possibly) change your mind. Link: https://www.skepticalscience.com/docs/Debunking_Handbook.pdf

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