

EX POST PAPER

Audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists

Understanding what your audience's priorities are, how and where they communicate with each other, and why they are likely to react to your campaign is the foundation of every intervention. On 2 and 3 November 2017, the Radicalisation Awareness Network Communication and Narratives working group (RAN C&N) studied the target audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists.

This paper will share the resulting observations on these audiences, their vulnerability factors and the narratives employed by extremists targeting it. The RAN insights will be used to help determine who should be addressed, and how, in promoting effective alternative narratives and counter-narratives to the narratives of right- and left-wing violent extremists.

This paper is produced by the RAN Centre of Excellence.

Introduction

In 2017, the RAN C&N concentrated on the GAMMMA+model's seven elements (Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media and Action plus Evaluation) in the context of setting up an online campaign. A common element of successful campaigns is thoroughly understanding one's specific target audience. Without this grasp of the audience, the campaign and message will be entirely ineffective.

Credits

The meeting in Rome was attended by Jonathan Russel (Breakthrough Media, UK) Chris Holmsted Larsen (University Roskilde, Denmark), Elliot Grainger (European Strategic Communication Network (ESCN), EU), Josephine Schmitt (CONTRA Project, EU), Sean Arbuthnot (Prevent Leicester, UK), Johannes Baldauf (Miller & Meier Consulting, Germany), Thomas Bouvatier (l'Association Autonomisation Citoyenne, France), Francesco Farinelli (European Foundation for Democracy, Italy), Juliette Brungs (Stiftung SPI, Germany), Lóránt Györi (Political Capital Institute, Hungary) and Alexander Ritzmann (Brandenburg Institute for Society and Security Germany).

The speakers presented their findings on the subject of these audiences and their targeting, and implications for alternative narrative and counter-narrative work; the related breakout sessions gave all participants an opportunity to contribute.

The insights shared in this paper are based on the presentations and the outcomes of the breakout sessions. More particularly, the paper analyses the target audiences (of right- and left-wing violent extremists), their vulnerability factors and the narrative elements considered most attractive.

RIGHT WING Audiences and resonating Themes

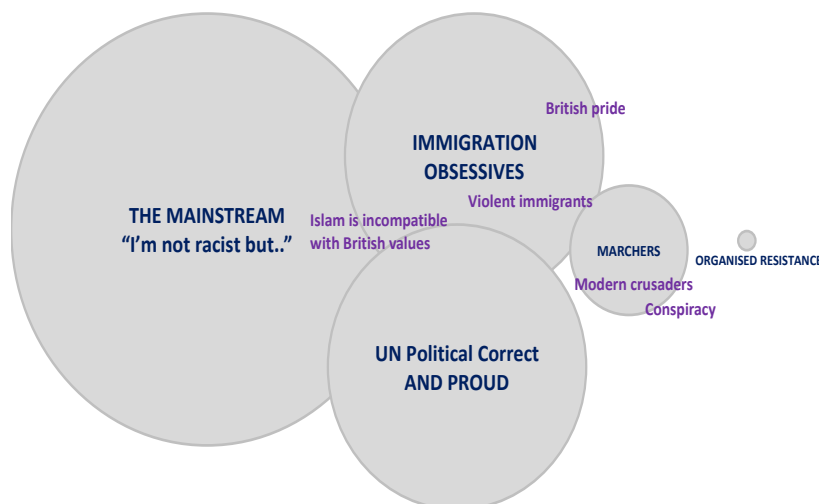


Figure 1 Right-wing audiences and resonating themes

Target audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists

Right-wing extremist audiences

More easily recognisable than audiences of left-wing extremists, the target audiences of right-wing extremists are chiefly young, self-conscious individuals, often millennials. They share roughly the same ideals across countries: many young far-right extremists view the current far right as broken and disenfranchised, and they wish to restore and reinvigorate it.

This group can be divided into several categories.

- **The mainstream.** Right-wing extremists are trying to mainstream their arguments via social media, mostly by reaching out to people who despite not considering themselves racists, do relate to right-wing messages.
- **Immigration obsessives.** These are often patriots who believe immigrants and other

groups are responsible for bringing about their problems and troubles.

- **The un-politically correct and proud.** The key focal point for this group is often Islamophobia. Although both right-wing and left-wing extremists are certain of what they oppose and uncertain of what they support, this group is more successful at targeting people in opposition to ideas or groups, e.g. Islam.
- **Marchers.** Often active in real-life protests. There is usually clear evidence of their online activity in hate speeches and the spreading of propaganda.
- **Organised resistance.** Conspiracy theorists exhibit organised resistance; it is also found in football clubs (extremism is sometimes mainstreamed through the subject of football).

Left-wing audiences

Left-wing extremists are more culturally more complex than right-wing extremists. Audiences of left-wing extremists are also more difficult to identify than those of right-wing extremists, because they support numerous different ideas. Left-wing extremist audiences can be broadly divided into the following categories.

- **Political and radical youth.** These are young people on various far left branches (e.g. anarchists, communists and green warriors) who wish to switch from one group to another.
- **Left-wing oriented youth.** Feeling disappointed in the left-wing agenda and achievements, these young people are seeking more active ways to experience and practice their beliefs and ideas. They have a growing hatred for groups that appear to them to abuse their superior status, such as police and capitalists.

- **Non-political radical youth.** Extremism is relatively new to this group: they are searching for a new purpose and for a sense of belonging to a 'family', and they are also seeking a route to living on a better, superior level. They already have a strong 'black vs white' vision of the world and cannot tolerate difference.

Often, both left-wing and right-wing audiences have a very strong sense of dignity in striving for perceived glory and honour. They have often made their home within a social environment of like-minded peers. In this social context, they strictly follow their group's code of honour.

Target audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists: vulnerability factors

Both far right-wing and far left-wing target audiences appear to share the same vulnerability factors.

- They have been victimised (or are still being victimised).
- They consider themselves subject to marginalisation and ostracisation.
- Certain behaviours can be triggering for these target audiences (e.g. authoritarian expression or the endorsing of violence and aggression).
- They often struggle with identity issues and finding a fulfilling sense of purpose in life.
- The need to belong to a family or brotherhood is often present.
- The anger and fear stemming from perceived sweeping injustices (e.g. 'all our jobs are being taken', 'women are being mistreated') can lead to a willingness to make 'sacrifices for the greater good'.

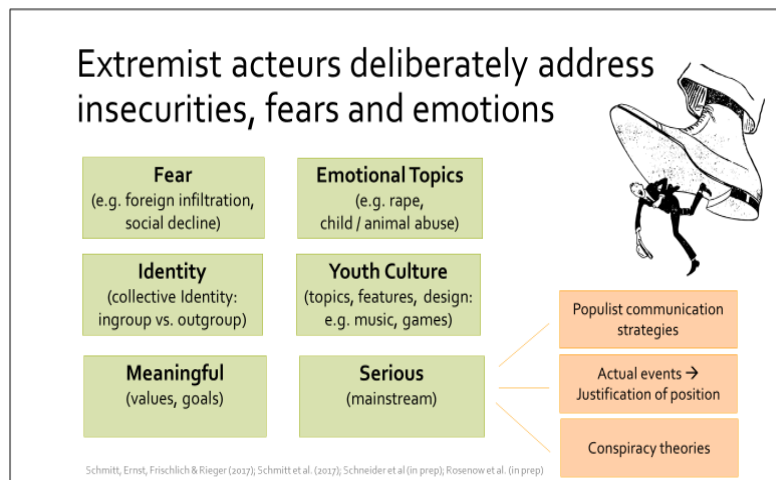


Figure 2 Vulnerability factors addressed by extremists. Source: Schmitt, Ernst, Frischlich & Rieger (2017); Schmitt et al. (2017); Schneider et al. (in prep); Rosenow et al. (in prep.)

When approaching such audiences with counter-narratives and alternative narratives, it is important to not offend them or take the moral high ground, but rather to relate on a more emotional level with their fears and emotions.

Target audiences of right-wing violent extremists: messages and narratives that resonate

Left-wing audiences

Left-wing extremists focus on different types of anti-narratives: anti-liberal, anti-democracy, anti-capitalism and anti-occident (towards migrants, LGBT groups, etc.). Often, they view democracy as weak and indifferent to fascism, a breeding ground for violence.

Despite often being considered a somewhat homogenous group, left-wing extremists actually strive for diverse causes and are not at all united, even clashing with one another at times.

Right-wing audiences

In the past, far-right extremism was group-centred. Today's right-wing extremists are supporting the rise of the individual rather than that of the group. Consequently, their narratives relate individual insecurities, fears and emotions, with violence presented as a solution.

Right-wing extremist narratives and messages feature the following characteristics (this is roughly the same for left-wing extremists).

- **Address fear.** Doomsday scenarios, foreign infiltration scare tactics and shocking content are often used to sow fear among audiences.
- **Focus on emotional topics.** Extremist groups often 'feed' certain types of grievances. They intentionally respond to grievances in emotionally loaded ways in order to provoke behavioural change.
- **Address the search for identity.** Audiences of extremist groups often struggle with the search for identity and belonging. By conjuring a collective identity with a very clear set of rules, they present a new 'family' to become part of. The benefits they offer their audience are a sense of stability and security and a sense of belonging.
- **Present themselves and their ideas, values and goals as meaningful.** In so doing, they provide their audience with apparently simple explanations to reduce troubling complexities and complex questions and make them manageable, e.g. foreign infiltration and social decline.
- **Use keywords and focus on topics familiar to youth culture.** Extremists are skilled at relating their own agenda to issues young people cope with in their day-to-day lives. By accepting and endorsing young people's music and games, they can gain their respect and then influence them by providing extremist answers to their questions.

- **Create a sense of urgency.** By positioning themselves as being part of mainstream society, extremists create a sense of urgency an environment in which doubts and critical thinking are more easily dismissed.

Reaching target audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists

Left-wing audiences

Both high schools and universities offer fertile ground for left wing extremist recruiters seeking target audiences. Historically, the left appeals strongly to teachers and intellectuals as well as comrades and union workers who are recruited at the workplace. Left-wing extremists also make use of books and the internet for their propaganda (but they don't employ high-profile videos and GIFs as much). Their online presence is less visible than that of right-wing extremists or Daesh.

Right-wing audiences

Overall, today's far right has innovative ways of communicating with their target audience online, inspired by the communication strategies of Daesh and the alt-right. They make use of offensive memes, grotesque caricatures and trolling. Online platforms like Facebook and YouTube but also semi-private platforms like WhatsApp and Telegram are often a central outlet for propaganda. They also have access to like-minded people on such platforms and media, and therefore their use of online space reflects their biases back to them via echo chambers that are difficult to break out of.

YouTube recently published an analysis of right-wing content, with the following findings.

- Extremist actors use populist communication strategies.
- Right-wing extremists make strategic use of breaking news and current affairs to appear objective, justify their positions and whitewash their intentions.
- They provide their audience with simplistic arguments to address complex problems, encouraging a polarised 'black and white' logic and belief in conspiracy theories.
- They also engage in offline activities that appear benevolent and charitable, such as helping pupils with their homework and taking care of elderly people (seen in eastern Germany).

It is also worth noting how easy it is to encounter propaganda online. Adolescents are bound to come across extremist messages online, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Right-wing extremists use the strategy of entering similar key words to those of counter-narratives and alternative narratives, so that audiences will view their content instead of the counter-narrative content. Another tactic is to post reams of hate speech underneath counter-narrative videos, thereby compromising them. This strategy could also be used in reverse, when setting up alternative or counter-narratives.

The big picture: how do they compare?

The narratives and structures that left-wing and right-wing extremists use are very similar. Ideologies put forward in such settings appear to be merely a set of narratives designed to justify violence and help individuals take control of their lives. In this sense, the ideology of the left and the right are almost interchangeable, with chance determining whether one lands up in either the left wing or the right wing. This underlines how, psychologically, people may be susceptible to radicalisation, while at the same time, the

narratives and messages always target a certain audience, using that particular vernacular and relating to that specific understanding of the world.

Promoting alternative narratives and counter-narratives: tips and lessons learned

We can protect vulnerable target audiences of both left-wing and right-wing extremists by fostering their critical thinking and media literacy:

- identifying, drawing attention to and raising **awareness** of propaganda and manipulation effects;
- **reflecting**: enhancing their critical media competences: knowledge of the topic, skills and attitudes;
- **empowering** people to participate and take a stance in social discourses with extremist messages.

Lessons learned on content and audience

- Be quick and specific: right-wing extremists in particular respond immediately after an incident — this attracts audiences.
- Use role models: for example, engage with famous (regional) Muslim athletes who can serve as role models for those targeted by right-wing extremists. This is especially effective for young people who look up to such figures.
- Consider your angle and subject matter and adjust these to match your target group's priorities: e.g. promoting pluralism is likely to be better received by a university-educated audience, while promoting staff retention may attract a different group.

- Map out the needs and demands of the audience: understand their vernacular, context, environment, fears and hopes.
- Invest time and effort in understanding the grievances of the audience.

Lessons learned on process and audience

- Cooperate on a wider scale, e.g. with local governments, local sports clubs and other civil society organisations, to gain more insight into your target audience.
- Invest in primary prevention and building resilience with vulnerable people, or others who might likely be or become the target audience of left- or right-wing extremists. Target your early prevention measures at such groups.
- Translate your narrative into stories that resonate with your target audience at a personal level, and interact and engage with them online and offline (this might require extra investment).
- Being present and available online is as important as being present and available offline.

Conspiracy thinking –

The belief that one's in-group is the victim of a conspiracy of out-groups is one of the foundations of every extremist ideology. The subsequent victimhood narrative ("we are under attack, YOU need to help!") forms a key component of extremist propaganda and recruiting efforts.

It is useful to differentiate between "conspiracy theories" and "conspiracy thinking". There are actual conspiracies by governments and powerful groups with the aim of protecting their interests or extending their power (e.g. Watergate-/Iran-

Contra affair or corruption/manipulation by big companies), so being critical towards structures of power is important in every society, especially in pluralistic democracies.

Conspiracy thinking, on the other hand, is the belief that an all-powerful few are in total control. The far-right claims that a Jewish/United States conspiracy is directing the world, the far-left blames Wall Street/US imperialism, while Islamists see a Zionist/US alliance pulling all the stings. All three ideologies refer to a version of the “New World Order (NWO)”, which is driven by anti-Semitic stereotypes like the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. On an individual level, the idea that a “hidden hand” can be blamed for complex problems and individual failures can be attractive for those who feel overwhelmed by the complexity of events or who desire to feel special claiming only they “know the truth”, while everyone else is dumb and blind.

How to debunk conspiracy thinking?

Research into the debunking of vaccination related conspiracy thinking indicates that it might be more effective to address the big-picture conspiracy thinking (e.g. governments and pharmacy industry want to poison my children) rather than the detailed conspiracy theory (vaccination leads to autism; the doctors are paid by the pharma lobby). The latter can lead to a conspiracy-“whac-a-mole”, where every debunked conspiracy theory will be replaced by another one as long as the overall conspiracy thinking stays intact.

Learn more on how to understand and debunk myths and conspiracy theories here:

<https://www.skepticalscience.com/Debunking-Handbook-now-freely-available-download.html>