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CSEP BRIEFING

PRECOBIAS – Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness on Cognitive Biases

Project description

The PRECOBIAS project aims to prevent and counter radicalisation by enhancing the digital resilience and critical thinking by unveiling mental processes and cognitive biases that underlie the interpretation and analysis of information. This awareness is paramount in helping individuals vulnerable to radicalisation to be able to “resist” the extremist discourses online.

The target audience of this project is young people (between the age of 15 and 25) and young people at risk of radicalisation in Italy, Belgium, Germany, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland.

To avoid scaring the target audience by using the name PRECOBIAS, which is clearly identifiable as an EU-funded project, the alternative brand BRAIN.FAIL was created to be perceived as trustworthy by the target audience. The BRAIN.FAIL campaign consists of a [self-test for cognitive biases](#) and a [YouTube channel](#) where the different biases are explained. There is also an Instagram Contest which is part of the social media campaign (see below).

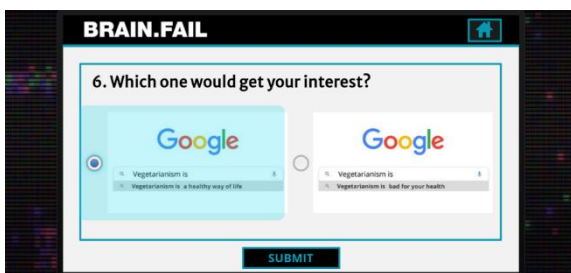
This paper follows a briefing structure, in which it summarises the campaign, the main achievements of the project, the lessons learned on online campaigning in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE), and links to some of the campaign messages.



Summary of the campaign

The purpose of the BRAIN.FAIL campaign is to help young people better understand themselves by revealing the underlying mental processes and cognitive biases that shape their interpretations and analyses of social media content. The message of the campaign is articulated in a way that is perceived as engaging, funny, interactive, and not didactic/pedagogical with the idea to present an issue, that of cognitive biases, that affects all human beings and not only them. This prevents them from feeling blamed or attacked by the content of the campaign.

The format of the campaign resources was chosen based on the target audience's preferences and consumption habits. The selected channels on social media were Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. All three have a big focus on sharing and community. Moreover, the sophisticated targeting functionalities of Facebook, as well as Instagram, proved to be determinant for the success of our campaign.



Young people who completed the test were invited to spread awareness by sharing the resources with others. The social media channels provide sufficient opportunities for peer-to-peer content distribution. These young people are also offered the chance to participate in a contest by tagging BRAIN.FAIL when they share content concerning cognitive biases online. The result of this was two-fold: young people are involved and engaged in the countering radicalisation and the project benefits from increased dissemination via influential multipliers.

Achievements

- The campaign **reached more than 3.5 million European youths** (ages 15–25). Out of these roughly 8% are at risk of radicalisation. The cognitive bias test, that was developed in 7 languages, has been completed more than 18 000 times and has been shared more than 4 000 times.
- PRECOBIAS produced a **series of 10 videos in 7 languages** which have been promoted and shared in all partners' countries. The video views are over 300 000 up to now. The website of the campaign had more than 70 000 visits.
- The project developed the **toolkits for teachers and social workers** and an intensive MOOC (massive open online courses) on cognitive biases and radicalisation which is developed in 8 languages.
- In October 2021 a **training day for 20 representatives** and members of counter-radicalisation and social work networks and organisations at EU level was organised.

Lessons learned

- **Changing policies from Facebook and Instagram** can have a significant impact on your campaign. In fact, advertising through Facebook and Instagram, once considered an effective tool, is becoming increasingly complicated and demanding. This has been further exacerbated by COVID-19 as it triggered further waves of restrictions. The rigorous checks and guidelines make it very difficult and time-

consuming, as well as demanding in terms of effort and knowledge required to run successful campaigns for small teams and budgets.

- **Dialogue is essential between the European Commission and social media (companies)** whose platforms the EU-funded projects are using for campaigning. In order to ensure effective implementation of the projects the usual cumbersome procedures used by social media companies should be made more manageable for EU funded projects to make their campaign a success. An equilibrium needs to be found between the non-commercial nature of CSEP funded projects and the commercial nature and needs of big social media companies, and the EU institutions can help achieve that
- **Being reactive/adaptive is very important.** We made continuous changes to the BRAIN.FAIL campaign following feedback provided by the target audience

What we would do differently next time

- Direct contact with relevant individuals from Facebook and Instagram would help us to overcome different “bureaucratic” problems encountered more effectively.
- It would be best to have an external advisor dealing with social media campaigns (such as advertisement agency account manager) in order to better support the team.

Follow-up

What has been the added value of this project for P/CVE policies?

- The main benefit of the project is that it aims to prevent radicalisation with an approach that is purely psychological and cognitive.
- It is not a project that deals directly with the theme of radicalisation, but rather with the underlying psychological mechanisms of people. For this reason, the campaign is not perceived as a “threat” by the target audience.

Do you have any strategic recommendations for policymakers?

- Socially relevant campaigns like counter radicalisation campaigns, should receive more attention by authorities and “gatekeepers” of the most widespread communication channels as social media.
- The continuous changes in policies are a greater obstacle day-by-day to these kind of campaigns to the point that an accurate audience segmentation will be impossible. Or at least it will take an extremely large number of resources and too much time.

How can it be followed up on (in international, national and/or local context) or what could/should be the next step(s)?

- We believe an approach that focuses on making its targets immune or, at least, resilient towards the extremist propaganda, is very effective. We could continue with such campaigns targeting young people to prevent recruitment in the first instance, rather than trying to convince people to exit the extremist groups.