UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FOR P/CVE: AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION AND MESSAGE TESTING APPROACHES

Galen Lamphere-Englund and Martijn Vugteveen

KEYWORDS

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE); Strategic Communications (Stratcomms); Terrorism; Behavioural Change; Youth; Resilience; Target Audiences; Narrative Design; Audience Segmentation; Message Testing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Developing successful, impactful communication for preventing and countering violent extremism depends on the artful persuasion of audiences. This paper articulates actionable practices for adapting narratives and designing campaigns for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) among target audiences. Building on global lessons from P/CVE strategic communications for less resilient groups, we discuss field-relevant approaches to audience segmentation and message testing. We also provide recommendations for reaching vulnerable young and non-resident audiences.

Successful social and behavioural change communications – especially for P/CVE – depend upon identifying a persuadable audience segment, often called the swayable middle. But to focus on the right group, practitioners must first ensure that their overall P/CVE strategy matches their targeting objectives (Whittaker and Elsayed, 2019). They should ask themselves how an intervention will specifically and, ideally, measurably impact their audience's knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours. The more the practitioner can specifically define the audience, the more likely a campaign is to cut through and have a demonstrable impact on behaviour. To better delineate specific segments, communications researchers can use surveys to understand the target audience's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours, along with credible messengers, media channel preferences, and lifestyle or entertainment inclinations. These categories, along with anonymised demographic data and intervention-specific questions, provide a template for information used in audience segmentation. Additionally, and particular to the P/CVE context, this process can also identify helpful narrative-centred beliefs and factors of resilience to violent extremism (Grossman et al, 2020). Communications experts can then deploy these insights to inform an effective campaign along the channels, messengers, and messages which hold traction with the chosen audience.

Message testing, meanwhile, refers to understanding what narratives or specific messages best resonate and impact a given group of people.[1] Testing and revising narratives ensure that the final messaging approach will land well and does not make inaccurate assumptions about audience needs. It typically takes place after background research, audience segmentation, and a design phase during which strategy, initial creative content, and credible messengers are decided. Traditional testing approaches include focus group discussions, cognitive interviews, exposure surveys that ask for audience reactions to messages or preliminary creative content, and online A/B testing. However, unlike traditional communications campaigns, evaluating the effectiveness of a specific message or narrative can be extremely tricky and requires careful consideration (Zumir, 2022). Approaches to message testing vary across audiences, country contexts, and budgets: we discuss these in depth in this paper. Representative testing group composition, tightly calibrated questions, and experimental approaches to evaluating the impact of messaging can all help streamline message testing to ensure maximum efficacy of the final approach (Bokemper et al, 2022; WHO, n.d.).

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[1] Narratives here are best defined by Kurt Braddock as 'cohesive, causally linked sequences of events that take place in dynamic worlds subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful action performed by characters' (2020, p. 75).

As with any work in this sensitive space, a human rights first approach with robust Do-No-Harm policies should ground strategic communications endeavours. On that foundation, models like those offered by the European Strategic Communications Network (ESCN) Compendium (2019), GAMMMA+ from the RAN Communications and Narratives working group (2018) or the counter-radicalisation communications intervention steps from Braddock (2020) provide solid scaffolding for interventions. The below complementary recommendations draw on our cross-sector review that practitioners may find helpful in their work. The recommendations follow steps 2-4 from a typical stratcomms cycle (see visual example below) and end with cross-sectoral lessons from COVID-19 vaccine informational campaigns and counter disinformation efforts.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CYCLE

☆ Indicates focus of this paper.
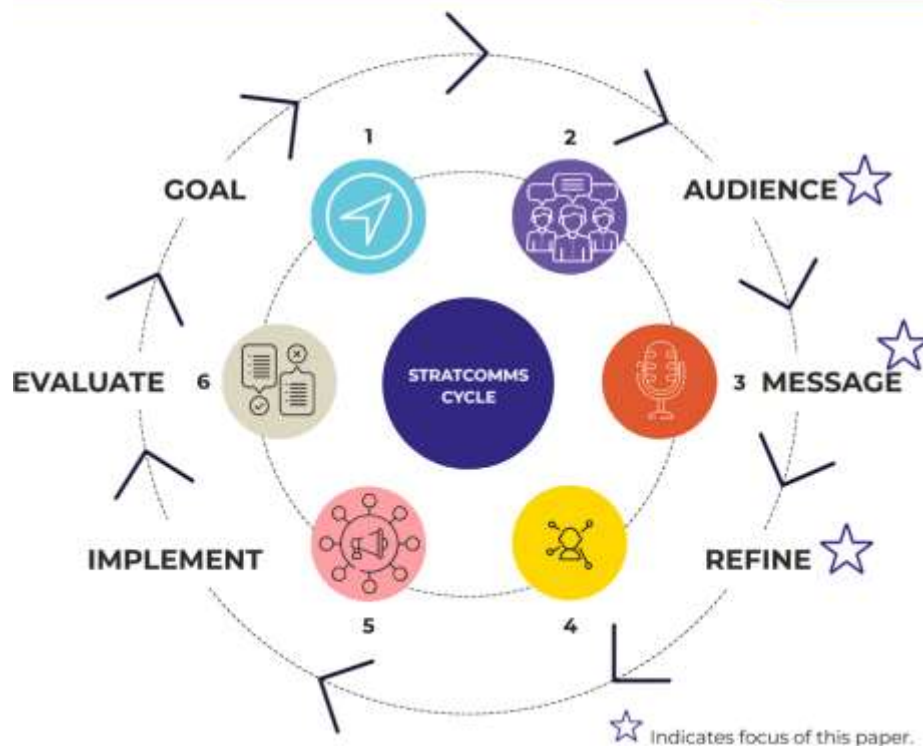
GOAL
Set a defined purpose or P/CVE related behaviour to target with a stratcomms intervention.
1

AUDIENCE
Identify a target audience and segments, along with their messenger and media preferences.
2

MESSAGE
Use narrative and message testing techniques to hone content for the target audience.
3

REFINE
Finalise content and strategy based on audience segmentation, messaging, and stratcomms goals.
4

IMPLEMENT
Deploy comms assets, partners, and messengers to actualise the strategy.
5

EVALUATE
Assess the effectiveness of approach at achieving behavioural or normative change. Revise accordingly.
6

RECOMMENDATIONS

Audience (Targeting)

1. **Choose a specific goal** or related discrete behaviour to target with an intervention. Successful audience targeting and segmentation depend upon a clear strategic approach (Ritzmann et al, 2019). Without designating an intended behavioural change linked to violent extremism or radicalisation, researching audience segments will be nearly impossible.

2. **Learn from best practices** from other social and behavioural change communications sectors. Similar approaches to audience segmentation and message testing are used successfully in COVID-19 vaccine campaigns, public health work, and counter disinformation work, to name but a few. This review also highlights the importance of identifying narrative deficits during audience research (from counter misinformation work) and the continued importance of identifying trusted messengers during communications research (from communications campaigns).

Audience (Segmentation)

3. **Identify the audience through** their knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. Audience targeting and segmentation surveys should evaluate linked attributes to the behavioural goal (Braddock, 2020). Surveys should also assess useful communications preferences, such as media and platform channels, entertainment and lifestyle content types, and specific credible influencers.

4. **Consider resilience instead of** vulnerability framing. By incorporating a resilience or protective factor-based approach and questions during audience targeting, practitioners can better identify specific factors that can be improved through positive interventions (Rottweiler et al, 2022). This approach can also help identify specific beliefs to shift through a particular intervention.

Audience (Accessing the Hard to Reach)

5. **Use appropriate and modern** technologies for data collection, especially with hard-to-reach audiences. Accessing non-national residents, overseas populations, or sub-communities for a specific intervention can be challenging. New tech-based quantitative and qualitative tools such as rapid mobile surveys and online communities can help reach audiences remotely, safely, and confidentially.

6. **Co-design with communities** when possible. Face-to-face or even virtual approaches that allow for iterative feedback from the same community members consulted during audience segmentation, message testing, and evaluation can help to ground interventions in participatory local knowledge and minimise rejection risks (Holmer et al, 2018).

Message (Testing) and Refining

7. **Test narratives and messages** on each audience and segment. After audience segments have been developed, preliminary narratives and creative content can be designed to meet the behavioural change objective. These approaches should be tested with the specific target audience, or audiences, to solicit their feedback. Narratives should be clear to the respondents, and creative content should be sufficiently defined to elicit actionable

revisions. We also see the utility of testing pre-bunking content and evaluating the performance-related assets during message testing (from COVID-19 responses).

8. **Ensure message testing is** timely, targeted, and well moderated. The composition of message testing groups is critical: no matter the budget or research methods chosen, different groupings with each demographic target group should be used. Moderators should be familiar with the campaign, P/CVE sensitivities, and cultural nuances within the communities being asked for feedback.

METHODOLOGY

This consolidated overview on audience segmentation and message testing seeks to address a key question for P/CVE practitioners, namely: What are the best strategic communications practices for audience segmentation, narrative development, and messaging targeting/testing in P/CVE work? The following seeks to also provide relevant case studies, technological innovations for audience surveying and segmentation, and lessons from other behavioural change campaigns across sectors. To answer these questions, we relied on studies gleaned over a decade of counter extremism and conflict prevention paired with a comprehensive literature review and synthesis through the following four stages.

Stage One – Identify Gaps: We reviewed prior RAN PS and relevant P/CVE literature to avoid duplication of efforts and to ensure novel primary contributions to the policy area.

Stage Two – Literature & Campaign Review: We then consulted open-source academic, policy, and communications literature on the subject. This was paired with a reading of grey sector and academic writing on strategic communications, public health messaging, counter mis- and disinformation messaging, and relevant applications for improving P/CVE communications work. Additionally, successful campaigns from the above sectors were examined to glean insights and pragmatic recommendations applicable to audience targeting and narrative design. Categories of sources consulted included academic and peer-reviewed research; grey sector literature (thinktanks, intergovernmental agency reports, practitioner and monitoring & evaluation reviews of relevant strategic communications publications); and documentation of publicly accessible campaigns (namely from P/CVE, counternarratives, counter mis/disinformation, and public health interventions).

Stage Three – Synthesis: Drawing on the above reviews, in addition to their practitioner experience running stratcomms programming, we designed practical step-wise recommendations and answers to the guidance questions for this report.

Stage Four – Feedback and Review: After drafting, reviews from the RAN PS implementing team were solicited and responded to. This was carried out to ensure the maximum utility of the final research deliverables.

ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW

Strategic communication is the art of persuasion. To that end, a typical strategic communications campaign cycle follows roughly six steps:

1. setting a defined purpose or related behaviour to nudge with the intervention;
2. identifying a target audience, along with their media channel and messenger preferences;
3. developing the narrative and messages to be disseminated, then improving them through message testing;
4. refining the campaign strategy and creative content based on testing results;
5. implementing the campaign through chosen creative approaches, partners, and other forms of engagement;
6. evaluating the effectiveness of the campaign at achieving behavioural or normative change, then revising and improving if capacity allows.

In this paper, we focus on steps two through four to better understand and develop recommendations for audience targeting and message testing in P/CVE and counter influence operation contexts. Other steps are mentioned but are not explained in-depth here.
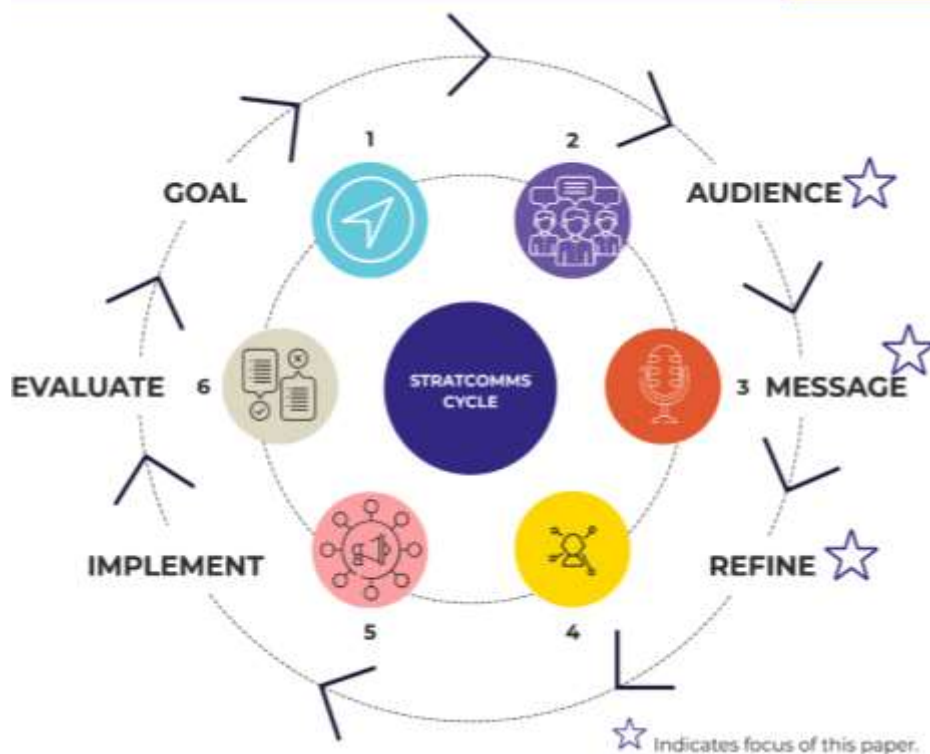

Figure 1: A typified six-step communications campaign cycle.

TARGETING AUDIENCES

Understanding audience targeting

As most violent extremist recruiters recognise, whether intuitively or strategically, smaller groups of people defined by specific beliefs are more likely than dichotomous communities to be persuaded by a concerted effort. We know that identifying the right target audience and getting to know the profiles of our target audience are essential in developing effective strategic communications (stratcomms) and persuasive outreach campaigns (Stephens et al, 2011). In P/CVE contexts, Whittaker and Elsayed (2019) have highlighted the importance of tailoring communication messages that target the right audience, particularly those vulnerable to extremist ideologies and who have been engaged as tacit or active supporters of those views.

Practitioners preventing violent extremism often struggle to define a sufficiently reachable and delineated group within society to target with a given intervention. While whole-of-society campaigns may seem tempting, resource constraints make massive audience targeting impractical or implausible. Reaching all the youth of, say, France is neither efficient nor effective.

At the same time, specific sub-groups or segments inside a wider population may hold different attitudes, perceptions, or preferences, making them more swayable on a given issue. Marketing professionals use such **audience segments** to define a smaller target audience that might be reached and persuaded more effectively (Lee, 2020). For example, an audience for online feminist mental wellbeing courses might be defined as 24-40-year-old female professionals in urban areas of Germany with higher education degrees in a middle-to-upper income bracket. Prior market research into consumer demands and preferences in the country might help identify that audience as one most interested in mental health and with sufficient disposable income to buy the course. Alternatively, commissioned research through surveys, focus groups, or interviews can help to identify specific audience segments.

Successful social and behavioural change communications – especially for P/CVE – depend upon identifying a **persuadable audience segment,** often called the 'swayable middle'. Finding the right audience is key to ensuring impactful behavioural change. Those too set in their views on an issue typically will not budge, nor will those with no interest in the issue. Targeting ardent Daesh/ISIS supporters with an online communication intervention is unlikely to meet with easy success, while a resilience-building campaign targeting strong communities with no apparent vulnerabilities to violent extremism is equally foolhardy. Still, a different campaign might yet find a swayable middle in marginalised subcommunities of gamers susceptible, but not yet already lost, to far-right propaganda using incel (involuntarily celibate) tropes.

To carry out audience targeting, practitioners should first ensure that their overall P/CVE strategy matches their targeting objectives. In the GAMMMA+ model developed by the RAN Communications & Narratives working group which reflects a typical communications cycle as illustrated in Figure 1, this is the first step: the Goal (Ritzmann et al, 2019). They should define a precise and nuanced problem, or at least what narrative or ideological propositions they seek to shift. Next, the strategy should provide what tactics they might use and, in general, who they wish to reach. Lastly, it should set out what intended and possible unintentional effects those tactics may have. Ethical concerns and a human rights-centred, do-no-harm approach should always be thought through and incorporated.
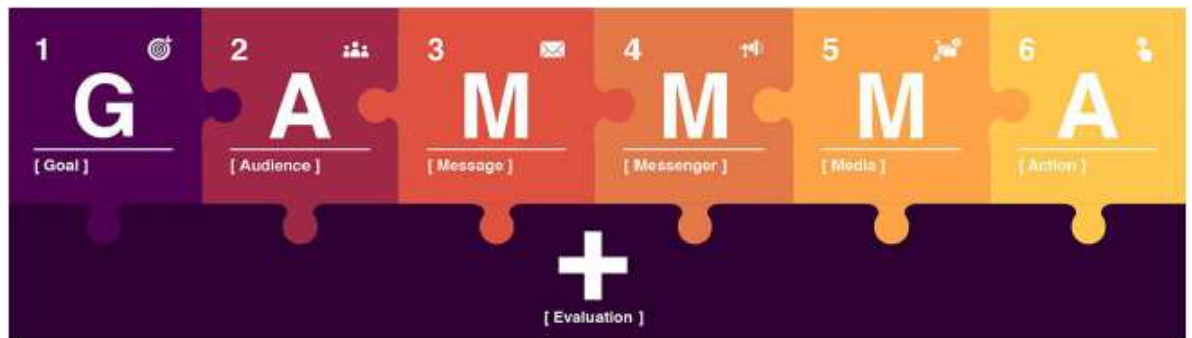
Figure 2 - GAMMMA+ Model from Ritzmann et al, 2019

Fundamentally, practitioners should ask themselves how an intervention should specifically and, ideally, measurably impact the knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours of their audience. Developing a clear target audience will prove challenging without stipulating the exact problem at hand and stating specific desired outcomes, which ought to be more nuanced than simply preventing radicalisation or building resilience.

Once basic strategy questions are answered, defining audience segments can take place. As with any communications campaign, knowing one's audience is pivotal: culturally informed background research should help inform audience definition. This second Audience step of the GAMMMA+ model can also, as researcher Kurt Braddock puts it, 'distinguish target audiences via intention' by using surveys to 'determine targets' beliefs, attitudes, intentions, norms and self-efficacy' related to the target behaviour change sought (p. 158, 2020). For the ESCN model, this step entails having a "baseline of attitudes and behaviours" for the target audience (p. 88, 2019). The less generic and more specific a practitioner can stipulate the attributes of an audience, the more likely a campaign is to cut through and have a demonstrable impact on behaviour. Typically, segmentation analysis centres on differences in the following four categories.

1. **Key knowledge, attitudes, or behaviours** which in this field might be towards violent extremist organisations or individuals, radicalised ideological views, or intolerant attitudes. This dependent variable can be swapped for a specific aim of an intervention – such as knowledge of mis- and disinformation risks or foreign influence tactics. In P/CVE stratcomms campaigns with ample research capacity, levels of resilience to violent extremism can even be assessed here by using multiple factors.

2. **Credible messengers** trusted by the audience, which may include a variety of religious, cultural, political, sporting, or pop figures.

3. **Media channel preferences**, which can help identify subtle in-roads for an approach by asking after the most favoured online video or music genres, video games, TikTok or Instagram channel types, video durations and formats, and so on.

4. **Lifestyle and entertainment preferences**, which can be used to select the most viewed campaign channels, such as specific social media platforms or groups, online video games, or even podcasts. Preferences towards storytelling formats, such as types of emotional or humorous narratives, which might create a cognitive opening (Trip et al, 2019) can also be gauged here.

The above four categories, along with anonymised demographic data and other questions as dictated by the specific context and aims of a given intervention, provide a template for information used in audience segmentation. In the GAMMMA+ model, this step can also aid in identifying the Messenger and Medium preferred by the audience. Methodologies typically used for gathering that data vary slightly based on the context, country, and budget of a given project but may include: survey panels offered by a research agency with a standing group of respondents; mobile surveys that reach respondents through smartphone ads or apps; face-to-face surveys, which are helpful for hard to reach or non-networked groups of people, albeit at a higher cost; secondary social media or demographic data, which may provide viable information on categories 2-4 above; and, focus group discussions or interviews which can add significant qualitative depth to a segmentation exercise. Qualitative work is often conducted following a more extensive, ideally representative, quantitative polling exercise to identify current trends among a wider population.
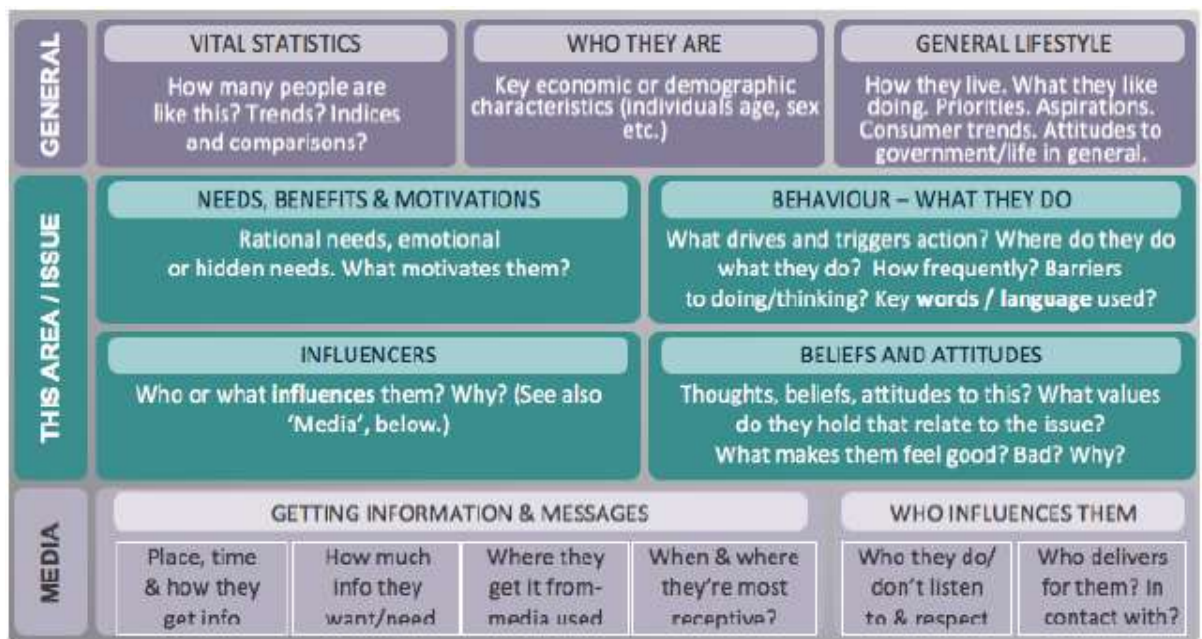
Figure 3 - Audience Segmentation Components from Ritzmann et al, 2019

Once data is collected, specific sub-groups, or segments, can be identified through quantitative analysis. In P/CVE work, examples might include very resilient, average, and less resilient groups to violent extremism, or supporters, swayables, and non-supporters of diverse and inclusive societies. Categorising the dependent variable for a campaign's objectives allows the goal be linked to corollary data, including related beliefs and preferences for media, channels, and influencers of the swayable audience. From that, and by adding in the demographic data of the swayable group, practitioners and researchers can precisely define a target audience.

In addition, through audience research, one can identify the specific beliefs to target with an intervention that meets a three-fold test, as suggested by Braddock (2020). Namely, these should be a belief or beliefs that are '[1] correlated with the behaviour designed to change, [2] underrepresented within the target audience, [3] capable of being affected via persuasion' (Braddock, 2020, p. 158). Campaigners can deploy these insights to inform an effective campaign along the channels, messengers, and messages which hold traction with the chosen audience. After identifying the target

audience segment and beliefs to be nudged, specific persuasive messages can be curated and tested with the audience. Each should be adapted through testing to suit their preferences – this is described in the Message and Narrative Testing section.

Figure 4 – 'Defining Goals' from Zumir, 2022, p. 17

AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION AND INSIGHT PRACTICES

While the above provides a general overview of audience targeting and segmentation practice, we know that additional nuance is needed for P/CVE work. The European Parliament has noted that for alternative and counternarratives, 'a nuanced behavioural and attitudinal understanding of [an] audience is needed to persuasively shape attitudes and behaviours' (2017). The case studies below illustrate good practices to reach that understanding.

Using resilience to define audiences instead of vulnerability

Examining the multitude of factors contributing to radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism has occupied researchers for decades. However, research into positive aspects that foster resilience to violent extremism has been relatively recent. Also termed 'protective factors', many resilience factors have the potential for growth through targeted strategic communications interventions (Rottweiler et al, 2022). In this context, resilience has been defined by Ungar (2008) as: 'the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways'.

Strategic communications for counter influence operations or reaching overseas audiences can benefit from this resilience focus, as it allows for the definition of specific attributes inside a given population that might be susceptible to manipulation. For example, the Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) scale developed by Grossman et al (2020) addresses multiple domains of resilience hypothesised to be linked with preventing VE across various groups. Other tools and indicators have focused on generalised assessments of resilient communities or specific ethnic groups yet are, for a variety of reasons, limited in their scope (Grossman et al. 2020; Weine 2012; Weine et al. 2009). BRAVE, however, has been successfully deployed across the world. After being initially validated on culturally diverse groups in Australia and Canada, the tool has successfully been contextually adapted and used in at least 12 countries ranging from Germany to Kyrgyzstan and for forthcoming research in Indonesia.[2] Recognising that resilience is situated in communities – not just individuals – this approach uses 20 measures across five primary factors underpinning resilience: in this case to violent extremism. These include the following.

Cultural identity and connectedness: Familiarity with one's own cultural heritage, practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms (can involve more than one culture); knowledge of 'mainstream' cultural practices, beliefs, traditions, values and norms if different from own cultural heritage; having a sense of cultural pride; feeling anchored in one's own cultural beliefs and practices; feeling that one's culture is accepted by the wider community; feeling able to share one's culture with others.

Bridging capital: Trust and confidence in people from other groups; support for and from people from other groups; strength of ties to people outside one's group; having the skills, knowledge and confidence to connect with other groups; valuing inter-group harmony; active engagement with people from other groups.

Linking capital: Trust and confidence in government and authority figures; trust in community organisations; having the skills, knowledge and resources to make use of institutions and organisations outside one's local community; ability to contribute to or influence policy and decision making relating to one's own community.

Violence-related behaviours: Willingness to speak out publicly against violence; willingness to challenge the use of violence by others; acceptance of violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts.

Violence-related beliefs: The degree to which violence is seen to confer status and respect and the degree to which violence is normalised or well tolerated for any age group in the community (Grossman et al 2017, p. 10).

By using a resilience-based survey instrument – or at least portions informed by it and culturally adjusted – audiences can be defined based on their relative resilience to their peers. Whether looking at resilience to violent extremism, disinformation, or influence operations, this allows practitioners to attenuate specific variables for interventions, such as improving inter-group programming if bridging capital is notably lacking or developing outreach programmes based on improving voice in local policymaking if linking capital is low. In addition, adding a resilience-informed approach to audience

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[22] For a full list of countries where BRAVE has been trialled, see *https://brave.resilienceresearch.org/how-to-use/.*

targeting efforts can allow practitioners to look at which channels, messengers, and messages might resonate the most with swayable audiences whose resilience is most in need of support. However, both protective factor analysis and surveys like BRAVE carefully stipulate that they measure resilience to VE, not the likelihood of engaging in VE. In other words, a less resilient group identified through the survey should not be stigmatised as likely to participate in violent extremism or terrorism, merely that there are resilience factors that can be improved.

Learning from mis- and disinformation campaigns

Disinformation, or the intentional dissemination of falsehoods with a specific intent, is intrinsically interlinked with influence operations, as well as with extremism and extremist narratives. Weaponised disinformation by state and violent extremist actors alike is increasing, along with the ability of VEOs and state actors alike to rapidly scale malicious campaigns via social media and digital platforms (Lamphere-Englund, 2022). Overseas audiences are frequently the target of such campaigns. Accordingly, efforts to tackle online disinformation have surged in the last years, and universities and think tanks have distilled lessons from attempts at prevention.[3] Among the most popular and seemingly effective efforts include those at pre-bunking, a tactic drawing on inoculation theory to teach users to identify specific disinformation pieces before they stumble on them organically, along with takedown efforts and countermeasures to warn users when they interact with disinformation or problematic content (Zamir, 2022). Critically for audience targeting learnings, *The Conspiracy Theory Handbook* from the Center for Climate Change Communication notes that engagement with forms of political disinformation and extremism should depend on trusted messengers, affirmations of empathy and critical thinking while avoiding ridicule (Lewandowsky and Cook, 2020). All the above are applicable for P/CVE and counter influence work – and can be honed into specific messages through audience targeting and message testing, as described in the next section.

Learning from COVID-19 vaccine campaign principles

Over the past years, the COVID-19 pandemic has weighed heavily on the world, while anti-vaccine mis- and disinformation have consistently undermined public health responses. At the same time, effective vaccine campaigns have highlighted strategic communication insights useful for audiences in the P/CVE world. As the World Health Organisation (WHO) notes in its *Principles for Effective Communications* (n.d.)*,* strategic communicators must:

1. know their audience – including via audience targeting to understand the 'socio-demographic and cultural characteristics of decision-makers';

2. listen to their audience;

3. tailor their message;

4. motivate their audience.

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[3] See, for example, Jack, Caroline (2017), 'Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information.', *Data & Society* vol. 3, nr. 22, pp. 1094-1096. and Lewandowsky, Stephan, and John Cook (2020), *The conspiracy theory handbook*, Center for Climate Change Communication, George Mason University.

These broad strategic communications principles are echoed by audience segmentation analysis carried out during the pandemic, such as that by Granicus Group (n.d.) or the US State of New Jersey, which developed segments and audience personas that identified:

1. pain points for the vaccine;

2. goals about the vaccine;

3. communications needs for each segment.

Similar work carried out in the EU and globally has sought to illustrate the vaccine information gap – termed a data deficit by researchers at First Draft News – for each audience segment (Smith et al, 2020). Such an approach can also be used in P/CVE work to identify narrative gaps and existing outreach work with specific audiences. Practitioners should also identify narrative data deficits faced by audiences seeking information on extremism, disinformation, or radicalisation and respond to those through credible messengers.

HARD-TO-REACH AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Audience research and segmentation can be challenging even in contexts with ample data, open-minded participants, and unconstrained survey capabilities. Reaching hard-to-access audiences requires additional considerations. Think of non-resident nationals who might be in other countries, audiences in non-permissive operating environments, or virtual sub-communities without geographic boundaries. In these cases, existing market or audience research may be absent and reaching individuals for interviews may be challenging or risky for both researchers and participants.

New, tech-based tools can offer insights into these hard-to-research communities. Of particular use for audience targeting are rapid mobile surveys and online communities, which can reach relatively large numbers of participants quickly, affordably, and remotely.

Rapid online surveys allow for quick data collection – often taking between a week to two weeks – as compared with months for face-to-face surveys. They also do not impose COVID-19 or travel risks and can be rapidly developed and launched without in-country polling teams. Similarly, they can be launched directly to users' phones with their consent, potentially mitigating respondent bias and protecting researchers when working in non-permissive locations or discussing extremism issues.

However, respondents tend to skew younger (under 45) and must own smartphones. For P/CVE work targeting youth, this is generally not an issue but should be kept in mind. Using mobile devices can also skew the population away from socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals. Older ages will not be as represented - and those who access the survey will be more likely to be digitally literate, which may further distort responses. To adjust for this reality, researchers can also weight data to ensure consistency with national demographics across age and region.

Several online, anonymised, rapid mobile-first online survey platforms are available with wide reach across countries. Most will allow for around 30 questions, including skip logic, though a shorter survey will increase response rates. For example, one reliable option, Pollfish, uses a novel approach called organics sampling: a 'methodology built on a new delivery framework called Random Device

Engagement (RDE). Respondents are invited using a double opt-in to avoid the pitfalls of river sampling: they confirm their interest, [and] proprietary backend technology collects and verifies their unique user ID to create a profile, and they join our respondent pool where they may be invited to take a survey if they fit the targeting criteria. Native integration with 120K+ partner apps allows us to easily send surveys as advertising alternatives to users who already have the apps installed, giving us reflexive, immediate responses directly from targeted samples of consumers without disrupting their mobile experience or creating a biased atmosphere' (Rothschild and Konitzer, 2018).

Online communities, meanwhile, are carried out through a virtual platform that enables participants to respond to structured questions, mark up photos/videos, and interact with other participants and the moderator. Online research groups like these, compared to more traditional focus groups, provide the additional benefits of:

1. engaging with respondents over a more extended period and thus gathering more data than can be achieved in a focus group setting with a strict time limit;

2. enabling respondents to engage with sensitive questions, for example, by explaining illicit behaviour while concealing their identity behind the safety of their computer or mobile screen;

3. giving P/CVE researchers or practitioners the opportunity to observe and contribute questions which can be explored on days 2-3 of the community while the study is still live;

4. qualitatively interviewing a higher number of respondents without any geographic or time of day restrictions.

Respondents can join such platforms using their first name or a pseudonym to interact with each other. In one GDPR-compliant platform, Recollective, questions and answers can be visible to others in the community or made private. These communities are generally left open for multiple days to allow for long-term responses and are incentivised to improve response rates. Participants are recruited through local research agencies, online survey panels, or by local implementers and are typically given a financial incentive for their participation. Respondents are best moderated by local moderator(s) who are trained in discussing sensitive topics like extremism, facilitating group discussions, and utilising the online community platform. Typically, respondents will complete consistent short tasks each day. Most community discussions take place over two days (usually a weekend) with a follow-up day for any closing or late replies. In previous research with sensitive communities, this approach has wielded in-depth information with more significant disclosures than with traditional face-to-face focus group discussions. And as previously mentioned, online communities can be conducted fully remotely, enabling audience research to be done from a distance while reaching specific communities in other locales. Using languages spoken as screening questions during recruitment can help expressly select individuals or non-resident nationals who may be exposed to content from a given country, a VEO, or other actors of concern.

NARRATIVE AND MESSAGE TESTING

Understanding narrative and message testing

Message testing refers to understanding what narratives or specific messages best resonate and impact a given group of people.[4] While often linked with discussions of counternarratives, message and narrative testing need not be oppositional. They can be used in a wide variety of P/CVE interventions. The fraught conversation over the efficacy and usage of counternarratives, meanwhile, is well covered by other reports (Rosato, 2021; Carthy et al, 2020; Carthy and Sarma, 2021; Bélanger et al, 2020; Braddock and Horgan, 2016; Rosand and Winterbotham, 2019; Reed, 2018). In any case, message testing is a fundamental step in effective strategic communications. Testing and revising narratives ensure that the final messaging approach lands well and does not make erroneous assumptions about audience needs.

Many campaigns make the mistake of not reviewing creative content (mock-ups, images, narratives, videos, and so on) with the actual audience before 'going live'. Overconfidence in knowing an audience – a mistake rife in P/CVE interventions targeting younger audiences while being designed by considerably older or culturally removed practitioners – leads to final products that miss the mark. To avoid this, message testing typically takes place after background research, audience segmentation,

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[4] Narratives here are best defined by 'cohesive, causally linked sequences of events that take place in dynamic worlds subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful action performed by characters' (Braddock, 2020, p. 75).

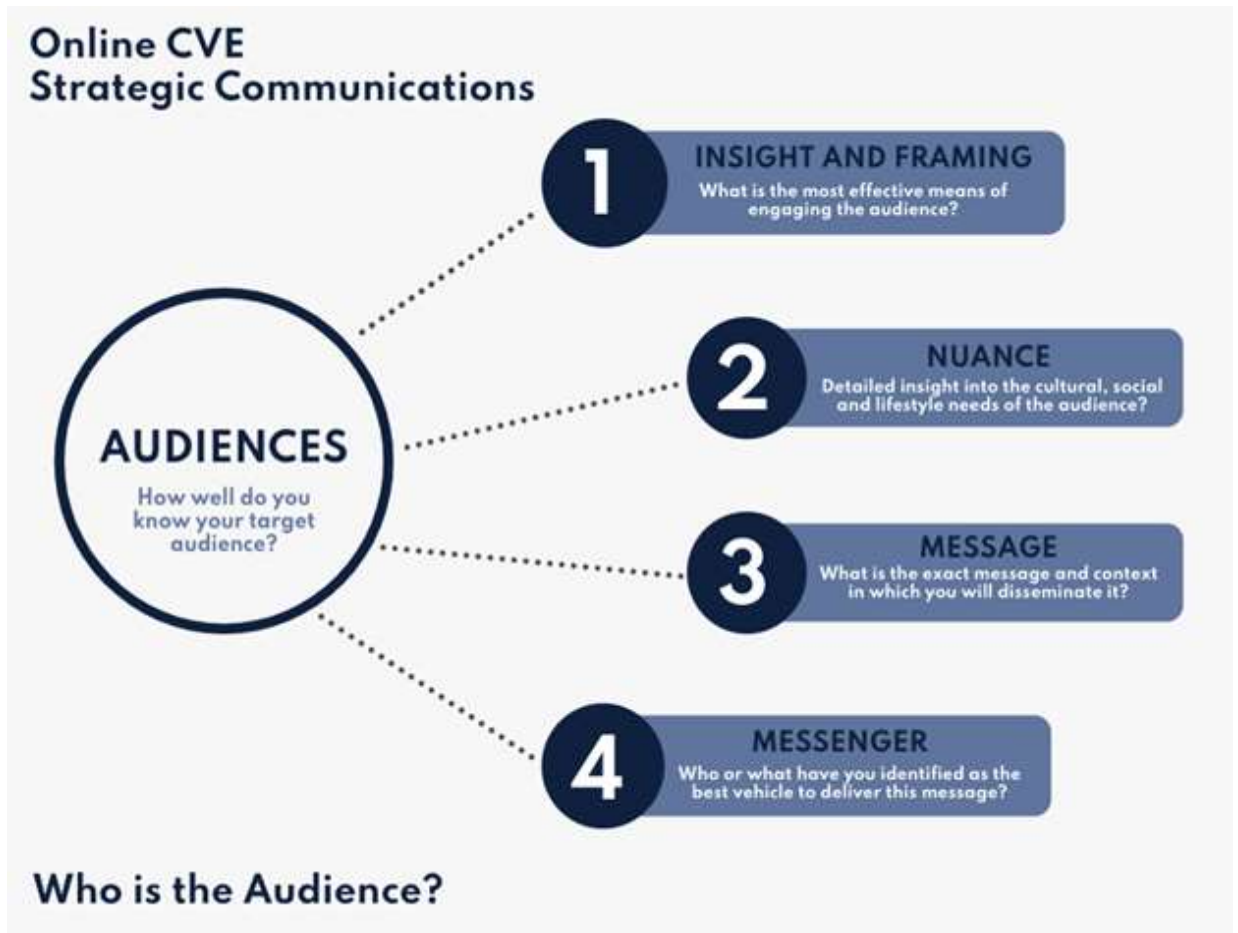and a design phase during which strategy, initial creative content, and credible messengers are decided.

Figure 5 - From Zumir, 2022, p. 25

Testing – designed to get feedback on the overall concept and narrative, creative assets, and motifs or tone – can take place through various tools. Traditional approaches include focus group discussions, cognitive interviews, exposure surveys that ask after audience reactions to messages or preliminary creative content, or online A/B testing with a test group. The latter – A/B testing – is typically used in online environments to monitor engagement with slight variations in content: a practice common to social media and online platforms of all varieties seeking to maximise user engagement and time spent on their services. In P/CVE interventions, A/B testing can be used both at the start of intervention before activation and as an ongoing way to evaluate and iteratively improve content during a campaign. This approach, which shares many attributes with adaptive delivery approaches, can also be used to re-tool similar campaign assets for different audiences by shifting tones and forms of the narratives for a new audience (Glazzard, 2017).

However, unlike traditional communications campaigns, evaluating the effectiveness of a specific message or narrative can be extremely tricky. A recent report from the Positive Interventions Working Group run by the Global Internet Forum for Counter-Terrorism found that 'the "golden goose" of online CVE interventions remains the relationship between content and engagement, followed by values alignment and behaviour change' (Zumir, 2022). Developing message testing approaches that

adequately capture audience sentiments towards humour, irony, and other storytelling devices is difficult – let alone gauging whether a given message might sway an underlying behaviour or belief related to violent extremism. Furthermore, once an intervention goes live, interactions go beyond the campaign materials: online comment threads (Waddell, 2018; Chung 2019), socialisation among one's peers and social milieu (Hedges, 2017), and press coverage (Mazzoni, 2022) can all impact the outcomes of even the most internally consistent strategic communications campaigns.

Message testing practices

Specific approaches to message testing vary across audiences, country contexts, and budgets. As the last RAN GAMMMA+ model review offers:

> We recommend observing the responses of a small sample of your target audience before rolling out your full-scale campaign. If you don't have team members who are close to your target audience, test your message using a focus group comprising members of your audience or people very close to your audience. This is easily done in low-budget campaigns; plan a walk-in hour for relevant local community representatives. You can also test your message on a small scale by initiating targeted discussions in an online forum frequented by your audience (2019).

Simple discussions about the campaign approach or small-scale online discussions are helpful, but more intensive techniques can yield more precise results. Multiple focus groups or online community panels like those discussed for audience segmentation can be used with campaigns with slightly more budgetary resources. These expose individuals to campaign content to assess their reactions before and after viewing the material. This generally serves two purposes:

1. evaluating and testing the most viable messaging on the audience(s) prior to dissemination;
2. reviewing key audience reactions to the finalised messages and content to assess for intended behavioural change as measured by changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices.

Typically, respondent responses should be moderated by a skilled facilitator fluent in the audience's language. They should be highly trained in discussing sensitive topics, facilitating group discussions, and, using online panels, utilising the chosen online community platform. During the focus group or panel period, respondents will be given messages, images, videos, and language to respond to and give feedback. As such, the moderator should be familiar with the campaign goals and be able to probe specific nuances needed to hone the final messages.

The composition of message testing groups also matters. For P/CVE work, if multiple audience segments are targeted, then separate groups should be carried out with each segment. For example, if targeting less-resilient and middle-resilient audiences segmented by gender, then a minimum of four discussion groups would be most appropriate. Different demographics should also be disaggregated, such as people from different regions, cultural or religious backgrounds, or socioeconomic backgrounds. In many campaigns, gathering 20-30 respondents in total subdivided into distinct groups of 5-6 people each can be a balanced and cost-effective way to gather feedback. More complex campaigns or interventions covering wider groups – other countries, languages, groups, and so on – naturally necessitate a larger sample. The specific sampling criteria should be refined following audience segmentation and any background research phase to create 'copy-cat' audiences for the key VE vulnerability segments or other targeting criteria developed previously. As with other types of audience research, conventional research agency panels can be used for recruitment with carefully

designed screeners – questions to filter out the respondent group. Care should be given to ensure that respondents and research agencies are not placed at risk by engaging with P/CVE material. Alternatively, local recruitment run by the implementing group in communities where programmes are taking place may be a more reasonable solution for smaller projects.

Ongoing engagement with focus group members can also be built into P/CVE intervention design. Community-based engagements with a co-design element are often more effective in building trust while lowering the risk of negative fallout from interventions (Holmer et al, 2018). Keeping the same audience group from segmentation analysis to message testing – and perhaps in co-design or evaluation phases – can have manifest benefits. At the same time, the risk of listening to the same people who consistently contribute to P/CVE or similar social campaigns should be mitigated.

Practitioners should carefully calibrate questions for message testing to enquire about the resonance of the message and messaging approach. Questions that capture whether each segment understands the story, visuals, and cultural relevance of the communications products are essential. To do so, testing should use messaging and visuals as close to final version as possible. Additionally, message testing is usually best done qualitatively before activating an intervention, allowing for more discussion and feedback. Quantitative methods such as surveys can be used, but these often do not provide as rich responses to nuanced messaging.

Learning from youth P/CVE campaigns

A wide array of successful P/CVE campaigns have used various forms of message testing to hone their approaches. For example, PeaceGeeks, a CSO, uses offline engagement with their audience members to allow their 'planning to go beyond the norm of focus group testing…[adding] diversity to different possible target audience needs with bespoke round-table and workshop style events…[giving] greater nuance and depth' (Zumir, 2022).

Similarly, YouTube's Creators for Change programme, developed in collaboration with UNDP and funded by the European Union, leveraged local audience segmentation of at-risk audiences and applied message testing in multiple countries to reach over 8.5 billion viewers in 2018 alone (YouTube, 2018). The programme included creators with a specific counter-radicalisation and P/CVE focus in their work, paired with content varying from comedy to sports and fashion to reach audiences who might not have otherwise been willing to engage with a decidedly more challenging subject. Message testing with specific audiences and training for content creators on how to test their content before going live helped to ensure cut through to hard-to-reach audiences with the subject matter.

Another project, Abdullah-X, run through a CSO, used a [YouTube partnership](#) to run 'A-B testing through creating different thumbnails with varying degrees of intrigue and then targeted different potential users through hashtag/metadata changes with the same core content' (Zumir, 2022). That particular project worked to refine audience targeting via a data-driven approach. Other online and social media-focused campaigns use similar approaches, such as the 'Find Another Way' campaign (YouthRightOn, 2017) run by the EU-funded [Youth Right On](#). That Bulgaria-based campaign used narratives online through videos, ads, and media articles to address its target audience. These were aligned to audience polling needs and evaluated through focus group discussions. However, message testing was not directly carried out during the testing phase (Center for the Study of Democracy, n.d.).

COVID-19 vaccine campaigns

Public health interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic also offer insights for best message testing practices. The WHO, for example, contends that: 'Even during an epidemic or a pandemic, basic level testing can be conducted that, in the end, will provide the needed evidence that communications are working or how to adjust them. It's an important process that actually saves time and money by not wasting efforts on ineffective communications' (WHO, n.d.). Experimental tests of public health messaging during 2020 reflected clear messaging bright lines for the country studied: framing social distancing as bravery, not as a safe or anti-reckless action, for example (Bokemper et al, 2022). Using treatment messages backed by a robust theoretical framing allowed for refinement of public health messaging, just as message testing P/CVE narratives can. Both the University of Cambridge and Public Interest UK have developed helpful message testing guides for public health that are broadly applicable to P/CVE work. Among these suggestions are recommendations from the WHO to manage message testing costs and timelines by:

1. borrowing questions from other pre-tests when possible;

2. working with partner organisations to recruit participants and conduct tests (such as a church, patient educators, a clinic);

3. keeping the questions short and to the point. Use as many close-ended or multiple-choice questions as possible (for easier tabulation analysis);

4. using the 5-5-5 guide whereby you interview 5 people who fit your target audience, ask 5 questions, take no more than 5 minutes to do the survey – you can do this in person, over the phone, via email, or through messaging apps (WHO, n.d.).

In P/CVE work, pre-tests or similarly useful survey tools can be culled from public data disclosures in academic articles, through RAN groups, or through resources like the Hedayah Counter Narrative Library and the CVE Reference Guide for Local Organisations library collated by USAID and FHI360.[5]

ETHICAL CHALLENGES

Data collection for P/CVE audience segmentation and message testing should be considered sensitive and, as such, should take a particularly rigorous approach to ethical considerations. A human rights-centred process is vital to the long-term success of P/CVE programming and research. Do-no-harm procedures should be used with all forms of online audience research. At a minimum, informed consent procedures, assurances of privacy and confidentiality, and absolute respect for all participants must be ensured. Informed consent in this field must not be contravened, as all participants have the right to:

1. Know the nature and purpose of the research, including contact details for further information;

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[5] These guides are accessible at *https://hedayah.com/resources/counter-narrative-library/* and
https://www.cvereferenceguide.org/.

2. information regarding the voluntary and negotiable nature of the process and any payment or compensation provided to participants;

3. protection of privacy in data collection and storage (see below);

4. relevant use of the data for informing programmes;

5. consent for the recording of focus groups and interviews, as needed;

6. approval for future anonymised use of data (UNICEF, 2015).

Additionally, data handling concerns and GDPR compliance can be more challenging with virtual data collection. Questions should be carefully framed to be non-identifying. Researchers may also want to avoid overtly asking about violent extremism, VEOs, or terrorism-related content on platforms designed for market research. Adjacent social issues can be readily probed and by taking a resilience-based approach, a savvy understanding of audience segments can be developed without risking audiences.

Personally identifiable information (PII) should not be linked to respondents' feedback or replies, such as names, addresses, and/or phone numbers. One way to counter this is for respondents to be assigned a randomly generated numeric code for all surveys and interviews. These numbers can then be linked separately to PII in an encrypted, password-protected database that is only accessible to senior researchers who are trained and briefed on ethical guidelines and adhere to ethics-compliant confidentiality agreements.

National laws, institutional guidelines, and context-specific risks should also be adhered to. For example, 'a key element of the duty of care approach is ensuring that before the commencement and initiation of any fieldwork (online or offline), a thorough and holistic risk assessment and risk management plan are created. The risk assessment should include the likelihood of certain outcomes occurring that may cause harm, damage, or threat to the researcher, institutions, and where relevant, the research subjects' (White et al, 2022). Additionally, and in line with best practice in terrorism and extremism studies, 'credible action that would cause extreme harm' uncovered by researchers should be strongly considered to be reported to authorities (ibid). Protocols to ensure reporting guidelines and researcher safety during audience research and message testing should be in place before starting any project.

CONCLUSION AND REMARKS

Drawing from strategic communications playbooks across sectors for audience targeting, segmentation, and message testing approaches provides a number of helpful lessons to the P/CVE field. As with any work in this sensitive space, a human rights-first approach with solid Do-No-Harm policies should ground any strategic communications work. On that foundation, building on models like the GAMMMA+ from the RAN Communications and Narratives working group (2017, the ESCN Compendium (2019), or the counter-radicalisation communications intervention steps from Braddock (2020), illuminate complementary recommendations that practitioners may find helpful in their campaigning work. The below are structured along the general sequential steps in a stratcomms campaign, with the addition of cross-sectoral lessons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Audience (Targeting)

1. **Choose a specific goal** or related discrete behaviour to target with an intervention. Successful audience targeting and segmentation depend upon a clear strategic approach (Ritzmann et al, 2019). Without designating an intended behavioural change linked to violent extremism or radicalisation, researching audience segments will be nearly impossible.

2. **Learn from best practices** from other social and behavioural change communications sectors. Similar approaches to audience segmentation and message testing are used successfully in COVID-19 vaccine campaigns, public health work, and counter disinformation work, to name but a few. This review also highlights the importance of identifying narrative deficits during audience research (from counter misinformation work) and the continued importance of identifying trusted messengers during campaign research (from traditional communications approaches).

Audience (Segmentation)

3. **Identify the audience through** their knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs. Audience targeting and segmentation surveys should evaluate linked attributes to the behavioural goal (Braddock, 2020). Surveys should also assess useful communications preferences, such as media and platform channels, entertainment and lifestyle content types, and specific credible influencers.

4. **Consider resilience instead of** vulnerability framing. By incorporating a resilience or protective factor-based approach and questions during audience targeting, practitioners can better identify specific factors that can be improved through positive interventions (Rottweiler et al, 2022). This approach can also help identify specific beliefs to shift through a particular intervention.

Audience (Accessing the Hard to Reach)

5. **Use appropriate and modern** technologies for data collection, especially with hard-to-reach audiences. Accessing non-national residents, overseas populations, or sub-communities for a specific campaign can be challenging. New tech-based quantitative and qualitative tools

such as rapid mobile surveys and online communities can help reach audiences remotely, safely, and confidentially.

6. **Co-design with communities** when possible. Face-to-face or even virtual approaches that allow for iterative feedback from the same community members consulted during audience segmentation, message testing, and evaluation can help to ground stratcomms approaches in participatory local knowledge and minimise rejection risks (Holmer et al, 2018).

Message (Testing) and Refining

7. **Test narratives and messages** on each audience and segment. After audience segments have been developed, preliminary narratives and creative content can be designed to meet the behavioural change objective. These approaches should be tested with the specific target audience, or audiences, to solicit their feedback. Narratives should be clear to the respondents, and creative content should be sufficiently defined to elicit actionable revisions. We also see the utility of testing pre-bunking content and evaluating the performance-related assets during message testing (from COVID-19 responses).

8. **Ensure message testing is** timely, targeted, and well moderated. The composition of message testing groups is critical: no matter the budget or research methods chosen, different groupings with each demographic target group should be used. Moderators should be familiar with the campaign, P/CVE sensitivities, and cultural nuances inside the communities being asked for feedback.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Galen Lamphere-Englund is a senior researcher and management professional working at the nexus of violent extremism, conflict, and tech issues. His work promotes human rights and positive, sustainable peace. For over ten years, he has worked across 30+ countries to manage projects for P/CVE institutions, humanitarian and development NGOs, United Nations agencies, governments, think tanks, and many of the largest tech platforms. He currently convenes the Extremism and Gaming Research Network and is a Preventing & Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) advisor to Hedayah, the Center for Excellence in Countering Violent Extremism, and Love Frankie agency. He has led strategic communications research and trainings over 50 governmental, civil society, and tech platform partners, including the UN Security Council, many of which expressly focus on building the resilience of vulnerable young people.

Martijn Vugteveen is a freelance research consultant. He has contributed to multiple projects and papers on topics such as P/CVE. He has a Masters in Crisis and Security Management at Leiden University, with a specialisation in governance of radicalism, extremism and terrorism. His main research interests are predominantly centred around radicalisation and international conflict."

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