



American Counterterrorism
Targeting & Resilience Institute

Report

**Perspective on Counternarratives:
Successes, Missing Links, and Opportunities**

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September 2020

www.AmericanCTRI.org



The American Counterterrorism Targeting & Resilience Institute (ACTRI) is a cross-disciplinary, nonprofit research organization focused on the broad spectrum of transnational extreme-right, extreme-left, and militant-jihadi political violence. We study the relationships between them and their effect on how ideologies emerge, spread, dominate, and influence countermeasures.

Abstract

Counternarratives serve to delegitimize and challenge violent extremist group actions and narratives and dissuade followers or sympathizers from consuming and exacerbating violent extremist ideologies. While the use of counternarratives is incorporated across the P/CVE landscape, variances in approach, technique, and implementation continue to create challenges when measuring their success. In practice, counternarratives have faced criticism for their lack of centralization, reception among the target audience, and limited delivery of tangible and measurable results. The authors seek to identify common pitfalls and shortcomings relating to the creation, execution, and implications of counter messaging in general and counternarratives in particular, while shedding light on models that have worked in practice. Several counter messaging campaigns across the United States and abroad are compared to determine which elements are more likely to provoke success and how that is defined in context. By understanding the hindrances, research gaps, and limitations of relying upon counter messaging, P/CVE practitioners can reevaluate how these communication tools are measured and may be used to foster innovative approaches that continuously disassociate the public from violent extremism. The authors also discuss ACTRI's Strategic Narrative Disruption (SND) model, an ecosystem of highly consumable P/CVE content and significantly deeper and more explorable model than traditional "redirect methods."

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Introduction

Violent extremist ideologies and propaganda have dominated the social landscape for decades and continue to make an impressionable impact on all generations. Sympathizers and affiliates are often unaware of the injustices within the extremist realm and are highly susceptible to the consumption of false promises of euphoric utopias, which is often the basis for most propaganda campaigns. Violent extremist groups are adept at leveraging weaknesses and exploiting the grievances of their target audiences to gain their trust, respect, and support. To challenge the circulation and impact of violent extremist narratives, many governments, organizations, and P/CVE practitioners have relied on counter messaging as a way to discredit and disrupt ties between violent extremist organizations and their followers.¹ Challenges have presented themselves over the years in terms of their communication style, medium, content, and impact. In this article, the authors highlight successes and limitations that often accompany counternarrative campaigns, while stressing the need to explore alternative content and counter messaging models to both manipulate common pitfalls in practice and promote longevity and sustainable results.

Criticisms & Shortcomings

In recent years, efforts to counter violent extremist content online have been primarily focused on the content blocking, content removal, and content moderation. While taking down content may greatly restrict the reach of extremist propaganda, it does not adequately address the root causes that drive an individual to accept and promote extremist ideologies, nor does it resolve the push and pull factors within vulnerable communities.² Additionally, once one piece of material is removed, many others are uploaded in its place, creating a never-ending cycle of extremist rhetoric. Direct rebuttals and message dominance techniques are often used to overpower extremist ideologies both on and offline, which repeatedly fail to resolve underlying issues.³ This barrier to success can be broken by incorporating a strategic and coordinated initiative that goes beyond silencing extremist rhetoric for a more long-term and impactful approach. Disengagement and defection efforts along with consistent mentorship needs to be coupled with counter messaging as a way to gradually shift individuals away from violent extremism tendencies.

Further criticism stems from the lack of coordination between online and offline initiatives. Many counternarrative campaigns solely exist online or offline and do not leverage each other or push the same ideas as part of a bigger strategy to discredit extremist ideologies.⁴ Extensive counternarrative campaigns that build off each other are likely to have a deeper impression on society and evoke ideological shifts. Consistency and repetition are critical to influence the mindset of extremists through constant intervention and dissuasion techniques. Counternarratives in isolation reap very limited successes, and are highly under researched, as short-lived dissemination campaigns are not easily monitored following execution. This makes it challenging to assess long-term impacts of the rhetoric and to determine areas for improvement



moving forward. It is also difficult to prove causation between counternarrative campaigns and disengagement from violent extremism. Relying on ambiguous, unidentifiable, and intangible metrics hinders our ability to determine the potency of counter messaging campaigns. Defining and affiliating a measurement of success may assist with establishing a connection between counter messaging campaigns and disassociation from violent extremism.

Establishing a definitive objective and criteria to gauge success levels also varies depending on the length and goal of the initiative. Short term counternarrative campaigns will have very different styles, techniques, and metrics, as the results are seemingly more instant than a long-term campaign that may require a much more in-depth study and analysis of the target audience. Various counter messaging initiatives in practice often have their own theoretical definitions of what success entails; however, variances across the P/CVE realm create inconsistencies among analyzing the current state of extremism, policy creation, and implication. Because of these concerns, governments and private institutions are hesitant to disperse financial resources, as they remain uncertain if success is likely among these initiatives. Programs that produce results that are not concrete and tangible, often experience funding issues, as donors are hesitant about the longevity and potential of the initiative.

Disruption-focused approaches raise many human rights and free speech concerns that may continue to inhibit their effectiveness and success rates.⁵ Taking down a piece of material online would suggest that it is categorized as an extremist or terrorist connotation; however, what constitutes terrorist and extremist content varies across mediums. Unclear and inconsistent definitions of terrorism make it difficult for CT and P/CVE efforts to be consistently enforced on all platforms, and hinders policy enforcement and creation.

Due to the unpredictable nature of violent extremism, counternarratives are often created for the sole purpose of disseminating content and may lack understanding of how and why to leverage various policies, actors, and perceptions.⁶ This type of stance can greatly limit the practitioner's ability to achieve a lasting impact on the target audience. Understanding present-day concerns and threats in actuality is critical to create initiatives that are relevant, feasible, and actionable within target communities. Counter messaging campaigns are often dependent upon ambiguous theories that may not actually be applicable to the realities among vulnerable demographics. They need to exhibit longevity and be used in conjunction with larger efforts to discredit violent extremist narratives.

Recommended Practices

Various counter messaging campaigns have included a variety of good practices within their efforts to dissuade users from legitimizing extremism. There is a growing need for more direct and targeted counter messages that blatantly deconstruct and delegitimize extremist propaganda. However, concerns over the response and reception among the target audience manifest and are more likely to reject the rhetoric upon first glance.⁷ A dynamic and innovative approach will



capture the attention of the viewer and is more likely to be considered. There are varying degrees of extremism on the spectrum, each with their own agenda; counternarratives need to be tailored to the specific elements that the group is making most attractive to recruits. Once their attention and trust are established, then defection and disengagement efforts should commence.

Ensuring that explicit goals and objectives are laid out prior to execution is important to determine the types of strategies and approaches that work best, i.e. interactive counter-messaging, animation, videos, primary research, secondary research, donation pages, etc. Determining what works best for the target audience and placing an emphasis on a gradual cognitive and behavioral shift can greatly enhance reception and reaction.

Incorporating emotions into counternarratives is an effective strategy that allows viewers to feel more relatable to the content and exhibits similar thoughts and behavior patterns that vulnerable individuals are also experiencing.⁸ A behavioral push to motivate vulnerable or at-risk individuals to think or act in a certain way remains a hallmark of many violent extremist groups (e.g. ISIS, al Shabaab). The key to effective counternarratives is to identify the type of emotions that appeal to target audiences to achieve a desired outcome (i.e. being aware of the type of effect the counternarrative aims to cause, understanding how target audiences process information; the type of narratives, life stories, etc. they value in their community, culture, etc.) as well as to identify the type of emotions that are most appealing (e.g. anger, pride, humility, etc.). Along with relying on emotional content, the age, culture, location, and gender among the target audience is critical to examine, as this will help mold a more relatable and receptive rhetoric. Gender tailored counter messaging can be very effective, as men and women may experience different push and pull factors for joining or supporting violent extremist groups.⁹

Credible Figures & Messengers

Offline and online P/CVE initiatives face a wide array of struggles when creating and projecting counternarratives. To maximize reception and consumption among the target audience, a counternarrative must be presented by a credible and reputable figure who is well respected among the extremist community. The government, law enforcement, and counterterrorism practitioners are often criticized among extremists and will not be receptive to rhetoric that strives to discredit their beliefs. Challenges present themselves as practitioners strive to find a credible figure to be the voice of counternarratives, as these individuals are not always accessible or willing to speak out against their current or previously held beliefs.

A pertinent example of where credibility is key presented itself in the U.S. State Department's "Think Again, Turn Away" campaign, as it was majorly advertised by the government, whom extremists are hesitant to trust due to political and personal grievances.¹⁰ Selecting the best-fit voice of a counternarrative can either make or break the success rate of the initiative, which is why careful consideration is required. Individuals who are familiar with the grievances, traumas,



and realities of extremist life need to be embedded within counternarratives to reflect these elements in local communities and maximize reception. Institutions and governments are often reluctant to fund these types of individuals, as their controversial views and difficult past makes them a questionable recipient. Organizations that do receive funding from the government are also seen as less credible by the extremist community, creating further challenges.

Combining Online and Offline P/CVE

Counternarratives online and offline tend to present themselves as stand-alone narratives rather than working together to collectively discredit a particular area within VE. Connecting online narratives with offline communities and better coordinating their message, style, and strategy can help boost overall consumption and impact. Both arenas can benefit from each other by determining what works best as an offline strategy versus an online one.¹¹ Extremists target the online and offline community in different ways, while their overall narrative and goal remains the same. Offline and online environments have different needs, audiences, capabilities, limitations, and reach that need to be considered when crafting counter messages as part of a larger initiative. As the world becomes more reliant upon cyberspace, offline forums tend to be neglected by practitioners. However, offline communications and interactions are where trust, rapport, and relationship building occur to strengthen newfound ties to extremist ideologies. Both online and offline realms need to be equally researched and strategically embedded into counternarrative campaigns.

Engagement and Interactivity

Distributing a counternarrative among offline and online communities is not solely enough to disrupt the lifecycle of violent extremism. Implementing engagement techniques into a counternarrative initiative can help acquire newfound support, as interactive programs tend to receive more interest and engagement. Online targeting communication campaigns and strategies, such as the *Redirect Method* and *Average Mohamed* – discussed later – lacked this aspect, and while still invaluable, their results could have dramatically increased had this element been present.¹² Since the field of P/CVE is very dynamic and voluntary, one cannot expect or demand reception among target audience; rather, evaluate and amend current counternarratives to maximize their willingness to interact. Demographics are much more receptive to counternarratives that relate to widespread community grievances and concerns rather than violent extremist rhetoric.¹³ Ensuring that engagement strategies address real life struggles and practical solutions is important to foster belief, hope, and trust among the target audience.

Integration Among Networks

Counternarratives typically focus on discrediting the beliefs and actions of violent extremists without providing an alternative network that exacerbates the deradicalization process. Narratives that tend to specifically focus on discrediting the ideology without providing supplemental material that could lead to further disengagement promote results that may be limited.¹⁴ Broadening scope and providing pathways into a new range of networks is paramount to continue the deradicalization and disassociation process. Without this additional step, counternarratives may fail to address the key push and pull factors of violent extremism, which may lead to continued terrorist engagement in the future. By not leveraging various networks dedicated to the goal of P/CVE, limitations such as variance in expertise, skillset, counter-messaging techniques, and capabilities will manifest themselves and create further areas of weakness for violent extremists to exploit.

Counternarratives in Practice

Disruption Method: Europol – Internet Referral Unit (IRU)

The Internet Referral Unit (IRU) features an array of “extremist hunters” tasked with monitoring correspondence and interactions of terrorists online.¹⁵ Websites or platforms that are found to host content in violation of terrorism or extremism laws are contacted by the IRU and expected to take down the content immediately. Along with content removal, the unit is also tasked with developing a technology to assess and process the rhetoric based on their findings to include newer key words, phrases, and images. The IRU strives to impact those that are radicalized and recruited, along with vulnerable individuals online. They tactically target high profile terrorists, as well as incidents, rather than routinely surfing the web, to remain current and proactive during the events’ highly publicized moments.

The IRU has held multiple successful campaigns that focus on the removal of extremist content online. As many as 1,800 pieces of content have been assessed by the unit in a given campaign. Since the first year of their establishment, their ability to remove content has increased over tenfold, from 1,079 to 11,050, as well as a fifteenfold increase in proposals to online service providers, from 690 to 9,787.¹⁶ The ability to remove more extremist content online can be construed as a success for the organization, as their sole purpose is to rid the online realm of extremist propaganda. Additionally, their success rate climbed from 74% to 91% of content removal, demonstrating that a disruption approach has a considerable impact on violent extremist propaganda.¹⁷ However, their approach to solely dedicate resources to online efforts greatly limits their ability to impact terrorist consumption on a global scale, as radicalization and recruitment do not exclusively take place online, neglecting the physical environment.

Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD)

The Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) launched the One-to-One online intervention program

designed to identify at-risk individuals and extremist group adherents on Facebook across the UK, USA, and Canada.¹⁸ At-risk individuals were defined as those likely to enter the orbit of extremism as well as those already expressing interest in extremist content. These individuals were paired with a total of 10 different intervention providers based on their age, gender, and espoused ideology: 5 former far-right extremists from North America and 5 former Islamist extremists from the UK, with one woman and four men in each group.¹⁹ The interventionists were tasked with reaching out to the at-risk individual to start a conversation and introduce various concerns about the validity and credibility of extremist groups and their narratives. One message per week over the course of 16 weeks was required by the interventionist to acquire enough data to analyze their outreach strategy and degrees of engagement.

Figure A represents the overall level of engagement and response among the target audience. The most compelling metric points toward the sustained engagement rate of 60% among the sample of 76 participants.²⁰ Sustained engagement is increasingly important to consider, as it indicates continued interest, interaction, and rapport among the interventionist and the target audience.

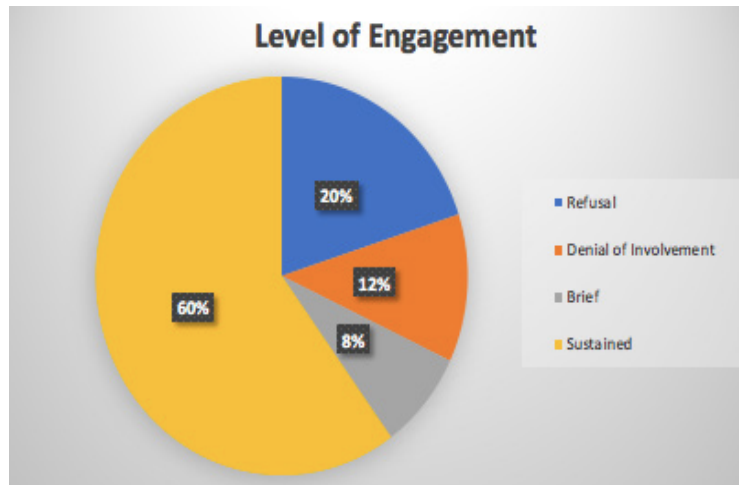


Figure A

The more one can consistently engage with and influence these individuals, the higher the likelihood they will be steered away from the recruitment and radicalization pathway. The study also received a refusal rate of nearly 20%, which suggests there are sensitivities that may be neglected and requires further exploration as to how one can make this demographic feel compelled to receive the rhetoric.

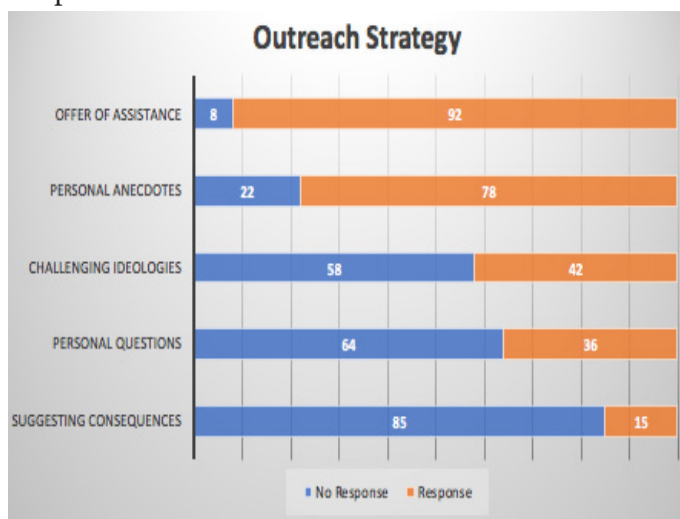


Figure B

Different types of messages also received varying degrees of attention. As seen in Figure B, an offer of assistance generated a response rate of nearly 92% of the candidates, whereas those that identified potential consequences in participating in violent extremism received a 15% response rate.²¹ This data suggest that individuals are more likely to respond when they feel supported and validated. When pointing out the negative connotations associated with extremism, the sample was more likely to reject the

rhetoric as they felt challenged and unaccepted.

A second phase of the pilot program featuring former extremists engaging with 814 at-risk individuals on Facebook was launched to determine their receptivity of outreach and engagement. This trial received a sustained engagement rate of 65% among right-wing extremists and 71% among Islamist candidates.²² Interest in taking the conversation offline was expressed by the participants during this phase, which eludes to an overall increase in reception among the target audience. The trial did not take place for a long enough period to measure if their services made any long-term impacts on the future of the individual, which makes determining success difficult. The program could be described as a success in achieving high levels of engagement as well as leading to an increase in engagement during the second trial. However, the engagement may have only been temporary and the sample could have resorted back to their extremist tendencies following the trial.

The program benefited due to its personalization and distinguished guest-interventionist presence. The fact that the outreach approach was catered to each individual greatly enhanced their chances of receiving a response, as the recipients felt comfortable, understood, and acknowledged. Additionally, leveraging former extremists to carry out the initiative sat well among the target audience, as they were perceived as much more trustworthy and credible, optimizing reception of ideas. P/CVE practitioners are able to leverage this discovery and create additional counternarratives focusing on aspects that are more appealing among the target audience rather than a direct and abrasive approach that will likely cause them to resist.

Average Mohamed

The Average Mohamed campaign was designed to advocate ideas of peace and anti-extremism while specifically seeking to discredit narratives of ISIS and Al Qaeda.²³ The initiative was catered toward a target audience of 8-16-year-old at risk individuals through various animated cartoons. The definition of an at-risk individual was not clearly defined surrounding the campaign. However, because the campaign focused on education and prevention, the initiative was applicable to the general population. Among the sample of at-risk individuals, roughly 68% were male and 32% were female, living in communities with high Somali Muslim populations, including Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle, and Washington.

A series of 5 cartoons were created, with each encompassing a theme of gender equality, democracy, identity, slavery, and Muslim in Western culture. The content was primarily focused on an educational and preventative aspect, allowing for a wider range of audience and purpose. The campaign ran across three social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The main character portrayed in the campaign is named “*Mohamed*,” an average person that was able to resonate with people as being a realistic and relatable leader of the community, raising the character’s credibility.

The overall results of the initiative displayed an increase in engagement; Facebook – 3,241 users,

YouTube 210 users, and Twitter 7,359 users.²⁴ Engagement rates were determined based on the number of individuals who actively engaged with the video content through likes, comments, shares, link clicks and pages liked to determine the overall impact of the campaign. Metrics of engagement varied slightly across all three platforms due to their divergent purposes and use among the online community. To gauge this metric via Facebook, activity such as shares, comments, likes, link clicks, page likes, advertisements, and videos were considered, whereas YouTube receptivity was measured solely based on video likes and dislikes. Additionally, retweets, media clicks, replies, and favorites all comprised the engagement metric on Twitter.

Perhaps the greater engagement metric on Twitter can be attributed to the different purposes and use of each platform. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter all have different roles, strengths, and weaknesses as an online social media platform, greatly varying their relativity and use among the target audience. For this initiative, Twitter received the highest level of engagement partially due to the ability to easily retweet and use hashtags to promote the campaign. Engagement levels are critical when determining whether or not an initiative has made an impact on the community and continuous long-term engagement can mean that users are being receptive to the content. In addition to the engagement with the counter messaging campaign, the traffic on Average Mohamed’s social media pages increased following the initiative.

As *Figure C* below demonstrates, the Facebook page “likes” increased by 733 users, Twitter 93, and YouTube 152.²⁵ The increase in support on social media may indicate that the initiative attracted attention to the point where viewers felt compelled to follow the site more consistently, indicating an interest in the overall themes portrayed in the animations. The longer that an at-risk individual engages in counter extremist content, the higher the likelihood of disengagement and disassociation from the realm of violent extremism.

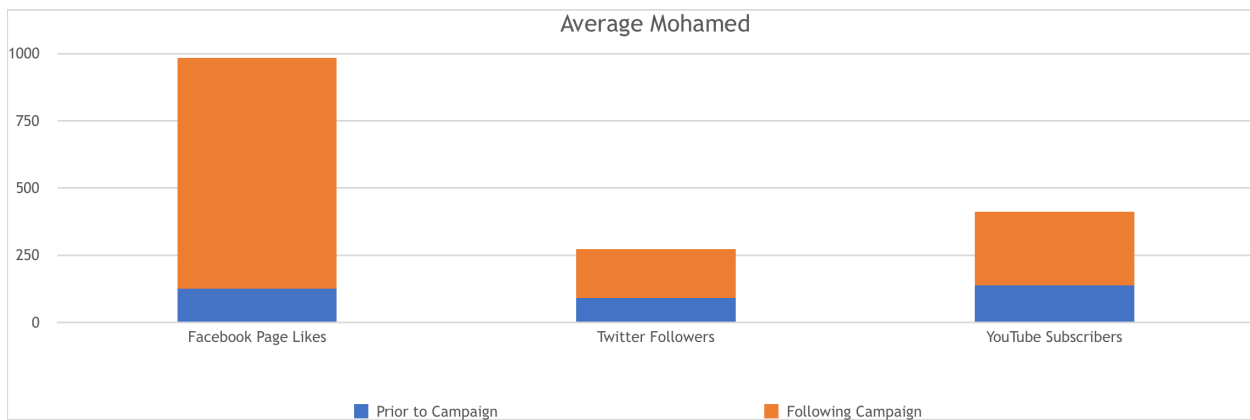


Figure C

The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)

The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism relies on primary research and the use of extremist defectors, prisoners, victims, and returnees in their counternarrative campaigns.²⁶ By leveraging the voices of insiders, the credibility and reception of the narratives is likely to be well received among the general population, specifically in languages that the Islamic State uses to recruit. Testimonies of ISIS defectors, prisoners, and returnees from Syria and Iraq are edited into short video clips, and they are used to provide a firsthand account of the life within the so-called Islamic Caliphate. This allows the viewer to feel the emotion of the protagonist and creates a sense of reality that others may not be receptive to otherwise. Risks and concerns within this strategy include determining the credibility, the mental health, and psychological stability of the individuals before engaging in any interviews. There is also a degree of reluctance among many prospects, including social stigma, fear of prosecution, discomfort, sensitivity of past trauma, and fear of retaliation. Additionally, these individuals are oftentimes difficult to identify, access, and reach.

ISCVE developed four Facebook campaigns across Iraq to determine the impact and potency of their counternarratives in the region.²⁷ Upon first glance, the videos that were disseminated appear to project ISIS propaganda rather than a typical counternarrative that will most likely push users away from considering the narrative. The first campaign was conducted in December of 2017 featuring an anecdote from a Belgian female ISIS defector. The campaign acquired a reach of 1,287,557 users, 2,339,453 impressions, and almost 1.7 million views.²⁸ Three other additional campaigns commenced from July to September 2018 featuring former ISIS members. All four campaigns attracted a total of 2.5 million views.²⁹ The specific audience and types of individuals who viewed the counter messages remains unclear. However, the campaign was able to circulate counternarratives among the general populations on social media, with some degree of impact within the online communities exhibiting extremist tendencies.³⁰

Moonshot CVE & The Redirect Method

The Redirect Method was created in 2016 through a partnership featuring Google and Moonshot CVE.³¹ The goal of this initiative is to not only reduce the amount of time spent consuming terrorist propaganda in cyberspace, but to also reroute the attention of the user from extremist content to other pages that advocate counternarratives. The method relies on Google Ad technology that seeks to identify individuals searching for extremist content in order to expose the individuals to a link or video that discredits violent extremist groups' recruitment themes and implies defection and disengagement from violent extremism..

The Redirect Method has projected advertisements alongside searches that correlate to violent extremism specifically focusing on ISIS. Predetermined algorithms are selected based on keywords and phrases that most ISIS sympathizers search for typically. More than 1,700

keywords and phrases were programmed into the algorithm that would trigger the use of the Redirect Method, including names of extremist leaders and terms and expressions such as *fatwa*, *Is ISIS Legitimate*, and *Want to Join ISIS*.³²

The redirect approach helps to mask the initial intent of the goal to counter ISIS while inadvertently attracting more users as they seek to learn about the group and develop their own opinion. Ads are displayed alongside the search results, hoping to catch the viewer’s eyes and redirect their attention to YouTube channels dedicated to reversing ISIS’ brainwashing via anecdotes from former extremists, imams denouncing ISIS, and highlighting the dysfunction of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

The initial pilot of the program ran from August 2015 to March 2016 and focused on the dissemination of counternarratives that discredit ISIS among potential sympathizers. Over the course of 8 weeks, the initiative reached an estimated 320,906 individuals who watched a total of 500,070 minutes of content.³³ The campaign was later funded by Gen Next, placing an emphasis on violent jihadis and far-right violent extremists, such as Neo-Nazi and white supremacist movements. The campaign was also released across 50 states and dedicated a four-month period to violent jihadis and a three-month period to far-right extremists.

The Redirect Method is evaluated based on various factors such as members reached and extent of engagement, as well as the time, locations, ages, and genders of those who engaged. Metrics used include impressions, clicks, average watch time, time-on-site, and bounce rate.³⁴ The degree of which extremist content is queried can be found under the impression metrics. An impression is achieved every time an ad is projected in response to a user’s online Google search. While impressions indicate that the program is being triggered, it does not necessarily equate to engagement and interaction among the online community.

As can be seen in *Figure D*, the number of violent far-right clicks in response to each ad greatly exceeded the number of clicks among violent jihadis.³⁵ Perhaps this number can be attributed to the larger online presence and numbers of violent far-right extremists as opposed to violent jihadis.

	Violent Jihadist	Violent Far Right
Clicks	1,158	4,010
Impressions	36,296	179,925

Figure D

The campaign was also displayed across YouTube and received engaging levels of watch time among the target audiences. As can be seen in *Figure E*, the watch time among far-right extremists totaled 4,709 minutes, whereas violent jihadis contributed a total of 753 minutes of watch time.³⁶ In addition to the watch time, *Figure F* shows the number of total videos viewed among each group. Similar to prior data, the activity among far-right extremists surpassed the

activity among militant jihadis, indicating the overwhelming majority of extremists may espouse far-right ideologies. Nonetheless, the fact that video ads redirected their attention and were viewed by the user instead of rejected suggests engagement with the content. Additionally, the number of clicks and time spent watching the YouTube videos implies that users were engaged and felt compelled to click on the ad, serving as a potential indicator of success.

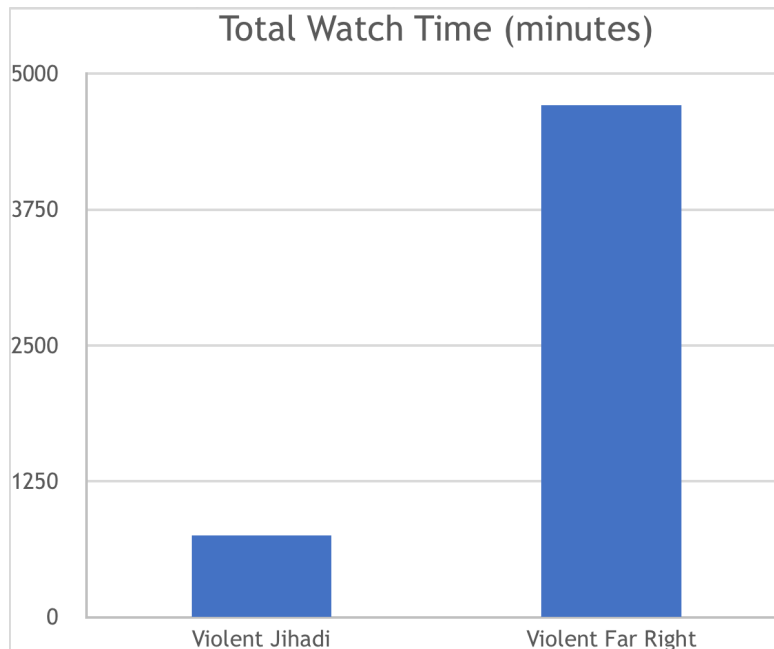


Figure E

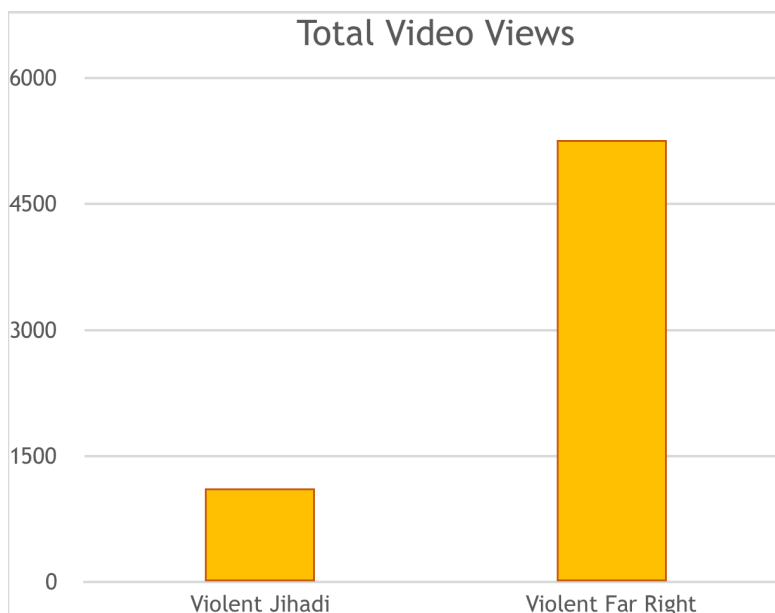


Figure F

Exit Deutschland

The Exit Deutschland initiative was created to strengthen Germany's fight against right-wing extremism in the region. Since 2000, the company has launched over 500 campaigns and maintains a recidivism rate of approximately 3 percent.³⁷ It is known for its creativity and innovation with targeting extremism.

Nazis Against Nazis

Every year on November 15th, neo-Nazis from across Germany flood the streets of Wunsiedel to honor their heroes and praise the actions of Hitler. To counter the message and propaganda associated with the event, Exit Deutschland transformed the march to a charity walk in 2014.³⁸ Unknown to the participants, the traveled route was marked with posters, banners, and motivational phrases that made the route look like a sporting event finish line. Local residents and businesses sponsored an additional 250 control participants to join in the march as well. Everyone was encouraged to keep walking, as for every meter that was covered, 10 euros would be donated to Exit Deutschland.

Ten thousand euros were raised from this walkathon, which equates to a 1,000% increase compared to the same prior campaign without the additional support, innovation, and creativity.³⁹ Along with local television, newspapers, and magazines, the story was also broadcasted across media outlets in 42 countries and won the Global Awards for Fundraising in 2015. Additional revenue to fight far-right extremism, as well as exponential reach of the message to abandon extremist ideologies, can be viewed as a success. The campaign also inspired other cities to adopt new and create ways of addressing Nazi-walks in the future.

Trojan T-Shirt Campaign

The Trojan T-Shirt Campaign was designed to promote a counternarrative among right-wing extremists as they attended a right-wing rock festival in Germany.⁴⁰ Exit-Germany members went undercover and created t-shirts with a neo-Nazi logo for the attendees to wear to the festival. The shirts were then distributed to their "fellow" neo-Nazi members to wear at the festival (*Figure G*).⁴¹ Once the shirt was washed, the logo would strategically disappear and a new message would read, "What your T-shirt can do, you can do too - we will help you to leave right-wing extremism behind. EXIT Germany."⁴² The campaign received publicity for its innovation and was published in major newspapers in Germany, along with foreign news sources receiving a total of 1.2 million views. The EXIT-Germany's Facebook page also received an additional 30 million contacts following the campaign. Private donations increased by 334% as well, demonstrating a newfound support among sympathizers. While definitive success of the initiative's impact remains unclear, the campaign's message was able to reach millions of viewers and gain monetary support among an extended community of individuals.



Figure G

Strategic Narrative – Meta Model

The Meta Model was designed to provide qualitative and theoretical analysis to compliment various narrative models that are primarily focused on quantitative analysis, specifically designed to counter Russian disinformation strategies.⁴³ This initiative strives to influence further conversation around terrorism, extremism, and successful counternarrative practices. The overall framework for the Meta Model can be seen in *Figure H* below, encompassing four quadrants of consideration when dissecting current counter narratives.⁴⁴ Various counter messages and strategies that the Meta Model has reviewed include A Model of Effective Narrative drawn from Narrative Theory, A Model of Terrorism Counternarrative Messaging, A Model of Resilience Messaging, The YARNS Model, A Model of Disinformation Counternarrative Messaging, and The RAN PVE Model. The Meta Model was designed to dissect each individual framework and identify common themes, characteristics, and best practices to implement them more closely in future counternarrative strategies. The approach of this initiative is important to consider as it will help streamline and synthesize critical components of counternarrative strategies that have already proven to be successful and promote change among the P/CVE community.

Several hinderances and drawbacks were discovered when analyzing the various counternarrative strategies listed above. A common theme that was revealed relates to simple tradition and sheer ignorance.⁴⁵ Many strategies pride themselves on the idea that things were done the right way, at the right time, and for the right reason. Many do not shy away from tradition and would



rather stick to what they know has worked versus leverage innovation and creativity to foster growth. Not deviating from the norm can greatly restrict and limit opportunities to create counternarratives that could change the way extremism is perceived, consumed, and understood. Underfunding also presented a mainstream issue across various counternarrative strategies, as there is very little information available about the impact that theories have had on the practice and realities of extremism. Another area of opportunity that needs to be addressed encompasses the idea of cross-disciplinary research. Currently, there is very limited practice and collaboration between different sectors, both past and present, forcing operations to commence without an over-arching strategic goal. Linguistics and diction presented various concerns regarding consistency, reception, and perception among the target audience. The types of phrases used deserve further attention when drafting effective counternarratives to maximize its psychological reaction among the target audience. Incorporating both hard and soft strategies along with a combination of both must be further entrenched within successful counternarrative strategies to address the threat of extremism from divergent viewpoints as well.

Crafting effective counternarrative strategies based on *Information Warfare*, *Narrative Warfare*, and *Influence Operations* revealed several knowledge gaps that practitioners need to better understand before expecting a successful counternarrative framework. The effectiveness of counternarratives is often under-researched due to limited information and tangible results, specifically pertaining to Russia and the use of misinformation. Additionally, more research is needed to examine the different types of counternarrative strategies that are prevalent within Russia as well as their implications on extremism and disinformation techniques.

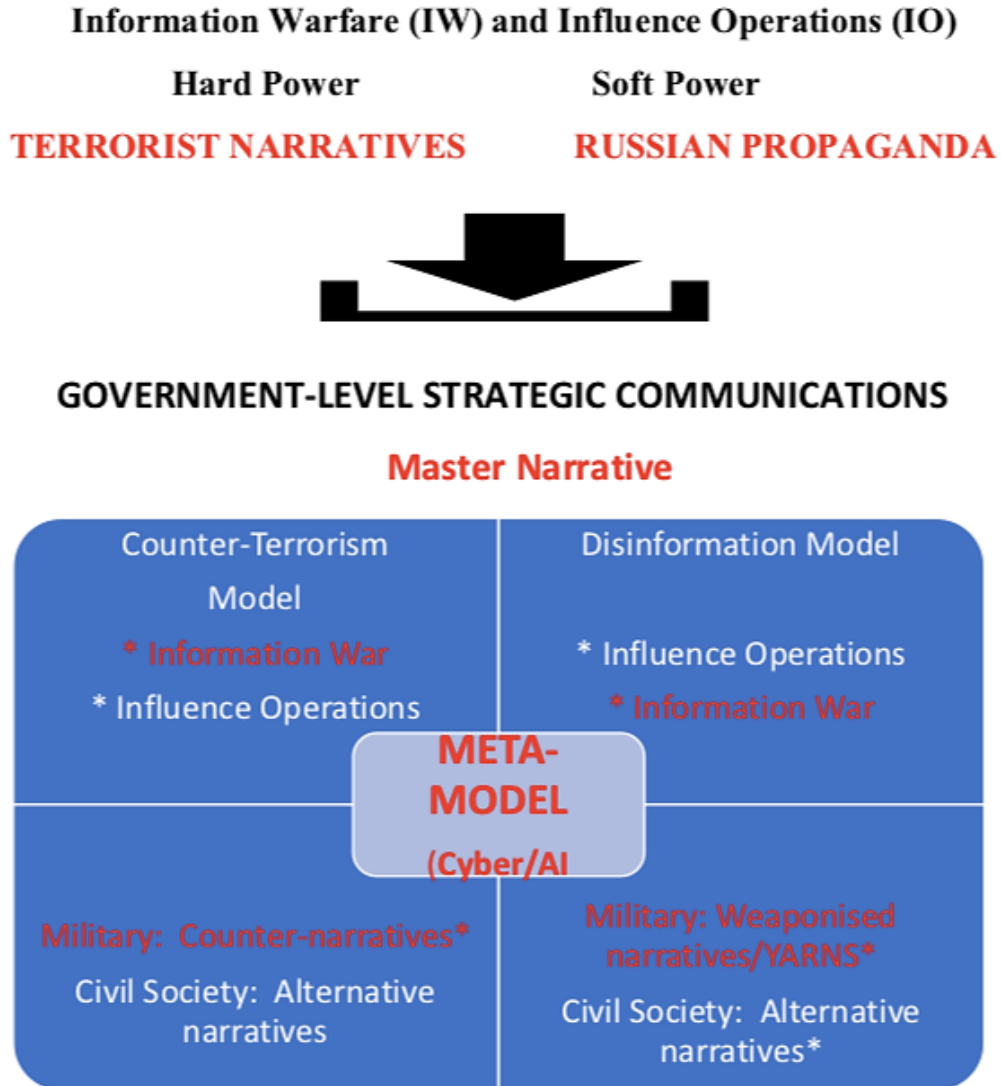


Figure H

Narrative Strategy – Identity Analysis

The creation of effective counternarrative strategies involves understanding and incorporating the unconscious bias of the target audience.⁴⁶ When information is received, the brain reacts in different ways: It either chooses to dismiss the information or store it somewhere within the narrative structure. The stored location of that information determines its importance, relevance, and meaning to the individual. The receiver can choose to consume and act upon the information received or simply reject it. Regardless of the avenue chosen, unconscious bias plays a critical role in influencing their decision to accept or reject the rhetoric. Due to this fact, counternarratives are often formulated around the overall message rather than the end goal we seek to achieve.

Traditional communication models appear similar to those in Figure I, which implies the meaning is carried along with the message.⁴⁷ While many associate the meaning of a phrase with the words that it contains, the individual who receives the message has the power to create their own meaning of the words and determine whether or not it is a credible message. This will determine whether the meaning of the message resonates among the target audience or perhaps amplifies itself into a violent extremism perspective.

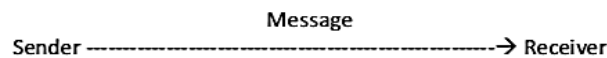


Figure I

This practice can be applied to creating effective counternarratives. Being able to understand the identity of an individual will allow us to better analyze the actions, behaviors, and triggers that certain words and messages provoke. Practitioners need to leverage this consider compelling questions such as “What effect do we want to cause?” rather than “What message do we want to send?”⁴⁸ An emphasis needs to be placed on the reaction and behavior that follows the message, rather than the message itself. Adopting Narrative and Internarrative Identity Analysis can help formulate counternarratives that are likely to receive a higher desired outcome and disassociation with extremism.

The Narrative Identity Theory not only focuses on how humans learn and develop, but it also places an emphasis on the way we behave and consume information. While this information cannot simply be polled and recorded because much of it stems from our unconscious bias, further analysis of themes, stories, and ideas that correlate to their upbringing and cultural background need to be considered. Understanding the implications of subconscious narratives will allow us to uncover elements among the target audience that they are unaware of and use it to our advantage. Narrative Identity Analysis entails analyzing the way in which an individual categorizes and explains their experiences with a certain theme. The structure of the content and how it is presented must be understood to better relay the predictability of their behavior. We

are then able to leverage this information into counternarratives to foster a desired behavioral outcome.⁴⁹

Internarrative Identity Analysis is relevant when narrative conflicts occur within the target individual. One must analyze why the conflict is occurring as well as any possible solutions that will mend the gap and foster a strong sense of thought. Predicting and provoking behavior should often include rhetoric that we know will promote conflicting narratives and behavioral changes, as extremists heavily rely on within their recruitment methods. We cannot expect behavioral shifts from counternarratives if we ourselves do not understand the triggers and psychological aspects of behavior.

Discussion

Strategic Narrative Disruption (SND) Model

Rethinking and Reevaluating Counternarrative Content

Efforts and strategies to disrupt, re-direct, and counter extremist propaganda are crucial and necessary. Strictly speaking in the context of counternarratives, alternative narratives, or other counter messaging efforts, overemphasis on their preventative utility and impact can be equally problematic. As also noted by some P/CVE experts, “[the notion] that violent words lead to violent deeds, that counternarratives can replace terrorist narratives, and that the actual threat of violent extremism can be mitigated through discourse”⁵⁰ may lead to erroneous conclusions on the most optimal strategy to confront violent extremist group appeal and recruitment. Furthermore, violent extremist content, including on-offline exposure to such content, must be evaluated in relation to other “real-life” (e.g. personal life crisis, mental health issues, etc.) factors that may influence the adoption of violent extremist views or behaviors.⁵¹ Even when receptiveness towards violent extremist content could be inferred, and in discerning potential phases of violent radicalization, one must carefully differentiate between “emotional (being receptive to extremist content), endorsed (promoting a radical message), and actual behaviors (taking action).”⁵²

Shortcomings persist with counter messaging content that overemphasize the role of extremist ideology⁵³ or perversion of religion (e.g. Islam) by violent extremist groups in influencing radicalization or VE tendencies. Specifically, efforts that downplay individual and social environmental conditions contributing to radicalization and predominantly cite exposure to ideology or religion via violent extremist group narratives as a necessary condition to radicalization or violent extremism continue to be challenged by P/CVE professionals.⁵⁴ The question of intervention feasibility also applies to counter messaging content that is not current and adequately receptive to constantly evolving VE content and recruitment efforts, as is counter messaging content that is promoted in isolation with offline efforts. With this in mind, future



produced content should be thematically researched to be adaptive and evolving, depending on the fluctuations of extremist content both offline and online, to maximize reach and impact (Figure J).

Recent research suggests a positive effect of using “the formers” and their stories to build resilience against violent extremism among general populations and those exposed to extremism, in particular in the way of “recognizing extremist ideas, recognizing extremist recruitment methods, and increasing confidence to seek and access help when exposed to extremism.”⁵⁵ Counternarratives told through the voices of the formers (i.e. those incarcerated or upon their release) often come with limitations, however. For instance, counternarrative content derived from interviews with incarcerated violent extremists (i.e. in a prison setting, in active conflict zones, etc.)—and where issues of undue influence and prisoner credibility may be called to question—that lead to primarily denouncing a violent extremist group ideology and describing negative aspects of living inside a violent extremist group may produce emotional and dramatic effect among some, but may fall short in providing an empirical examination of disengagement (e.g. from ISIS), acknowledge true experiences and identities that continue to linger after a life in a violent extremist group, or introduce factors other than deception to explain reasons for joining a violent extremist group (Figure J).

A combination of short & long form counternarratives and materials to maximize reach & impact

<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Counternarratives are often discussed in terms of individual journey into and out of extremism, including transformations prior to/at the time of joining a violent extremist group. Experiences inside a violent extremist (VE) group are captured and shared (e.g. negative experiences inside ISIS caliphate). Content and material that acknowledge and explore experiences and identities that continue to linger after a life in violent extremism could also be explored. Research shows that discussions on post-violent extremism activity is crucial to disengagement and preventative efforts.</p>	<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Counter messaging (e.g. counternarratives against ISIS, al Shabaab, etc.) often serve to increase commitment to belief system among sympathizers and followers of such groups. Often, such content confirms what VE groups are actually saying or do not have much traction among those receptive to VE group messaging due to their lack of desirability or cognitive ability to accept counterviews. However, such content is likely to be impactful in the case of those already exhibiting some form of doubt about the VE group, which could be exploited for targeting and outreach purposes.</p>	<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Counternarratives that target extremist rhetoric, ideologies, and actions (i.e. what VE groups say vs. how they act) but also call for social reintegration and understanding of social affective bonds. Narratives that securitize an issue (e.g. scenario suggesting that returnees from the Syrian and Iraq conflict are dangerous) may expand and strengthen VE group environment and limit P/CVE professionals' ability to address extremist grievances. It may also limit those who were once a part of VE groups to find meaning and purpose outside such groups. This is an avenue that continues to be exploited by VE groups.</p>	<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Counternarratives that involve testimonies of vulnerable individuals (i.e. targeted by extremists online) and "the formers" or defectors. Stories of those targeted and disillusioned by violent extremism, respectively, allows for not only a more direct, collaborative involvement in social change, but may also represent an opportunity to reconcile and reflect on ideological convictions, personal convictions etc., while rethinking and giving a new meaning to what it meant to be targeted by, serving in, or leaving a VE group.</p>
<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Content and material that specifically speak to the categories of individuals who 1) follow VE rhetoric (e.g. Islamist) but stay away from violence (e.g. jihadi militancy), 2) believe in violence and are likely to engage in belief reaffirmation following the demise of a violent extremist group (e.g. following ISIS' collapse), and 3) do not derive beliefs from a VE groups ideology but remain vulnerable to their exploitation (e.g. ISIS ideology or the idea of Caliphate).</p>	<p><u>Islamist, militant jihadi:</u></p> <p>Content and material that highlight factors other than ideas, religion, and ideology that are central to influencing pathways towards VE. Targeting of violent extremist narratives focused on ideology and religion is important; however, individual psychological, life experiences, and other structural factors need to be considered.</p>	<p><u>Right-wing:</u></p> <p>Video content and material that 1) address disinformation, fake news, 2) discuss symbols, signs, codes, etc. as propaganda value, 3) discuss adaptations of banned symbols, characters, etc. and 4) fact-check, offer topical insights and clarifications.</p>	<p><u>Right-wing:</u></p> <p>Content and material that are specific to ONE or more ACTIVE right-wing VE groups. For instance, content and material may portray, deconstruct, demystify how groups like <i>Atomwaffen</i> and <i>Russian Imperial Movement (RIA)</i> present themselves to attract their follower base. They are often portrayed as more hierarchical as opposed to leaderless or "lone-wolf" in nature. The content would portray whether such described changes represent propaganda value or serve an operational purpose, etc.</p>

Figure J. Author: ACTRI Sample Proposed Counter- messaging Content.⁵⁶

Rethinking and Reevaluating Impact Metrics

As examined in the preceding sections, most current P/CVE communication campaigns fall short of measuring direct impact. Evaluations and successes of counter messaging campaigns are predominantly reasoned through engagement metrics, though it would be erroneous to discount their utility outright (See Figure K). While instrumental in discerning the feasibility of a counternarrative intervention, engagement metrics must be evaluated against other outcomes that suggest a "relationship between exposure to a counternarrative and propensity towards violent extremism or terrorism (through a process of violent radicalisation)."⁵⁷



In those instances when direct impact of a counternarrative on negative behavior is contended (e.g. positive shift off-online in behavior due to a counternarrative content),⁵⁸ one must consider a number of variables that may have influenced or affected the said behavior beyond the counternarrative intervention. In other words, as argued by some authors, “it is highly unlikely that counternarratives alone are responsible for mitigating the risk of radicalization.”⁵⁹ Equally important, causality in P/CVE programs, including in the communication space, is especially challenging given the difficulties associated with “measuring a negative.”⁶⁰

This is not to say that difficulties in attributing change in behavior directly to counternarrative content when evaluating impact should be rejected outright either. While it is difficult to measure “non-radicalization,” or trace it back to exposure to a counternarrative,⁶¹ P/CVE evaluations must consider both direct and indirect impact of counternarratives on radicalization, alongside empirical research designs and clearly articulated theory of change (ToC) that could help isolate the effects of any single intervention.⁶² Furthermore, targeted counternarratives that challenge the rationalization of violence by violent extremist groups must clearly articulate inclusion and exclusion criteria applied to a specific intervention. For instance, while both the interventions may reduce propensity for violence among the target audience, P/CVE professionals must consider whether counternarrative content is introduced to a target audience prior to their exposure to an extremist group narrative (i.e. preventative interventions/protective factor in reducing extremist group narrative effectiveness) or after exposure to an extremist group narrative (i.e. therapeutic interventions/acting as a treatment).⁶³

ACTRI Sample Direct & Indirect Measures of Counternarrative Campaigns Online & Offline

- Awareness (e.g. impressions, reach, impression frequency, views), engagement (e.g. video clicks, video retention rate, video view rate, complete view rates, partial view rates, average view rates, frequency rates, prolonged engagements, constructive engagement, antagonistic engagements, “call to action” etc.), and comments and impact analysis (e.g. sentiment analysis, geolocation analysis, online surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, etc.).
- Surveys and assessments on the extent to which communication campaigns lead to engagement and whether corresponding to the level of action/engagement.
- Decreased frequency of VE group material and content both off-online.
- Increased frequency of anti-extremist content and other platforms that target extremist narratives online or offer opportunities for community engagement.
- Increased frequency of both informal and formal users willing to challenge extremist narratives online. Increased frequency of both formal and informal influencers who will be willing to undertake counter messaging initiatives online as a result of extremist viewpoints expressed by others.
- Decreased support for VE extremist groups among those with strong convictions (e.g. militant jihadi, right-wing) but with doubts towards the legitimacy of the group’s violent methods or ideology.
- Increased acceptance of offline support mechanisms/services by at-risk for radicalization individuals.
- Measurable changes in online attitudes or behaviors, or a positive impact on online negative behavior: Link clicks/landing page, changes in user privacy settings, shifts in content consumed (e.g. from ISIS to positive alternatives), post reactions, comments, page clicks, page shares.
- Rate of offline referrals and types of offline referrals accepted.
- Freedom of engagement (demonstrated through comments and other off-online actions and activities) on contentious social-political issues by at-risk for radicalization individuals
- Direct measurable shifts in online behavior: Target audience directly reaching to take the conversation offline, seek further referral to psychologists, counselors, etc.

Figure K. Author: ACTRI & Literature Review

Alternative to Traditional Redirect Methods

Redirect methods have proven instrumental in the fight against violent extremism. The fact that they are not aimed at censorship—as content censorship could lead to further grievance—the fact that they offer the alternative content—redirects may increase the likelihood that vulnerable populations will disengage from VE content—and the fact that they are data-driven—in the sense that they rely on search behavior, which may provide a greater insight into an individual’s thought process, behavior, feelings, etc., make them especially optimal. The non-performative sources, like google search (e.g. searching certain key terms, search traffic being private, never being edited, removed, banned, etc.), in practice have proven to be stronger indicators of human behavior than performative sources (e.g. conscious of how activities by individuals on social media will frame how others perceive them, etc.). Despite their utility, the existing redirect method may be perceived as flawed in its call to action by presuming that vulnerable individuals in the earliest stages of exploratory internet research are open to disruption through alternative



content (e.g. ISIS, al Qaeda recruiting themes and ideologies) and support services.⁶⁴ In the context of support services, this is akin to suggesting a teenager call Alcoholics Anonymous after their first taste of wine. In terms of content, redirect methods apply advertising tools and internet channels that mostly direct to content that discuss religion or challenge extremist ideologies.

While important, the method may not be [adequately] receptive to constantly evolving VE extremist content and recruitment efforts (e.g. content not being recent). Furthermore, it underscores engagement and falls short of actually measuring impact.⁶⁵ “ACTRI’s ‘Strategic Narrative Disruption (SND)’ model suggests that lessons might be taken from traditional advertising to guide curious users toward a specific outcome by *affirming their reality, encouraging exploration, and offering socially productive outlets and deradicalization services at the end of their journey*. The proposed method entails serving target audiences incremental doses of messages that we would want them to resist, allowing them to develop counterarguments on their own.⁶⁶ Rather than immediately offering the users alternate content or counseling, as with the Redirect Method, the model offers the users a space to explore and grow. It offers the users a space that accepts their line of questioning and uses repetition and affirmation to reinforce that it is the conclusion of violence that is wrong. The proposed model considers the fact that resilience to extremist narratives could not be reduced to countering extremist narrative alone; rather, we must create safe spaces for the young and vulnerable to extremist rhetoric to engage with questions and concerns that are harnessed by violent extremist narratives. In fact, as stressed in recent research, ‘failure to address criticisms of the prevailing social order [e.g. claims of unjust social practices, social/institutional discrimination, government repressive measures, etc.] reduces resilience to an uncritical acceptance of society as it is.’”⁶⁷

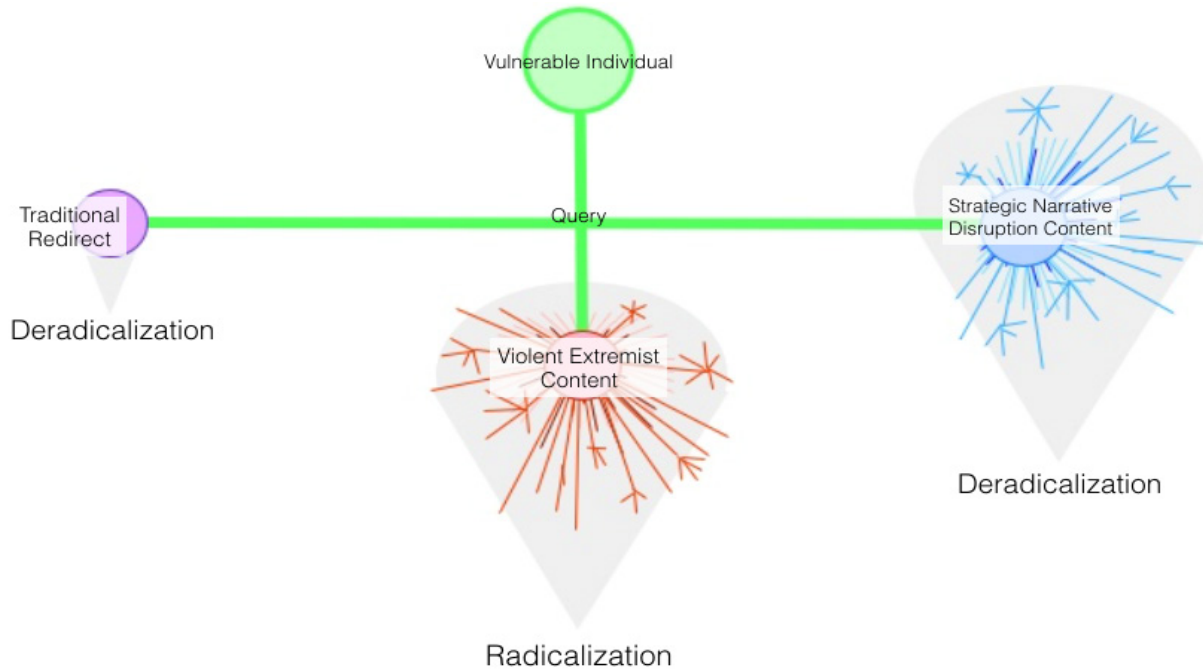


Figure L. “Strategic Narrative Disruption” Logic Flow

The proposed model complements the Redirect Method as it grows on it by placing an original ecosystem of highly consumable content in the path. This is accomplished by appropriating the esoteric symbols, language, and natural questioning of authority to build a network of content, including websites, social media pages, meme generators, and videos. Because the proposed content base would be significantly deeper and more explorable than traditional Redirect destinations, significantly more data could be collected on users and better attempts at tracking could be implemented (See Figure L).

Example Strategic Narrative Disruption Model

An example of the Strategic Narrative Disruption (SND) model in action might start with a vulnerable individual clicking on a violent extremist meme. If the meme is real, that user will be teleported into a vast network of highly compelling, highly explorable content that reinforces the questions that made the user click in the first place and suggests violence as the most appropriate solution. If the meme is a traditional redirect, the user will discover a landing page with older, deradicalized extremists talking about their regrets, which may not appeal to the user in that moment. If the meme follows an SND redirect, the user will find himself/herself in a network of compelling, explorable content that affirms his/her questions about authority as justified while teaching critical thinking skills. This content would ask hard questions about the nature of violent extremist motivations and the efficacy of violence as a tool for political and social change, and only then would it link through to counseling, mentoring, and traditional redirect content (See Figure M & N for examples).

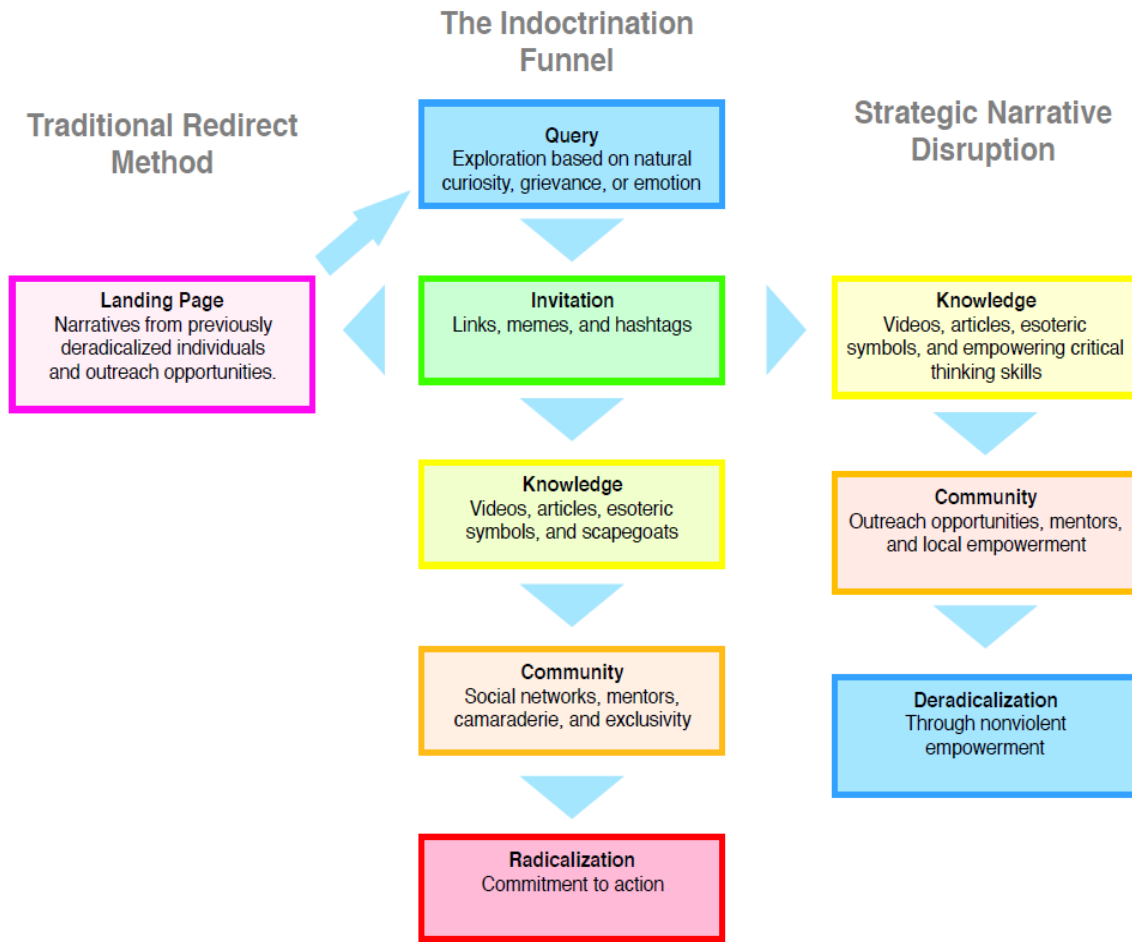


Figure M. Example Traditional “Redirect” vs. “Strategic Narrative Disruption” Model

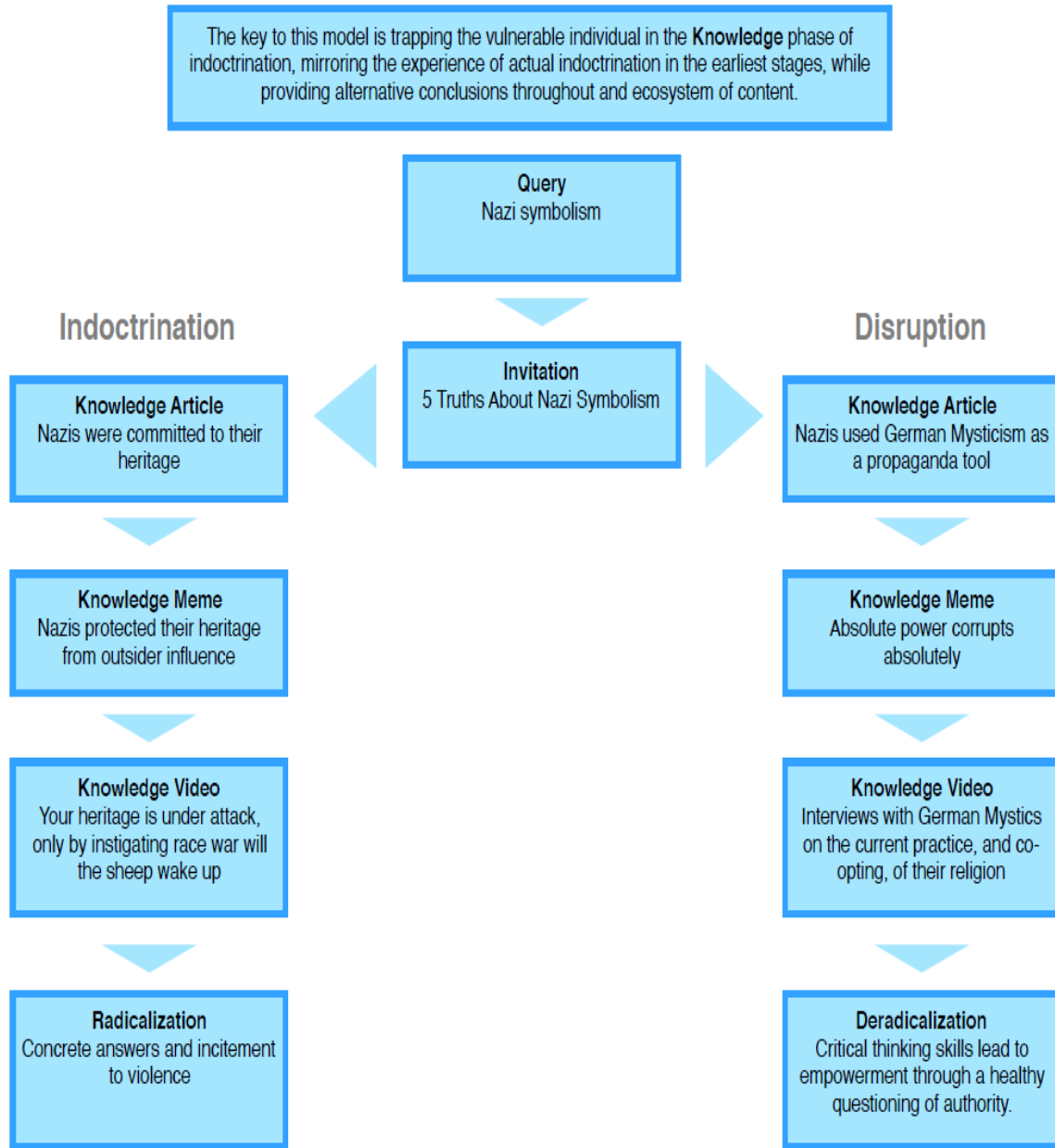


Figure N. Example Traditional Redirect vs. Strategic Narrative Disruption Model Applied to Right-Wing Extremism



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