



Extremism on the Internet

THE FIGHT AGAINST ONLINE RADICALISATION STARTS OFFLINE


Counter-narratives are often claimed to be the ingenuous solution for the prevention of extremism and radicalisation. They are intended to dismantle extremism's propaganda or create positive alternatives to its communities. But the effect is dubious and may, at worst, lead to the opposite result. Therefore, education and critical thinking are the best form of prevention.

Extremists and propagandists are exploiting social media. This has given rise to concerns that their online communities will cause further radicalisation of an internet savvy youth. Therefore, a number of researchers, interest groups and government

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Count on the long-term strengthening of critical thinking and an open, democratic culture.
- Educate young people in digital skills, which make them better able to understand the way the social media work and see through manipulation.
- Avoid using direct counter-narratives, which challenge and falsify extremist ideology.
- Avoid promoting positive alternatives through strategic alliances with organisations in civil society.

We should focus on building a strong democratic society of digital citizens.



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ministers advocate preventing radicalisation by using counter-narratives to penetrate the ideological defences of online extremism. In general, the strategies for counteracting extremist narratives can be divided into three categories:

- **Direct counter-narratives** which confront the ideology and lifestyle of extremism
- **Positive alternatives** which, among other things, support moderate voices
- **Improving digital competences** and the ability of vulnerable young people to reflect critically

Direct counter-narratives try to 'win the argument' by deconstructing and delegitimising extremist propaganda. This approach attempts to affect the behaviour of those who sympathise with or take part in violent extremism in the short term. Counter-narratives may include making fun of, challenging and falsifying the extremist ideology's claims or demonstrating the contradiction between extremist utopias and their brutal realities. This direct approach is often based on the assumption that the narratives of violent extremism are based on misunderstandings and conspiracy theories, and that revealing this will cause doubts in the extremist line of thought and point sympathisers in the right direction.

Positive alternatives operate in the medium-term and attempt to combat the attraction of extremism by using alternative offers on the identity market, such as moderate interpretations of religion and ideology or non-extremist leisure-time activities based on secular, Western values. This approach does not challenge extremist narratives directly, but is intended to influence young people who are vulnerable to the messages instead. The alternative voices may also help unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasising solidarity, common goals and joint values.

Critical thinking and scepticism about the truth value of information, combined with good digital skills, may make extremism less attractive to young people. In this line of thought, they must be trained by employing a democratic educational theory that works on improving their media competences; that is, their understanding of the functions of the different social media, skills in relation to new media, and analytic and reflective media-critical proficiency. Thus, the approach relies on the long-term perspective. It attempts to prevent future extremism by building a strong democratic society of digital citizens.

Receiver paradox – understanding the individual

The counter-narratives have a number of problems with understanding the individual when it is not only a matter of contradicting extremist voices, but also preventing radicalisation. In the direct counter-narratives, it is rational individuals who must be presented to the truth. In the positive alternatives, it is youth who are vulnerable and who can be manipulated who must be inoculated with the right values. But both approaches miss the point. Extremism is often alluring to the young people who are trapped in an existential and identity-political battle of resistance. Here, direct counter-narratives risk being simply considered to be typical Western and politically correct propaganda, which is also the object of ridiculing counter-propaganda. The alternative stories often do not offer anything other than an unresisting and impotent multicultural normality that misinterprets the emotional and political pull of extremism.

The normality-sceptical young people navigate in a chaotic sea of information, where they have to reduce the noise level by active choice. Therefore, the key is to attract young people to voluntarily observe cleverly constructed counter-narratives, which are generally irreconcilable with their values. The low number of hits on existing online campaigns illustrates that they have not succeeded.

Counter-narratives have very little relevance for the actual target group, which first and foremost seeks confirmation of its own ideas and radical inclinations. The assumptions of counter-narratives about the radicalising or de-radicalising effect of communication do not appreciate the very individual and contextual nature of radicalisation. The individual interprets incoming information in relation to a personal narrative that is rooted in a complex network of individual relationships. There is no panacea.

Sender paradox – rebellion against authorities

The strong focus by counter-narratives on the message risks making the approaches blind to the financing and sender paradoxes. The idea of the positive alternatives builds partly upon the narratives being provided by moderate voices of authority, such as moderate imams who can help to dismiss violence as being illegitimate. The problem is, however, that online extremism and the radicalisation phenomenon is, to a high degree, also based on the rebellion of normality-sceptical young people against authorities and moderate outlooks on life, for which reason the

authority-based counter-narrative risks simply confirming, and maybe also strengthening, the urge for rebellion.

The effective narrative must, as a kind of Trojan Horse, sow a seed of doubt, which may be allowed to grow and break down the defence mechanisms from within. Such alternatives can probably get some young people who are flirting with extremism to think differently. But if the Trojan Horse is to have any chance at all of getting inside the walls, the sender must not be visible and the objective must not be obvious. Thus, the critical story has the most effect if the voice of doubt comes from within the extremist circles.

If the alternative voices become financially or ideologically connected to the state, it will only arouse suspicion and reinforce mistrust. The sender paradox describes the danger of the state supporting counter-narratives and campaigns carried out by organisations in civil society. The support runs the risk of being a kiss of death to the credibility of



TWO EXAMPLES OF COUNTER-NARRATIVES

An example of a direct counter-narrative is the U.S. Department of State's *Think Again Turn Away* campaign.

The project uses the terror organisations' strategic mistakes and the accounts of defectors to present violent extremism as a mistaken strategy. It has an active body of Twitter users, who microblog about the misinformation and manipulation by Jihadi networks. The campaign is spread by films and pictures on most social media and uses both humour and contra-ideological fact checking. It has especially received media coverage for the controversial video '*Welcome to the "Islamic State" land (ISIL/ISIS)*', which uses sarcasm to tell about all of the advantages of becoming a foreign fighter for the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

IS responded with counter-propaganda, which attacks double standards and hypocrisy in the American presentation of itself.

An example of a campaign that relies on positive alternatives is *Walk Away from Violent Extremism* by the Australian NGO, People against Violent Extremism.

The campaign moves through a number of platforms with both films and pictures. The purpose is, among other things, to improve knowledge about and attention to violent extremism, to develop counter-narratives, which are shared through online platforms and to strengthen resistance to radical and extremist influences on young people. The latter component of the campaign is intended to appeal to feelings. It describes 'normality'; that is, dinner with family and football with friends, as the safe harbour where frustrated young people should cast their social anchors instead.

Thus, the basic story of the campaign is the idea of a secular and individualised multicultural normality.

independent initiatives and, therefore, the sender paradox speaks against the idea of strategic alliances with organisations.

Alternative truth or critical approach

The direct counter-narratives are about falsifying the ideology and showing young people what reality really looks like. The approach is based on simple assumptions about communication and does not openly recognise the fact that the reality of media is politically constructed and always depends on a certain viewpoint – regardless of who the sender is.

The positive alternatives offer a light version of the original extremist identity and attempt to lure the normality-sceptical young people back into the fold. Instead of emphasising the 'true' reality as the direct counter-narratives do, the alternatives offer another and more unproblematic place in the community.

Critical formation is, on the other hand, more fundamental. The approach connects general knowledge to the critical sense and, in doing so, teaches young people to be sceptical towards simple proclamations

of truth and the authorities who proclaim them. The first two approaches postulate another truth, while the last approach emphasises the criticism of proclamations of the truth. This is why the approaches seem to be irreconcilable.

Quite simply, there is a lack of research that can show the radicalising or de-radicalising effects of online communication. Such research should be based on a multifaceted understanding of the individual, so that we are not tempted to use already debunked concepts of radicalisation.

Preventing extremism is not the same as selling a 'better' product or telling the truth to a reality-distorted counterculture. Therefore, the fight against online extremism starts offline through better education and an open, democratic culture with greater political and identity-related elbowroom. There are no simple solutions. The most reliable strategy is to take the long, hard route that relies on education and critical thinking.

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