FACT SHEET

Counter-Narratives in Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)

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The battle with violent extremism is predominantly ideological. Notwithstanding its importance, the recent military defeat of Daesh only constitutes solving one piece of a large puzzle; the rest remains in countering the broader radical ideology and grand narrative behind it.

Narratives and Counter-Narratives

A narrative is "a simple, unifying, easily-expressed story or explanation that organises people's experience and provides a framework for understanding events."[1] Narratives are not only powerful in how they shape a certain vantage point on an issue, but also in how they frame worldviews and subsequently drive human action. Media frames have traditionally served one or more of the following four purposes: offering a problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.[2]

Examining narratives of violent groups is key to countering radicalisation and violent extremism. Narrative threads used by extremists include: defining a problem as an injustice, offering moral justification for violence, dehumanising survivors, diffusing responsibility, and downplaying harmful effects.[3]

Within this realm, a significant effort has been invested into so-called 'counter-narratives' in P/CVE research. Counter-narratives are presented in different media frames, which allows for a careful examination of language, semiotics and symbolism used in a media segment. The WANA Institute examined the current approaches to managing radical narratives and offering counter-narratives through a select media sample, revealing a number of shortcomings.[4] The examination was made possible through the use of Frame Analysis.[5]

Shortcomings in Counter-Narratives

First, media often limit themselves to providing counter-narratives rather than positive alternative narratives. Essentially, radical narratives are presented and then negated, without offering a compelling alternate worldview or a novel and constructive insight. This is problematic because a counter-narrative is one-dimensional; by simply dismissing the narrative of extremist groups, it reproduces the same grand dichotomous narrative of 'Good versus Evil' or 'Us versus Them'. In fact, a well-known rule in Frame Analysis points out that "negating a frame, activate[s] that frame."[6]

Second, media tend to equate terrorism and/or violent extremism almost exclusively with Daesh and its brand of terrorism. This yields a rather narrow and skewed understanding of the wider phenomena. It implies the use of an already contested approach to dealing with terrorism and/or violent extremism, one whereby increased militarisation and greater security-based engagement are pursued. Instead of challenging radical narratives; this equation perpetuates them.

1 David Kilcullen, ""Twenty-Eight Articles": Fundamentals Of Company-Level Counterinsurgency", Australian Army, 2006, 106, available at: http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/kilcullen.pdf

2 Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification Of A Fractured Paradigm", Journal Of Communication 43, no. 4 (1993): 51-58, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

3 Alex P. Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion And Literature Review", International Centre For Counter-Terror, 2013, 28-9, available at https://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Radicalisation-De-Radicalisation-Counter-Radicalisation-March-2013.pdf.
Alex P. Schmid, "Al-Qaeda'S "Single Narrative" And Attempts to Develop Counternarratives ", International Centre For Counter-Terror, 2014, available at https://www.icct.nl/download/file/Schmid-Al-Qaeda%27s-Single-Narrative-and-Attempts-to-Develop-Counter-Narratives-January-2014.pdf

4 The examination is based on a research paper on the productivity of counter-narratives within P/CVE efforts, prepared by the WANA Institute under the title: From Blades to Brains: A New Battleground, forthcoming February 2018. The media sample include four genres of traditional and non-traditional media – caricature, a comedy show, a drama series, and an advertisement by the telecom company Zain.

5 For example, see Jim Kuypers, "Framing Analysis from a Rhetorical Perspective," Doing News Framing Analysis. Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, eds. (New York: Routeledge, 2010), 286-311 and Jörg Matthes, "What's In A Frame? A Content Analysis of Media Framing Studies In The World's Leading Communication Journals, 1990-2005", Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 86, no. 2 (2009): 349-367, doi:10.1177/107769900908600206.

6 George Lakoff, The All New Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2014), xii.

Third, the radicalisation process itself is seldom addressed. This limits the efficacy of any attempt made at producing counter- and/or alternative narratives, given that the radicalisation process in itself is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. Short of generating a scientific, interactive, and evidence-based discussion around the radicalisation process, alternative narratives will lose their edge: presenting new and compelling information.

Cases in Point

Depicting extremists, Daesh in particular, as brutal, hypocritical, and immoral was a central theme in the examined samples. To achieve this criticism, the different samples sought to either dehumanise and denounce the conduct of said group, or shed light on its immoral and criminal behaviour.

This was done, for example, by showing the commodification of young girls by referring to them as 'goods' in the comedy show Watan 'a Watar; through the centrality of Jihad al-Nikah (sexual jihad) to the MBC drama series Black Crows; by portraying terrorists as a swarm of cockroaches that should be exterminated (see Figure 1 below); and through the distinctly Middle-Eastern, bearded features of the terrorists in the advertisement by telecom company Zain.

Figure 1: The Defeat of ISIS, Emad Hajjaj. 10 June 2017. The text on what is reminiscent of a head stone reads: "Here rests Daesh; we are not sorry for their lost youth and terrorism."

The examined samples also presented the behaviour of such groups as antithetical to Islam, attributing it largely to a misinterpretation/misrepresentation of religious texts. For instance, the Zain advertisement tried to restore the religious texts Daesh uses to falsely uphold the banner of Islam to their original meaning. Likewise, the drama series Black Crows drew attention to the immoral and criminal behaviour of Daesh fighters by showcasing issues like slavery, paedophilia, and human trafficking. In one scene, Al-Muqdad slits the throat of a young child and immediately goes to pray afterwards (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Al-Muqdad, the leader of The Heaven Boys' regiment.

Yet, while peddling emotive religious narrative may elicit anger at Daesh's actions, it does little beyond reinforcing the audience's pre-existing condemnation. Equally important, a mere exposure of the façade that governs Daesh's manipulation of religion does not dig deeper into questions of identity politics, media propaganda, oppression or vying for power. It does not move an audience from passive disapproval to active engagement.

The Way Forward

Ultimately, winning the ideological battle necessitates a move beyond counter-narratives into alternative narratives. Addressing the aforementioned shortcomings is a good first step as they significantly limit the efficacy of the attempts made at discrediting and/or delegitimising the narratives put forward by radical groups.

Equally important, the success of Daesh's narrative is attributed to it being able to promise, without even realistically offer, potential recruits a sense of achievement, purpose and identity. As such, merely countering this narrative is much like fighting with Daesh over who should stand on a rug, while offering alternative narratives is pulling the rug from under Daesh altogether.