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# **Civil Society and Counter- Narrative Strategies**

**Counter-Radicalization Online**

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## ABSTRACT

The spread of hate messages online perpetrated by terrorist and extremist groups represents one of the biggest threats that has caught the attention of governments, security forces, and national and international experts.<sup>1</sup> Relevant contributions to countering hate speech and terrorist narratives online have been made by national governments, international organizations, and members of civil society. The various initiatives implemented have had private and public sponsors, but have also often been spontaneous and voluntary, aimed at making the world a better place.<sup>2</sup> The objective of this analysis is to illustrate how the implementation of counter-narrative practices perpetrated by members of civil society is crucial to discouraging individuals surfing the Internet from consuming terrorist content available online. Moreover, such efforts are critical in combating online radicalization by lone wolves.

**Keywords:** *counter-narrative, online terrorism, strategies, counter-narrative campaigns, civil society, civilian commitment*

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Winter and Johanna Fürst, "Challenging Hate: Counter-speech Practices in Europe," The International Centre For the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## INTRODUCTION

*“We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.”*

Michael K. Nagata

On December 28, 2014, the New York Times reported this comment by Major General Michael K. Nagata, commander of American Special Forces Operations, regarding the war against the Islamic State.<sup>3</sup> Understanding terrorist ideology and propaganda has been and remains one of the biggest global challenges of the last several years. It is a crucial problem that must be addressed in order to prevent casualties, counter terrorist narratives, and guarantee human security – both online and offline.

The notable increase of terrorist propaganda in the cyber domain, and the need for a prompt response by state and non-state actors alike to mitigate the risks of online and offline radicalization into violent extremism, has been incessantly highlighted by national and international experts.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this research paper is to remark on the essential role played by members of civil society in the realization and implementation of counter-narrative practices online, viewed as a crucial action for discouraging individuals from accessing terrorist content online. The expression “civil society” adopted in this paper refers to various actors, communities, and formal or informal associations with various roles – excluding governmental ones – that carry out initiatives aimed at sharing common goals and values.<sup>5</sup> Different from governments, civil society is more engaged within local communities, therefore their communication strategies are more effective in terms of reaching a specific target and doing it through more trustworthy methods.<sup>6</sup>

Primarily, an analysis of the nature of counter-narrative practices and the communication strategies will be provided in order to facilitate the

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Schmitt, “In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology,” The New York Times, December 28, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/us/politics/in-battle-to-defang-isis-us-targets-its-psychology-.html>

<sup>4</sup> Linda Schlegel, “The Ongoing Trouble With Counter-Narratives: Why Evaluation May Not Be Everything,” Regional Cooperation Council, August 12, 2020. <https://www.rcc.int/swp/news/289/the-ongoing-trouble-with-counter-narratives-why-evaluation-may-not-be-everything>

<sup>5</sup> Adam Jezard, “Who and What Is ‘Civil Society?’” World Economic Forum, April 28, 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/what-is-civil-society/>.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Zahed Amanullah, Jonathan Birdwell, “The Impact of Counter-Narratives,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016.

understanding of these complex operations, the consequences of their implementation, and the importance of the broadcaster's identity. The paper will also illustrate some techniques applied on social media channels aimed at facilitating content sharing, crucial for setting up an effective counter-narrative campaign. Furthermore, a considerable analysis of the role played by civil society will be provided, and three case studies will be analyzed to give a better understanding of the theory's application in real life.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods have been used for the realization of this research work.

## THE NATURE OF COUNTER-NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

The term "counter-narrative" has taken on a wide range of meanings over time, and has often been adopted by journalists, scholars, and experts to refer to a communication strategy aimed at countering online recruitment and radicalization. These two malicious practices are used virtually by extremist groups and terrorists and are mainly directed at vulnerable individuals.<sup>7</sup> The goal of the creator of counter-narrative campaigns is to inform the targeted audience about non-acceptance and non-justification of terrorist violence and to provide more information regarding the consequences of its use. Additionally, counter-narrative initiatives are a medium-term strategy aimed not only at countering messages and narratives adopted by terrorists and extremists, but also at delivering good practices to dissuade users from legitimizing fundamentalists' use of political violence.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, counter-narratives represent an important tool to provide a different or alternative interpretation of certain events described, analyzed, and subsequently disseminated through messages, text files, video clips, or images by terrorist groups. Moreover, they consist of direct and reactive communication strategies aimed at arousing reflection, emotion, confrontation, and consequential distrust towards extremist propaganda messages. Naturally, they vary in their scope, purpose, and the selection of recipients.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Zahed Amanullah, Jonathan Birdwell, "The Impact of Counter-Narratives," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Catania, "Social Sharing: What Drives us to Share?" Social and Tech, 21 March 2019. <https://socialandtech.net/social-sharing-cosa-ci-spinge-alla-condivisione/>

<sup>9</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "Countering Terrorist Narratives Online and Offline," United Nations Security Council, 28 January 2020.

In May 2017, through Resolution 2354, the United Nations Security Council expressed its interest in seeking global cooperation aimed at identifying counter-narrative practices. In addition to emphasizing the inhumanity and cruelty of terrorist violence, this enabled Member States to develop alternative narratives to those offered by terrorist groups so as to disillusion individuals about the legitimacy of the extremist cause.<sup>10,11</sup> As Gabriel Weimann has made clear in his writings, before conducting any counter-narrative campaign, it is necessary to understand the cultural context in which it will be disseminated—the target audience—and at the same time it is necessary to carefully select the broadcaster.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in counter-narrative campaigns designed to be disseminated in territories belonging to the geographical area of the Middle East, different themes and content will be used and selected than those that could be identified and disseminated in the European geographical area.

The contextualization and the ability to identify what can attract the attention of the campaign's target is crucial for the realization of effective counter-narrative practices. In addition, online counter-narratives are more effective if they are reliable and objective, not only in terms of content, but also in terms of the level of credibility of the broadcaster.<sup>13</sup> For example, the dissemination of counter-narrative initiatives by a religious leader in a small Middle Eastern community may be much more effective when compared to the dissemination of counter-narrative initiatives by a religious leader in a small European community.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a direct criticism of the content of such narratives that the author aims to discredit is that they are not very effective for those who have already embarked on a process of radicalization

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<sup>10</sup> Through Resolution 2354 of 2017, the United Nations organization calls on member states to act responsibly in countering terrorist acts and violent extremism that foster terrorism. Consistency and coordination between donors and recipients are critical to deploy efficient counter-terrorism practices. Such actions must be complemented by the ability of issuers to adapt counter-narrative practices to different contexts. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12839.doc.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 6

<sup>12</sup> Some of G. Weimann's publications that have been used for conducting the analysis are: "Communicating Unreality: Modern Media and the Reconstruction of Reality," SAGE Publications, October 14, 1999 and "The Psychology of Mass-Mediated Terrorism," SAGE Publications, Vol. 52 issue 1. September 1, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriel Weimann, "Communicative Uses of the Internet for Terrorism," in "Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges," Institute of Peace Press, January 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, "Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2016, 381-404.

or who have already directly or indirectly expressed their support for extremist groups. Therefore, tone and strategic approach are crucial during the creation of the counter-storytelling process. Identifying and analyzing the themes and communication strategies that terrorist groups use in their arguments to attract supporters are of paramount importance in order to craft a convincing counter-argument. Scholars Kurt Braddock and John Horgan have identified four different and possible counter-narrative practices, summarized in the table below.<sup>15</sup>

Validity of analogy in terrorist narrative	Invalid		Valid	
	Dissolve	Replace	Dissolve	Replace
Counternarrative goal				
Counternarrative strategy	False analogy	Misanalogy	Disanalogy	Counteranalogy
Counterargument	The terrorist analogy seems legitimate, but collapses under scrutiny	The terrorist analogy is wrong, and there is a different one that is correct	The terrorist analogy appears true, but there are facts that contradict its structure	The terrorist analogy seems to be true, but there is another analogy that more accurately describes the same situation.
Objective	Highlight the dissimilarity of the objects being compared	Develop a better analogy that challenges the terrorist analogy	Highlight characteristics that the objects being compared should share, but do not	Use a different comparison point to make a claim about the target that contradicts the original claim

Source: “Counterarguments to Analogies in Terrorist Narratives” in “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism,” Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 2016.

The work done by Braddock and Horgan is not unique in this area of analysis. Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve conducted a study titled “The Counter-Messaging Spectrum” to identify practices designed to discredit messages shared by terrorists.<sup>16</sup> The authors identified three different types of counter-messages:

- strategic government communications adopted to put government policy and strategy in a positive light, generally translated into public awareness campaigns;
- alternative narratives undertaken by both governments and civil societies aiming to present a different narrative from the one offered by terrorists;
- counter-narratives generally carried out by civil society addressing the terrorists’ message in a critical and direct manner.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 10

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, “The Counter-Messaging Spectrum” in R. Briggs and S. Feve “Policy Briefing: Countering the Appeal of Extremism Online,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, February 6 2014, 13.

For each of these practices, it is necessary to understand who the target audience is; for instance, whether it is a general audience or a narrower, more specific audience.<sup>17</sup>

What	Why	How	Who
Government Strategic Communications	Action to get the message out about what government is doing, including public awareness activities	Raise awareness, forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences and correct misinformation	Government
Alternative Narratives	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society or government
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humour	Civil society

Source: Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, "Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism: What works and what are the implications for government?" Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013.

In addition, the choice of methodologies and approaches to countering online and offline radicalization should stem from an awareness of the socio-cultural context in which one is operating. The identification of common grievances; the adoption of available resources to placate them; the development of new capacities and greater inclusiveness; and greater tolerance, openness, and freedom to avoid feelings of societal polarization and marginalization are some examples of issues that must be considered before any decision can be made. It is necessary to address the many social aspects by defining short and long-term perspectives.<sup>18</sup>

*But what is the role that social media plays as a channel for the spread of counter-narrative operations?*

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHAREABLE CONTENT: HOW TO SET UP A COUNTER-NARRATIVE CAMPAIGN

Nowadays, social media represents a channel of extraordinary importance in the fight against terrorist propaganda and online radicalization. The diffusion

<sup>17</sup> Alastair Reed, Haroro J. Ingram, Joe Whittaker "Countering Terrorist Narratives," Policy Department for Citizen's Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid 26

of counter-narrative initiatives through virtual social platforms requires the creation of a product which would generate so-called social sharing, meaning the practice of users sharing various content available on social networks. The act of sharing occurs not only when a user believes that certain content aligns with their ideas or their own way of thinking, but also when the user believes that the content can arouse further interest among his friends or followers.<sup>19</sup>

*When can a post, video, or image be considered "appealing" to the wider web population?*

A study carried out by Jonah Berger on human cognitive processes identified six characteristics that describe why one piece of content may be more "shareable" than another.<sup>20</sup> The six characteristics are summarized below:

- **Social value:** desire to gain social recognition. By sharing certain content, the user seeks to safeguard his/her "image and reputation" in cyberspace, and consequently in real life.
- **Trigger:** sharing a post, a video, or an image allows the user to identify with it, and therefore to share ideas and reflections, or to express disapproval. In both cases, there will be a significant number of users who will do the same, thereby creating different "groups" of people: those who share certain content because it reflects their ideals; those who approve of certain content but do not share it for different reasons; those who disapprove of certain content and do not share it; those who share certain content and then express their disapproval; and finally, those who are indifferent to the same content.
- **Emotions:** content can often encourage reflection or provoke sadness, indignation, joy, or tension.
- **Participation:** the number of "likes" and "shares" of given content on social platforms gives the user an incentive to view it and share its popularity. Greater participation by users arouses in others a desire to take part in that specific initiative.

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<sup>19</sup> Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Zahed Amanullah, Jonathan Birdwell, "The Impact of Counter-Narratives," Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Simone Catania, "Social Sharing: What Drives us to Share?" Social and Tech, 21 March 2019. <https://socialandtech.net/social-sharing-cosa-ci-spinge-alla-condivisione/>

- **Practical value:** content that provides added value to the user, answers questions, or provides detailed information is more attractive compared to other content.
- **Stories:** storytelling used in counter-narratives – or in video content, text files, or images in general – often increases users’ attention and interest by producing emotions and a recognition of themselves in the story told.<sup>21</sup>

*Consequently, what are the procedures for creating an effective and shareable counter-narrative campaign?*

A study carried out in 2016 by Henry Tuck and Tanya Silverman entitled “The Counter-Narrative Handbook” provides an analysis of potential incisive communication practices.<sup>22</sup> The first procedure examined is planning, which consists of defining the target of the campaign, the virtual or real location of dissemination, and the tools and methodologies to use. Another useful practice is the “realization” of the content, meaning that it is necessary to define the short- and long-term objectives to pursue, to analyze the terrorists’ arguments and strategies, to understand the background ideologies and the diffusion methodology and, in the end, to proceed to the actual realization of counter-propaganda content. Determining the location of the campaign’s dissemination also provides a clearer understanding of the type of content that should be produced, such as video, text files, or images. At the same time, it guarantees a clearer vision of what characteristics the final product should have while also taking into account the nature of the desired target audience. The choice of language represents another factor of crucial importance. Finally, maintaining the audience; the ability to generate social sharing is a factor that should in a sense be foreseen beforehand, even if the audience is subject to change. Audience engagement is crucial to spreading the conceived counter-propaganda initiative as widely as possible.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>22</sup> Henry Tuck and Tanya Silverman, “The Counter-Narrative Handbook,” Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 15

## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE PRACTICES

The counter-narrative initiatives conducted over time have been numerous and perpetrated by different actors including governments, international organizations, and members of civil society. Civilian organizations and social movements have carried out a series of activities aimed at analyzing jihadist, right-wing, and left-wing ideology in an effort to educate social groups on non-violence and peaceful actions. However, over time, numerous concerns have arisen regarding the nature and credibility of counter-narrative campaigns.<sup>24</sup> In that regard, in their study entitled “The Challenges and Limitations of Online Counter-Narratives,” Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Lorenzo Vidino put more emphasis on the key role played by civil society in counter-narratives activities, stating:

Counter-narratives from government spokespersons are not credible in the eyes of terrorist organizations, and therefore unlikely to influence adherents of violent extremist ideologies. This issue highlights the need for counter-propaganda efforts by non-governmental entities to empower the private sector, civil society actors, and even former radicals.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably, civil society plays a very important role in generating practices aimed at preventing and combatting online radicalization, which represents one of the most complex global challenges and security threats. This observation is in line with what was concluded in the handbook published by the OSCE in 2018, entitled “The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization Leading to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe,” in which youth, families, educators, women, religious leaders, victims of terrorism, and the media are identified as the main characters to consider when it comes to counter-radicalization.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the handbook highlights that it is in the government’s interest

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<sup>24</sup> OSCE, “The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: A Guidebook for South-Eastern Europe,” August 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Lorenzo Vidino, “The Challenges and Limitations of Online Counter-Narratives,” PRIF Blog, 4 June 2018. <https://blog.prif.org/2018/06/04/the-challenges-and-limitations-of-online-counter-narratives/>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 17

to flank, support, and incentivize the initiatives undertaken by civil society in the fight against violent extremism.<sup>27</sup>

*But why does civil society play such a crucial role?*

Members of civil society, unlike government actors, are further embedded within the population, more trusted, and they better understand their society's characteristics and dynamics. They are much more credible and experienced given their day-to-day work with specific social groups, in the sense that they can provide significant support in identifying common grievances, collective demands, and vulnerable individuals.<sup>28</sup> On the contrary, governments have the political responsibility to ensure security within national territories and, at the same time, it might be hard for them to easily acquire credibility among the audience. For this reason, especially in states where there is a notable social mistrust towards government or where the government's actions are not complemented by words, civilian actors should be more involved in the dissemination of counter-narratives.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, the victims of terrorism should express solidarity as their valuable testimony could inform the audience regarding their personal experience. Of course, in this case the methodology of storytelling plays a crucial role. The interaction on social media, either through photographs or video content, must be properly planned. It is not just the story itself that has to be decisive, but it's also important to identify how the story is told and through which channel.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid 17

<sup>28</sup> Ibid 17

<sup>29</sup> "CTED Analytical Briefs," United Nation Security Council - Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), May 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc, Luca Guglielminetti, Josée Netten, Stéphane Lacombe, Maarten van de Donk, Jerry Galesloot, Pomme Woltman, "Handbook: Voices of victims of terrorism", RAN Corporation, May, 2016.

## CASE STUDIES

Numerous projects have been implemented by civil society over time (see Appendix 2).

### Case Study 1

In Germany, in 2015, a group of young Muslims authored the “Datteltäter” initiative, consisting of a series of ironic video clips published on YouTube regarding the jihadist interpretation of Islam. The aim of this initiative was to counteract the phenomenon of online radicalization and the recruitment by terrorist organizations through what the group called the “jihad of education,” meaning an analysis of the true nature of jihad. Currently the organization is active on Facebook with 87,434 likes and 94,939 followers. On Twitter, it has 3,281 followers.<sup>31</sup>

### Case Study 2

In the study “Counter Narratives in Social Media – An Empirical Study on Combat and Prevention of Terrorism,” carried out by a team of experts from the Institute for Information Systems at Germany’s University of Siegen, several counter-narrative campaigns conceived by members of civilian society were identified and analyzed.<sup>32</sup>

Campaign name, organizer and time frame	Strategy	Evaluation	Conclusion
<p><i>Average Mohamed</i></p> <p><i>Non-profit organization by Mohamed A. Ahmed since July 2014</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Production of 1-minute cartoon videos on topics such as religion, politics, and culture to reject extremist narratives through logical arguments</li> <li>- Main topics: Peace, democracy, anti-extremism</li> <li>- Target audience: American Muslims (8-16 y.o.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More than 80,000 website views in the first year.</li> <li>- More than 160,000 total views on YouTube</li> <li>- Coverage on TV and in newspapers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Popular campaign</li> <li>- Regularly maintained social media pages with further information</li> <li>- Engagement by Ahmed at schools and universities</li> </ul>
<p><i>Abdullah-X</i></p> <p><i>Anonymous (former extremist) August 2013 until the end of 2016</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Production of short cartoon videos on current events and youth’s topics of interest.</li> <li>- The former extremist uses his own experience and knowledge to reveal narratives</li> <li>- Target audience: British Muslims (10-24 y.o.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More than 50,000 views on YouTube during 6-week test phase,</li> <li>- More than 130,000 views in total</li> <li>- More than 1,000 followers on Twitter Coverage on TV and in newspapers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Campaign with great audience engagement in discussions and videos sharing</li> <li>- High viewer retention rate</li> </ul>

<sup>31</sup> Hany Farid, “The Eglyph Web Crawler: ISIS content of Youtube,” Counter Extremism Project, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Amanda Langer, Marc-André Kaufhold1, Elena Maria Runft, Christian Reuter, Margarita Grinko, Volkmar Pipek, “Counter Narratives in Social Media – An Empirical Study on Combat and Prevention of Terrorism,” Institute for Information Systems–University of Siegen, May 2019.

<p><i>Extremely Together</i> Kofi Annan Foundation since April 2016</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Team of 10 young people of different origins with anti-extremism experience present ideas, exchange experiences and provide suggestions for the collective fight against terrorism.</li> <li>- Links to related websites, sharing information events, creating surveys</li> <li>- Target audience: Young Muslims</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More than 8,000 likes on Facebook</li> <li>- More than 1,000 followers on Twitter</li> <li>- More than 7,000 total views on YouTube</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Moderate popularity, few reactions from audience</li> <li>- Online and offline presence</li> <li>- Interaction with audience, informational events</li> </ul>
<p><i>Families against Terrorism and Extremism (FATE)</i> Independent consortium of 20 European CVE groups since March 2016</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pan-European network of families and organizations</li> <li>- Daily postings on current events, information on the Islamic State, emotional appeals, links to related websites and campaigns, early detection of radicalization process</li> <li>- Target audience: Young Muslims and their families</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More than 1,5 million users on Twitter</li> <li>- More than 2,500 on Facebook in 6-weeks test phase</li> <li>- Worldwide range of more than 600 million People</li> <li>- Coverage on TV and in newspapers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wide range, multilingualism, multimedia internet presence</li> <li>- Online and offline presence</li> <li>- Interaction with audience: Events, workshops, counseling</li> </ul>

Source: Amanda Langer, Marc-André Kaufhold<sup>1</sup>, Elena Maria Runft, Christian Reuter, Margarita Grinko, Volkmar Pipek, “Counter Narratives in Social Media – An Empirical Study on Combat and Prevention of Terrorism,” Institute for Information Systems-University of Siegen, May 2019.

The table clearly shows that excellent results can be achieved by involving civil society in counter-narrative campaigns. The success of the campaigns is calculated based on the number and typology of reactions on social media, on the achievement of the campaign’s specific aims and, of course, on the failure of terrorist narratives disseminated online.<sup>33</sup>

### **Case Study 3**

In 2016, the Danish government implemented an action plan aimed at countering extremist propaganda and preventing online radicalization that involved civil society in the planning of counter-narrative campaigns, in the identification of pedagogical tools to strengthen critical thinking, and in increasing digital literacy among children and youth (see Appendix 1). Such an approach was intended to encourage civil society to become an active participant in the fight against terrorism and online radicalization, especially involving the younger segments of society and inviting them to use social media as a tool to spread alternative content to extremist propaganda. Multilevel cooperation, therefore, includes state, regional, and local actors who are tasked with promoting initiatives to provide mentoring and counseling in order to improve conditions at the social and individual levels. These initiatives are aimed at specific groups of the population considered most vulnerable.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 26

<sup>34</sup> Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen and Karin Ingrid Castro, “The Trouble with Counter-Narratives,” Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017.

Therefore, a role of extraordinary importance is given to:

- **Young people:** who represent the main target of recruitment by terrorist organizations and the social group most exposed to extremist propaganda. The involvement of young people in counter-propaganda practices or even more so in counter-narrative campaigns can be a key to their success. Young people interact regularly with their peers and with their social groups, and can spread greater knowledge and awareness of the consequences of cooperating with terrorist organizations. They boast significant credibility.
- **Women:** who are important figures in highlighting the gender roles prevalent in the operations of terrorist groups. Research on the role of women in terrorist activities has shown that women are largely passive or unwilling supporters of such groups and are often victims themselves.
- **Community leaders:** not only those who are political, but also leaders of any social community. Religious leaders particularly should use their influence on the faithful to disseminate messages of peace and hope and educate their community to condemn and oppose terrorist operations.

Finally, an extraordinarily important role is also played by school educators, academics, researchers, former violent extremists, and reporters of social, digital, and print media, who through their professionalism and knowledge should educate various social groups about tolerance and peaceful action even amidst adverse conditions.<sup>35</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Over the years, the involvement of civil society in online counter-narrative practices has acquired an interesting relevance. A variety of counter-narrative campaigns to prevent and fight extremist and terrorist activities have been realized by members of civil society, and their impact has been significant. This paper highlighted and analyzed only a few of them. As discussed above, members of civil society are generally identified as the most informed and capable elements in terms of the dynamics of their physical and virtual communities, which is the primary reason their pro-action attitude is a

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<sup>35</sup> OSCE, "The Role of Civil Society in Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism," Agosto 2018.

relevant asset to consider.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, to generate effective counter-narrative campaigns, essential procedures to follow might also include strategic planning, the production of real expectations, non-instrumentalization, the guarantee of personal safety of the broadcasters, attention to the sensitivity of local and socio-political dynamics, and the continuous monitoring of the evolution of each initiative.<sup>37</sup>

However, some challenges to consider for facilitating the spread of counter-narrative campaigns by members of civil society are not only procuring the financial support necessary for enforcing short and long-term strategies, but also reducing the gap between the broadcaster and the audience and securing the government's support in designating policies aimed at sustaining these kinds of activities.<sup>38,39,40</sup> This means that the strategies behind counter-narrative practices have to be complemented by concrete actions on the part of the government as well, for example in terms of creating equal access for education and job opportunities regardless of ethnicity, religion, or gender. Additionally, the security measures adopted by governments should be lawful, balanced, and aimed at building a more peaceful, integrated, and cohesive society.<sup>41</sup>

In a world where extremists' use of social media and communication technologies continues to exploit vulnerable people, everyone can invest their own knowledge, dedication, and solidarity to realize accessible, objective, and effective counter-narrative campaigns by using replicable methodologies outlined above as well as developing new, elaborate techniques.

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<sup>36</sup> "Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives," Institute for Strategic Dialogue in cooperation with RAND Corporation, October 1, 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 25

<sup>38</sup> Ibid 32

<sup>39</sup> Ibid 26

<sup>40</sup> "Governments and Civil Society Must Work Together to Combat the Rise of Violent Extremism," Central European University, October 14, 2016. <https://spp.ceu.edu/article/2016-10-14/governments-and-civil-society-must-work-together-combat-rise-violent-extremism>.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 36

## APPENDIX 1

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
<b>Individuals in extremist milieus</b>	Preventing terrorism in the near future by interrupting plots and convincing individuals to leave extremist milieus	Interrupt Dissuade Support disengagement from extremist milieus Provide alternative ways to address grievances or desires	Exit programs to facilitate disengagement from violent extremist milieus Mentoring on making personal changes Therapy Advice on gaining access to resources available to all citizens (e.g. housing, employment, career advice, therapy, medical assistance) Coaching relatives to support the individual	Civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason' to seek out and critically engage with online forums and challenge extremist views A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Security and Intelligence Service Police Prison and Probation Service Mentors Coaches for parents NGO centre for counselling Professionals who already have a good relationship	Aggravating Pushing further underground Making investigations more difficult Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid Compromising freedom of speech or religion Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
<b>Individuals at risk</b>	Preventing terrorism in the future by convincing individuals to not join extremist milieus	Change risky behaviour Provide alternative ways to address grievances or desires Promote desired behaviour	Mentoring on making personal changes Advice on gaining access to resources available to all citizens (e.g. housing, employment, career advice, therapy, medical assistance) Coaching relatives to support the individual	Civil-society actor-driven corps of 'digital voices of reason' to seek out and critically engage with online forum and challenge extremist views A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Mentors Coaches for parents NGO centre for counselling Professionals who already have a good relationship	Distortion of proportions Stigmatisation Marginalisation Polarisation Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid Compromising freedom of speech or religion Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

TARGET GROUP	SUB-OBJECTIVE	HOW	EXISTING METHODS	NEW METHODS IN THE 2016 ACTION PLAN	ACTORS	POTENTIAL RISKS
<b>Everybody</b>	Preventing terrorism in the distant future by minimising vulnerability to any risk, including engagement in extremist milieus	Build capacity and resilience  Promote well-being, social cohesion, and active citizenship	Already existing general social interventions  Building a critical sense and understanding of individual and human rights through primary and secondary school  Teaching materials on digital literacy, critical sense and propaganda techniques for primary and secondary school and after-school clubs	New pedagogical tools for promoting children's ability to participate in social relations and critically reflect  A support and training programme providing professional assistance for civil-society actors wishing to develop campaigns against extremism and radicalisation  A strategic cooperation to mobilise and empower young people to use online media as platforms for presenting alternatives to extremist propaganda	Professionals in day-care, primary and secondary schools  Civil society, including family, community, associations, clubs, etc.	Distortion of proportions  Panic  Mistrust  Stigmatisation  Marginalisation  Polarisation  Pushing individuals or groups to do exactly what one is trying to avoid  Compromising freedom of speech or religion  Providing arguments for groups or individuals with an interest in identifying double standards to promote polarisation

Source: Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen and Karin Ingrid Castro, "The Troubles with Counter-Narratives," Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017, 15-17.

## APPENDIX 2

Case Study	Type	Evolution & Programme Development	Monitoring & Evaluation	Digital Presence	Scope & Funding
<b>English Disco Lovers</b>	Civil society initiative	Grassroots, student-founded	Outranking English Defence League in search results and Facebook likes	Facebook (63K) <sup>10</sup> , Twitter (10.5K) <sup>11</sup> , website	Low-cost, art grants
<b>London Tigers</b>	Civil society initiative	Founded as sports club, since expanded into CE	Study conducted by University of Essex	Facebook (3.5K) <sup>12</sup> , Twitter (1.5K) <sup>13</sup> , YouTube (0.5K) <sup>14</sup> , website	Public and private support
<b>One to One Initiative</b>	Think-and-do tank initiative	Research and interventions conducted by Institute for Strategic Dialogue	Built in M&E metrics and post-project analysis	Twitter (4K) <sup>15</sup> , Facebook (1K) <sup>16</sup> , website	Supported by Countering Online Violent Extremism Research (COVER) Program at Curtin University, Australia
<b>Datteltäter</b>	Civil society initiative	Inspired by populist Islamist and Far Right content	Unclear	Facebook (60K) <sup>17</sup> , YouTube (53.5K) <sup>18</sup> , Instagram (6.5K) <sup>19</sup> , Twitter (1.5K) <sup>20</sup> , website	Occasional income from competitions
<b>HassHilft</b>	Civil society initiative	Fundraising model from Far-Right marches applied to online sphere	Based on level of awareness and money raised	Facebook (677K) <sup>21</sup> , Twitter (2.5K) <sup>22</sup> , website	Support from corporate partners as well as private individuals
<b>#NichtEgal</b>	Civil society initiative	Combination of intuition and targeted research	Unclear	YouTube (14.5K) <sup>23</sup> , Facebook (2K) <sup>24</sup> , Twitter (1K) <sup>25</sup> , website	Fully funded by Google/ YouTube
<b>Stop-Djihadisme</b>	Governmental	Not advertised	Unclear	Facebook (20K) <sup>26</sup> , Twitter (14.5K) <sup>27</sup> , website	Fully funded by the French government
<b>Seriously</b>	Think-and-do tank initiative	Counter-speech incubator developed in response to <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> shooting in 2015	Unclear, beyond macro-statistics	Twitter (10K) <sup>28</sup> , Facebook (1.5K) <sup>29</sup> , YouTube (<0.5K) <sup>30</sup> , online platform	Financed by public funds as well as corporate platforms
<b>Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme</b>	Civil society initiative	Victims-led initiative developed in response to Cairo bomb attacks in 2009	Based on levels of activity and outreach	Facebook (8.5K) <sup>31</sup> , Twitter (1K) <sup>32</sup> , Google+ (<0.5K) <sup>33</sup> , website	Funded by the French government and European Commission

10 "English Disco Lovers (EDL)," Facebook, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/englishdiscolovers/>.  
 11 "English Disco Lovers," Twitter, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/EngDiscoLovers>.  
 12 "London Tigers," Facebook, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://facebook.com/londontigers>.  
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 19 "Datteltäter," Instagram, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://www.instagram.com/datteltaeter/>.  
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21 "Hass Hilft," Facebook, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/HassHilft/>.  
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 29 "Renaissance Numérique," Facebook, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/renaissancenumerique/>.  
 30 "Renaissance Numérique," YouTube, accessed Jul 26, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC18uSj6oC6qj\\_VY6pM7Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC18uSj6oC6qj_VY6pM7Q).  
 31 "Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme," Facebook, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/AVT.org/>.  
 32 "AVT.org," Twitter, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/AVT.org>.  
 33 "Ass+AVT," Google+, accessed Jul 26, 2017, <https://plus.google.com/104367135295010472125>.

Source: Charlie Winter and Johanna Fürst, "Challenging Hate: Counter-speech Practices in Europe," The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, 2017, 10-11.

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