The Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence
Journal of Terrorism Research

Field Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives

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Abstract

U.S. policymakers regard countering and displacing extremist narratives to be a core strategy of countering violent extremism. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which uses highly sophisticated messaging to reach U.S. young persons, has further emphasized the need for this strategy. However, to date there has been little discussion of field principles to guide community-based practitioners in either countering or displacing extremist narratives associated with violent Islamist extremism. Drawing upon existing theory, empirical evidence, and practical experience from across multiple disciplines, this article seeks to fill these gaps with a set of field principles to guide both developing the content of new counter-narratives and alternative narratives and then delivering the new counter-narratives and alternative narratives.

Keywords: *Countering violent extremism; terrorism; ISIS; Al-Qaeda; narratives*

Introduction

Terrorism researchers and counter-terrorism practitioners have for some time recognized the power of narratives to recruit individuals into violent extremist activities (Schmid, 2014). This recognition has been incorporated into the new field of countering violent extremism (CVE). CVE includes an array of policies, programs, and initiatives designed to prevent violent ideologies from taking hold of people in the first place, and to stop them from crossing the line towards actual violence (Nasser-Eddine, et al., 2011). At the February 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, countering and displacing extremist narratives was one of the top priorities. "Countering" means offering narratives that directly challenge the extremist message and "displacing" means offering alternative narratives.

The effort to develop new strategies has become more urgent in the age of ISIS, which employs highly sophisticated and effective communication strategies. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger (2014) describe how ISIS' messaging and savvy use of social media platforms have upended traditional jihadi methods of recruitment, resulting in thousands of fighters and other volunteers being recruited to their cause.

New counter-messaging initiatives have been developed, such as the Peer to Peer Challenging Extremism Initiative, a public-private partnership between the State Department and EdVenture Partners, which helps college students develop social or digital campaigns to counter violent extremism (Glavin, 2015). Such initiatives should be applauded, but also underline the need for empirical or best practices guidelines to help inform their efforts.

In this paper we seek to contribute to the efforts to counter and displace the violent narratives that violent Islamist extremists use to target and persuade American Muslims to radicalize into violence. This article focuses on responding to these narratives due to the particularly deadly nature of violent Islamist extremist

movements (Piazza 2009) and the high priority assigned to them by U.S. national security policymakers (Johnson 2014; Comey 2014). Engaging in a broader analysis inclusive of other actors such as the U.S. (Perliger 2012; Furlow 2012) and European (Kundnani 2012; Dafnos 2014) violent Far Right is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, consistent with current counter-narratives scholarship (e.g. Braddock and Horgan 2015) and practice (e.g. Tuck and Silverman 2016) we assume the field principles articulated in this article are also applicable to other violent movements, such as the U.S. violent far right and U.S. violent far left. While informed by several of the authors' direct experiences with American Muslim communities, we also draw upon a broad diversity of literature in terrorism studies and other disciplines that is ideologically neutral in its content and scope.

This article draws from the scholarly literature in terrorism studies, communications, and public health, as well as other publications that incorporate and highlight community-sourced perspectives on narrative development and messaging. It also draws upon our own direct engagement with U.S. Muslim communities, including community-participatory research (Weine), community leadership (Saeed), and community-based civic and political advocacy (Beutel).

With some notable exceptions, (Ramsay 2012; Braddock 2012; Braddock 2015; Braddock and Dillard, forthcoming) there is a general deficit of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of counter-narratives and how countering extremist narratives and messaging elicits desired outcomes. Braddock and Horgan (2015) offered communication and psychology theory-based procedures for (1) analyzing terrorist narratives, (2) constructing counter-narratives that challenge terrorist narratives, and (3) disseminating the counter-narratives to overcome barriers to persuasion. For example, they found that developing effective messaging should, "Incorporate themes that advocate an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target" (Braddock and Horgan 2015, 9) This strategy is consistent with prior claims from policymakers (Grant 2015) and researcher-practitioners (Matejic 2015) that counter-narratives have limited utility and that violent narratives must ultimately be replaced, not just countered.

One observer noted that CVE policies, "to date have been guided largely by intuition and anecdotal observation, rather than by clearly relevant metrics." (Berger and Strathern 2013, 37) We believe that this includes the development and delivery of narrative content. Some ways to evaluate alternative and counter-narratives include social network analysis, (Hedayah and International Center for Counter-Terrorism 2014, 4) polling, focus groups, sentiment analysis, (McCants and Watts 2012, 2) and other innovative scoring systems to measure influence and exposure over social media platforms like Twitter (Berger and Strathearn 2013). The findings of these evaluations can begin to build an evidence-based set of lessons learned that can inform future efforts.

The article is divided into four sections. First, we define key terms and concepts, such as "narrative," "counter-narrative," and "alternative narrative." Second, we suggest field principles for developing the content of new counter-narratives and alternative narratives. Third, we offer field principles for delivering new content. Both sets of field principles are offered with a conscious, but not exclusive focus on U.S. Muslim community actors. Fourth, we discuss the implications for research, practice, and policy.

Key Terms and Concepts

Narrative

In the context of violent extremism, drawing from Scott Ruston (2009), we define an extremist narrative as *a system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world for the purpose of supporting individuals, groups, or movements to further illegal violent and violence-assisting activities*.

Researchers have identified 13 "master" narratives that *violent Islamist extremist movements, such as Al-Qa'ida,* use to influence their audiences. These narratives utilize historical events or religious concepts, such as the abolishing of the Caliphate in 1924 or Qur'anic passages on Satan (Arabic translation *Shaytan*), to influence their audience (Halverson, Goodall, and Corman 2011).

Each of these "master" narratives has 3 common elements:

- An underlying grievance in which a non-Muslim "other", typically Westerners, Zionists, and "Crusaders" are responsible, in collaboration with local dictators, for the mistreatment and humiliation of Muslims around the world.
- The notion of an ideal society where an Islamic state or the "Caliphate" rules under a purist notion of "*sharia,*" or perfect Divine law (which in reality is conflated with archaic interpretations of *fiqh*, the imperfect human effort to interpret Divine law) (Quraishi-Landes 2013, 10). The establishment of a "sharia" governed polity serves to replace the corrupt governance structures of secular Western-backed regimes.
- A means of moving from that grievance to achieving an ideal society namely through violent activity advocated by AQ and the ISIS (Schmid 2014, 6).

While messages from AQ and ISIS share various aspects and degrees of emphasis of these three elements, their narratives also diverge substantially. The differences between the two movements center on: 1) their ultimate political goals, and; 2) their relationship to violence. Both movements share an interest in establishing a Caliphate. For AQ, this is mostly a theoretical ideal. For ISIS, this is an active engagement in state building and governance. As a result, AQ's recruitment narratives and members are a "vanguard" movement, reflecting a more selective and elitist mentality. By contrast, ISIS is much more open to recruiting a broader array of people from various backgrounds and skill sets to fulfill diverse governance roles including doctors, engineers, nurses, elder caretakers, etc. As a result, each movement's use of violence also diverges substantially. For AQ, violence is a means to a political end (i.e. withdrawal of Western support from local Muslim regimes.) For ISIS violence is an end in of itself – a sign of its commitment to creating a "pure" Muslim society and polity. As a result, ISIS appears to be far more promiscuous and comfortable with its use of wanton violence against non-combatants, which is also reflected in its online messages to recruit (Fink and Sugg 2015; Al-Tamimi 2014).

By employing religiously-laden motifs, AQ and ISIS' narratives exploit two basic human psychological needs: 1) **cognitive closure** which, "amounts to the quest for certainty, and eschewal of ambiguity… It is the quest for structure and coherence in one's outlook and beliefs" (Kruglanski 2014) and; 2) **a quest for significance**, which, "denotes the supreme importance to humans of being noticed, mattering, and deserving honor and esteem." (Ibid.) Earning the status of a "hero" and a "martyr" plays on this quest.

There are several different ways that narratives can displace or counter extremist narratives. The Institute

for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has described a "messaging spectrum" that include three types of messaging activities: 1) government strategic communications; 2) counter-narratives; and 3) alternative narratives. (Briggs and Feve 2013) In a U.S. domestic context, legal and strategic considerations, which are discussed later in this article, proscribe U.S. government actors from engaging in any counter-ideological strategic context. (Rascoff, 2012) Therefore, we mainly focus on counter-narratives and alternative narratives, which are elaborated upon in the next section.

Counter-Narrative and Alternative Narrative

We define **a counter-narrative** as *a system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world for the explicit purposes of combating violent extremist narratives, and eliciting legal and non-violent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements, which support that worldview.* Counter-narratives seek to directly address a violent narrative after it has been delivered to an intended audience, making them a reactive type of messaging. For instance, videos that respond to the religious justifications of violent *extremists* (Muslim Public Affairs Council 2010) are part of a broader counter-narrative that sees groups like AQ and ISIS as religiously inauthentic.

An alternative narrative is a *system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world to promote and elicit legal and non-violent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements, which support that worldview. Unlike counter-narratives, alternative-narratives are not explicitly intended to directly confront violent narratives, although they may have secondary outcomes, which do displace them.* Moreover, because they do not necessarily seek to directly address violent narratives, counter-narratives are not reactive per se; these narratives can proactively lead to anti-violence outcomes. For instance, an alternative narrative that promotes a faith-based form of citizen involvement and civic engagement among youth may be primarily intended to increase voter registration and participation rates among 18-year olds. However, these narratives can have a secondary effect of intellectually grounding individuals against violent narratives that say a person cannot be a loyal American citizen and an observant Muslim at the same time.

These different messaging activities are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Counter-Messaging Spectrum (Briggs and Feve 2013, 6)

What	Why	How	Who
Gov't 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
Counter-Narratives	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge through ideology, logic, fact or humor	Civil Society
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

In discussing countering extremist narratives, the "counter-narrative" is typically mentioned far more

frequently than other types of messaging activities. Sometimes the other types of messaging activities are misidentified or misunderstood as counter-narratives.

One recent example of a counter-narrative was produced by Ambassador Alberto Fernandez of the U.S. State Department, called "Think Again, Turn Away". Fernandez who wrote the episode himself said that it was inspired by the Terry Jones television series about the Crusades and is a, "riff on jihadist videos describing what a joy ride it is to join ISIL." (Fernandez 2014b) According to Fernandez the goals were three fold: 1) contest the space; 2) redirect the conversation, and; 3) unnerve the adversary (Fernandez 2014a). This video generated lots of controversy in the U.S. (Watts 2015). In our opinion, it seems to go against many common sense principles of what should be done to construct narrative-based strategies and led us to articulate those principles that they might guide persons or organizations working on countering and displacing violent narratives.

Field Principles for Countering Extremist Narratives

We formulated field principles to inform the practice of countering and displacing extremist narratives, which are summarized in the table below.

Table 2: Suggested Field Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives
Developing New Narrative Content
Utilize Emotional Communication
Complicate the Violent Narrative
Reframe Rather Than Confront
Avoid Fear-Based Messaging
Humanize the Subjects
Promote Positive Identities
Protect Communities' Rights and Liberties
Engage Beyond Violent Extremism
Delivering New Narratives
Know the Intended Audiences
Define the Desired Outcomes
Choose the Medium(s) of Communication
Choose Credible Messengers
Do No Harm
Diminish the 'Say-Do' Gap
Evaluate the Process and Impact

Generating New Narrative Content

Eight field principles were formulated to inform the development of new narrative content.

Utilize emotional communication. Use narratives with powerful emotional content in order to counter the highly emotional messaging of ISIS, as well as other violent extremist organizations. Narratives that are too much rooted in ideas risk losing the attention span of the audiences. Emotional messages that generate moral

outrage are regarded as the most effective in pulling individuals into a pathway toward terrorist violence (Bartlett, Birdwell, and King 2010, 98-99; Sageman 2004). Interestingly and in contrast, they also generate moral outrage among wider publics to delegitimize extremist ideology and violence. For example, when violent extremists in Egypt unintentionally killed a 12-year-old girl, Shayma, the Egyptian government widely publicized her death. The death of the young girl generated moral outrage among Egyptians and as a result public sympathy towards the terrorists quickly evaporated. In turn, this fostered to internal demoralization among militants that eventually led to defections and ultimately a cessation of violence (Brachman and McCants 2006).

Complicate the violent narrative. If violent narratives seek to provide certainty and simplicity out of chaos, then one response is to "disrupt" a black-and-white view and provide a more nuanced view. Such counter-narratives should, wherever possible, incorporate efforts to promote integrative complexity, or the ability of an individual to see the world and competing values in a nuanced, rather than a binary, manner. Prior research suggests that lowered integrative complexity substantially raises the probability of engaging in violence (Smith, et al. 2008). Programs promoting increased integrative complexity, such as "Being Muslim, Being British," appear to lead to positive anti-violence outcomes (Savage 2011; Savage, Liht, and Williams 2011; Liht and Savage 2013).

Reframe rather than confront. Create narratives that acknowledge the concerns that underwrite much of the sympathy toward extremist groups without validating the violent means that extremists advocate. This employs the same psychological mechanisms that violent extremists use to recruit people–a quest for significance and the need for closure—but uses them for different means. In this way the narrative redirects energies built up by unaddressed grievances, rather than getting involved in a direct ideological confrontation. For instance, a YouTube video by an anti-extremist activist called "Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria" takes the concerns of its potential audience very seriously. To some extent, the video validates those concerns and grievances, while admonishing those who may seek to solve those grievances using violent means (Abdullah X 2014).

Avoid fear based messaging. Narratives should avoid frightening people into action, given the evidence that such strategies have been ineffective and counterproductive in various fields, including public health (Prevention First 2008; Peters, Ruiter, and Kok 2013) and criminal justice (Petrosino, Petrosino, and Buehler 2004). This does not completely undermine the value of strong emotional appeals or what some call shock value. For example, government agencies, such as the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), have employed a modest use of shock value to raise awareness about violent extremist recruitment targeted toward U.S. Muslim communities.

Humanize the subjects. Highlighting the human costs of terrorism can be a powerful reality check to the glossy and sanitized propaganda produced by violent extremists. For instance, the killing of innocent Muslim civilians and harsh realities of constantly being on the run are two of the most powerful reasons why violent *extremists* decided to "dropout" of their violent lifestyle (Jacobson 2010). Highlighting these aspects of terrorist activities can be a powerful counter-narrative. At the same, while invoking moral outrage at the terrorists, it is important to not necessarily demonize individuals who may be sympathetic to the grievances they articulate. Such efforts can intensify the risk of pushing at-risk individuals further along a pathway toward violent action (Bartlett, Birdwell, and King 2010). Research on disengagement and exiting from terrorism suggests that demonstrating respect and empathy toward target audiences is much more likely to elicit favorable outcomes (Bhulai, Fink, Ziegler 2014; Holmer 2014).

Promote positive identities. Alternative narratives seek to supplant the "solutions" that extremist narratives offer to Muslim communities' problems. Moreover, they often appeal to the same type of hero lionizing and psychological levers that AQ and ISIS use in their messaging such as by drawing on traditional Islamic religious concepts and local cultural hero mythologies. In the Middle East, Naif Al-Mutawa created the comic series, "The 99", a group of Muslim superheroes whose group name is taken from the "99 attributes" of God mentioned in the Qur'an (Merica 2011; Truitt 2011; The99Kids.com n.d.). In the United States, Marvel Comic's new "Ms. Marvel" character is a 16-year old Pakistani-American teenager named Kamala Khan who is the creation of G. Willow Wilson, a Muslim convert and comic writer (Hudson 2014).

Protect communities' rights and liberties. Narratives should aim to strengthen the defense of civil rights and civil liberties of communities. For example they can reframe or subsume the issue from one that is about "countering violent extremism" to "preventing targeted violence" (we discuss this more in the next section). Moving away from frames of "terrorism" and "violent extremism"—which often trigger a false association with Islam—reduces security-driven anxieties of the general population toward Muslims that in term fuels anti-Muslim animus (Das et al., 2009; Khan and Ecklund 2012; Sides and Gross 2013). This can also have the benefit of weakening violent narratives that claim government efforts to counter violent extremism are part of a so-called "War Against Islam" (al-Awlaqi 2008a; al-Awlaqi 2008a; Khan 2011, 3, 9)

Engage beyond violent extremism. Narratives should engage other types of violent extremism, specifically seeking to recruit Muslims into violent action. Indeed, a major criticism has been that, "violent extremism is a phenomenon that is not unique to American Muslim communities, [but] the government's CVE program remains focused solely on American Muslim communities" (Council on American Islamic Relations-California 2014). One alternative example is National Outreach for Hate Awareness and Threat Education (NO HATE) USA, a student-led violent prevention awareness campaign. NO HATE USA's philosophy is to fold CVE into a broader focus of preventing *targeted violence* (2015). This approach appears to have at least two benefits. First, it avoids being limited by geographic trends of violent extremism in the United States, which tend to cluster in 10 counties (LaFree and Bersani 2012). By contrast, acts of targeted violence, such as mass shooters, appear to occur throughout the United States without any particular geographic clustering (Blair and Schweit 2013). In addition, framing the issue as targeted violence serves to broaden public safety relationships with U.S. Muslim communities beyond a narrow focus on counter-terrorism intelligence gathering. Instead it is based on broader public safety concerns that affect all Americans. Rather than being seen as singled out, U.S. Muslims, in partnership with other communities have a narrative around which they can be comfortably united with their fellow citizens to promote the public good by actively working to enhance public safety.

Delivering New Narratives

Another seven field principles were identified to inform the delivery of new narratives.

Know the intended audiences. Choosing a specific group or groups of persons who you want to reach and learn all you can about them. For example, this could be an entire diaspora community, or late adolescents and young adults in that community, or their parents or teachers. It could also be the extremists themselves. Being clear about which one is of crucial importance to successful delivery and reception.

Define the desired outcomes. Clarify what kind of changes you want to impact. This could include changing knowledge, attitudes, and/or behaviors. For example, they may have an aim of specifically undermining the credibility of violent extremist leaders or organizations, or seeking to empower peers and parents to challenge

young persons who may want to become foreign fighters.

Choose the medium(s) of communication. Select the most appropriate medium for reaching your intended audience. For instance, adolescent and young adult audiences could be potentially be best reached via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Whereas a public service announcement aired on a television or radio channel may be better for reaching a whole community.

Choose credible messengers. Narratives should be spoken by trusted and legitimate sources. In the U.S., due to legal and strategic considerations this means that the primary messengers of alternative and counter-narratives are, and should be, private American Muslim individuals and non-governmental civil society actors (Rascoff 2012). In the United States, the main legal issue related to counter-messaging efforts has to do with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits government endorsement of any religious tradition over another in public life. This includes prohibiting the use of taxpayer funds to promote certain interpretations of any religion that advocate non-violence over religious iinterpretations that do not. In strategic terms, U.S. government security agencies lack trust and credibility among American Muslim communities, due to negative perceptions related to domestic surveillance policies. (Ibid.) Choosing credible voices may include former extremists and militants because they may have ongoing social relationships with individuals who remain involved in hateful and violent movements (Braddock and Horgan 2015). Beyond that, other contextual considerations should be weighed. Victims of attacks or former violent extremists may be some of the most effective messengers because they speak with the unique moral authority of the survivor or witness (Jacobson 2010).

Do no harm. Narratives that have the potential to make a difference can also do harm. For example, humor and ridicule in anti-extremism messaging can be a double-edged sword. One study on satire of terrorist acts noted, "Just as an off color joke can offend your co-workers or sour a personal relationship, humor has the potential to be divisive and motivating in ways that are detrimental to larger policy goals" (Goodall et al. 2012). Knowing the target of the ridicule, and the intent of the ridicule is important. If the target is a particular terrorist leader, with the intent of making him/her look bad and have potential recruits no longer see him/her as glamorous, then this increases the probability of success. However if the direct target of ridicule is potential recruits, psycho-social literature would suggest that this will be counter-productive, eliciting a defiance response, instead of compliance (Infante et al. 1992; Infante and Wrigley 1986; Moscovici and Zavalloni 1969; Semic and Canary 1997). This is likely due to ridicule being perceived as an insult by making fun of a person's desire to contribute to a good cause (such as "helping the people of Syria"), albeit in a misguidedly violent way. By contrast, online counter-narrative content such as Abdullah X's "Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria" uses rhetoric and a communication tone that takes the concerns of its potential audience very seriously (Abdullah X 2014).

Diminish the gap between government policies and rhetoric. Narratives should not be disconnected from realities or available actions for the intended audiences. For example, narratives that promote greater investment in the local community should be accompanied by public-private partnerships that actually create opportunities for that kind of involvement (Ahmed and Ezzedine 2009).

Evaluate the process and impact. Given the lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of counter-narratives, it is vitally important to apply program evaluation methods that evaluate both what impact a message has and how and why it is having that kind of impact. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches to evaluation should be utilized, including polls, focus groups, sentiment tracking, (McCants and Watts 2012) and social media influence metrics (Berger and Strathearn 2013).

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

Drawing upon a growing body of theory, empirical evidence, and practical experience from across multiple disciplines, we suggested field principles to guide both developing the content of new narratives and delivering new narratives. These principles are not a panacea and are likely to evolve in response to new threats, contexts, and lessons learned. But for the time being, these principles can assist policymakers and practitioners in developing and delivering narratives to counter and displace extremist narratives. Federal, state, and local government officials can let these guidelines inform their recommended best practices, which they encourage community-based practitioners to follow.

Presently, there is near total lack of empirical research on efforts to counter and displace extremist narratives. New efforts that are developed to counter and displace extremist narratives should have a monitoring and evaluation component. Additional new research is needed to support these efforts, especially in two areas.

One research priority area is to develop research that informs community-based practitioners about the narratives used by extremists to recruit individuals into violent action. Muslim community members have expressed concerns about engaging individuals online or in person who are supportive of violent extremists because they fear becoming the subject of a law enforcement investigation. Mainstream Muslims who might otherwise be interested in countering extremist recruitment find themselves at a disadvantage stemming from a lack of knowledge about messaging activities and narratives because they are hesitant to immerse themselves in the environments where such recruitment takes place (Beutel 2013). (A corollary policy implication of this finding is to examine whether or not surveillance practices and the legal standards regulating them are counterproductive, and if so, to reform them.) (Ibid.). One example of addressing this need is an open-source online library of narratives, counter-narratives, and alternative narratives being developed by the University of Maryland's START center (Braniff, 2015). In addition to providing information on extremist narratives and mainstream Muslim counter- and alternative narratives, being housed at a university research center, the library also provides a more comfortable (academic) venue, where community members can learn about this issue.

A second research priority area is to empirically test the process and impact of countering and displacing extremist narratives. Narrative approaches could be applied to analyze the content of narratives developed as well as the response of receivers to those narratives. Community-based participatory research approaches could investigate the community processes involved in the development and delivery of potentially effective narratives. Survey research approaches could be used to measure the impact of the narratives on the target population, for example assessing changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

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