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Spotlight

Storytelling Against Extremism: How Insights From Narrative Persuasion Research Can Improve Digital P/CVE Narrative Campaigns

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Over the last 20 years, extremism and political violence have increasingly been understood and framed as "narrative phenomena." [1] The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) concludes that "exposure to extremist narratives is undeniably critical to the process of radicalization." [2] Extremists are storytellers. They tell powerful tales of good versus evil and light versus darkness, heroic actions to protect the weak, and of utopian visions for a 'better' world. [3] They provide a 'competitive system of meaning' particularly appealing to individuals searching for belonging, purpose, meaning, and a vision for their lives. [4] If extremism and radicalization are narrative phenomena, it is only logical to assume that narratives are also crucial for efforts in preventing and/or countering (violent) extremism (P/CVE). To curb the appeal of extremist narratives and mitigate the inspirational impact of these stories, we need to tell equally compelling stories.

This approach is referred to as counter- and alternative narratives (CANs) against extremism. Counter-narratives are "attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly." [5] Alternative narratives "undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'" [6] and put "forward a positive story about social values, such as tolerance, openness, freedom and democra-

cy." [7] Most of these campaigns are aimed at audiences in pre-radicalization phases and focus on primary prevention. [8] CANs have been created and implemented since the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005 and are now an integral part of the P/CVE repertoire in several European countries. Over the last years, several handbooks and guidelines have been published to support practitioners seeking to develop CANs, detailing frameworks for the creation and implementation of successful narrative campaigns against extremism. [9]

Given the popularity of the CAN approach, one would assume that it is a well-established and well-supported 'tool' in the counter-extremism toolbox. However, this is not the case at all. Instead, the field is ripe with criticism of CAN campaigns, including complaints that the approach lacks a "fully articulated theory" and that a persistent and "sizeable knowledge gap" hampers the effective implementation of narrative campaigns against extremism. [10] Several authors lament that CANs lack a solid proof of concept and proof of effectiveness, i.e. that we do not actually know that narratives are effective tools of persuasion and that it is unclear whether CAN campaigns actually have the desired effects. [11] Evaluations of CAN campaigns have shown mixed results and often demonstrate only a marginal impact or no effects at all. [12] Some researchers even go as far as arguing that there is "no

evidence to suggest that current or past counter-narrative strategies have been effective." [13] Clearly, despite its popularity, the CAN approach is highly contested and the confusion surrounding the potential lack of effectiveness is a "key shortcoming" of narrative campaigns against extremism. [14]

A review of the academic literature and the handbooks on CAN campaigns reveals why this might be the case. Inexplicably, work on narrative campaigns against extremism seldomly engages with narrative persuasion research. References to concepts, approaches, and empirical research from the fields of storytelling, entertainment-education, and narrative persuasion are notably absent from the discourse on CAN campaigns. The CAN approach in its current form is not rooted in narrative persuasion research and does not draw on well-established frameworks of narrative persuasion campaigns in other contexts. This is not just surprising, it is highly problematic. **How can one hope to develop persuasive narrative campaigns against extremism if such campaigns are not created in accordance with the principles of narrative persuasion?** It is entirely implausible to build a narrative approach against extremism without rooting this approach in *existing narrative persuasion* research and practice.

Worse still, most CAN campaigns are not actually narratives. They do not tell stories but present arguments with a few story elements sprinkled throughout the campaign. How then do we expect CAN campaigns to be successful in eliciting narrative persuasion effects? It is hardly surprising that current evaluations have shown very limited effects: If the campaign does not put existing knowledge on narrative persuasion into practice, it cannot elicit the desired narrative persuasion effects. This

is a crucial gap in the current CAN approach and must be addressed immediately. "If we are to collectively write a bestseller about CVE, we must employ the art and science of narrative" [15] and "if counter-narrative is to rise to the challenge, it means using the aesthetic and affective resources of storytelling." [16]

Existing research on narrative persuasion provides a solid basis of knowledge on how narratives can persuade audiences, an established theoretical framework on how narrative persuasion works, a list of factors influencing narrative persuasion processes, and hundreds of case studies detailing entertainment-education campaigns implemented in various contexts, including in highly relevant fields such as conflict resolution. We have clear evidence of the "power of a good story" [17], but we are currently not utilizing this knowledge in the P/CVE context. Why are we not making use of the knowledge on how to create persuasive narratives? There is no reason not to. In fact, it severely hampers P/CVE efforts if we do not integrate this existing knowledge base into the CAN approach and, instead, (unsuccessfully) try to reinvent the wheel.

In my PhD research project, I set out to transfer and integrate narrative persuasion research into the CAN approach with the goal of improving narrative campaigns against extremism. This spotlight is based on my dissertation and summarizes key findings to demonstrate why it is absolutely necessary for P/CVE actors to engage with and use existing insights on narrative persuasion and storytelling to improve the quality of digital CAN campaigns and benefit from established frameworks for narrative persuasion. I show that the criticisms of the CAN approach can be addressed by integrating narrative persuasion

research into CAN theory and practice and that CAN campaigns can be significantly improved by grounding them in the principles of narrative persuasion and entertainment-education. Firstly, I briefly outline key mechanisms of narrative persuasion. Secondly, I dive deeper into several factors that can facilitate or hamper narrative persuasion effects. Thirdly, I discuss key takeaways for P/CVE narrative campaigns. Fourthly, I consider key challenges and limiting assumptions I discovered during semi-structured interviews with CAN experts. Lastly, I provide a conclusion and discuss ways forward for CAN campaigns.

What is a narrative and why are narratives persuasive?

There is no agreed-upon definition of the term narrative. I follow Cobley, who states: "Put very simply, 'Story' consists of all the events which are to be depicted. 'Plot' is the chain of causation which dictates that these events are somehow linked (...). 'Narrative' is the showing or telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place." [18] Narrative therefore refers to *'story as told'*, i.e. not just the content of the story but also its specific presentation. The same story can be the basis for different narratives, because it can be told in various ways and through various media such as text, video, or video game. Narrative persuasion is the "act of storytelling so as to convince others to join one's ideas and convictions" [19] and "any influence on beliefs, attitudes, actions brought about by a narrative message through processes associated with narrative comprehension or engagement." [20]

Decades of research demonstrate the power of narrative persuasion. It is evident that narratives hold the power to shape and change beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, values, norms, and even behaviors. [21] This includes both narratives that have been developed for entertainment purposes such as soap operas or Hollywood movies as well as narratives created with an explicit persuasive intent, for instance in the field of education, health communication, development, social change, and conflict resolution. The latter are often referred to as entertainment-education campaigns and have been used widely and successfully in various contexts to make a positive impact on audiences' attitudes and behaviors. [22]

Narratives affect audiences at the neurological level. Consider the following sentence: *The snow was scrunching under his feet as he ran breathlessly through the dark forest.* While reading this sentence, your brain just activated areas responsible for motor skills (running) and visual perception (seeing in the dark), i.e. the same areas that would be activated as if you were actually running through a dark forest. [23] We do not simply sympathize with protagonists, we feel with them, because the vicarious experiences gained through a story cause similar neurological reactions as lived experience. [24] The stories we engage with literally shape our brain. This is because learning from the experience of others was crucial to our survival and our brain evolved as "a story processor, not a logic processor." [25] Since the beginnings of language evolution, stories are the default mode of human communication: They are easy to comprehend, engaging, and persuasive. [26]

Two key mechanisms support narrative persuasion: Narratives elicit less reactance than other forms of communication and prompt

less counter-arguing in audiences. [27] **Reactance** refers to a negative psychological reaction in response to persuasion attempts. Generally speaking, we do not like to be subjected to persuasion attempts, because it threatens our feeling of autonomy and independent decision-making. When we feel pressured to adopt a certain view or attitude, our opposition strengthens and we try to actively resist persuasion efforts. Narratives elicit less reactance than other forms of communication. This is because the persuasive intent is not made explicit. Audiences may feel like it is 'just a story' and generally do not expect to be persuaded by narratives. They may take a less critical approach to scrutinizing narratives than they take towards other forms of communication, particularly argument-based communication, and are more likely to simply go along with a story, because it is entertaining and/or emotionally engaging. For the same reasons, audiences are also more likely to accept even dissonant information when it is presented in a story format. [28] "When we're absorbed in a story, we relax our intellectual defenses" for the sake of enjoyment and emotional involvement. [29] Crucially, this means that even when narratives are created with a persuasive intent, this intent should not be made explicit. The moment audiences are made aware of the persuasion attempt, reactance increases and a key mechanism of narrative persuasion is lost.

Narratives also elicit less **counter-arguing** than other forms of communication, especially argument-based messages. It is more difficult to argue against content depicted in narrative form, because potentially dissonant claims or beliefs are shown in an implicit rather than explicit manner. Arguments are not made directly, but rather conveyed in a subtle manner through the plot or the characters' actions. This not only lessens the likelihood that audiences immediately react to dissonant content but also makes it challenging to formulate counter-arguments on the spot. Hence, a narrative format enables us to "mix the powder (the medicine) of a message with the sugar jam of storytelling. People bolt down the sweet jam of storytelling and don't even notice the undertaste of the powder (whatever message the writer is communicating)", because the arguments are made implicitly rather than explicitly. [30] In addition, counter-arguing is hampered by the audience's immersion into the storyworld. When we are 'in' a story, i.e. our cognitive and emotional attention is focused on a story, we have less cognitive resources available to form counter-arguments. We would also have to mentally 'step out' of the story to formulate such counter-arguments, which is not only difficult but often undesirable, because it breaks the magic of being immersed in a narrative and decreases enjoyment and feelings of entertainment. This means audiences may also be less motivated to engage in counter-arguing when they are engaged in a story. [31]

What makes narratives more or less persuasive?

Unfortunately, there is no simple blueprint for creating persuasive narrative campaigns. Good storytelling is an art, not merely a science. Nevertheless, narrative persuasion research has uncovered several factors that can support or hinder narrative persuasion and influence the likelihood that a narrative elicits the desired persuasive effects. The most important factors can be grouped under three main categories: Message, messenger, and audience.

Message

Unsurprisingly, how a narrative is told and how the main messages are presented, are crucial for narrative persuasion effects. Several message-related factors can influence narrative reception and persuasion processes, including narrativity, the quality of the storytelling, the plot, the emotional flow, the degree of realism, the processing fluency, and the audience's transportation into a narrative.

What sets narratives apart from other forms of communication is their **narrativity**. Narrativity is a spectrum and describes how 'story-like' a piece of communication is. [32] Generally speaking, the higher the narrativity, the more audiences feel immersed into the narrative, the better they remember the content of the story, and the more likely it is that this content is evaluated positively, which makes narrativity beneficial for narrative persuasion. [33] Narrative campaigns should therefore be actual *narratives*. They should be truly 'story-like' and not argument-based messages dressed up with a few story elements.

Expectantly, the **quality of the storytelling** can also support narrative persuasion. In fact, high-quality storytelling and creating good, well-told narratives is a prerequisite for narrative persuasion effects to occur. Telling good stories is not optional, it is not simply 'nice to have' or an 'add-on' for a persuasive message, it is the *very foundation and necessary precondition* of narrative persuasion. Stories that are not well-told will not elicit persuasive effects. Therefore, it is absolutely crucial that P/CVE actors employ high-quality storytelling and that CANs are, first and foremost, good stories. Narrative campaigns should be developed as "candy with vitamins" and not "chocolate covered broccoli." [34] They should be enjoyable in their own right and not 'taste' like an educational program in disguise. "Entertainment-education is intended to stand on its own in terms of narrative quality. Successful entertainment-education efforts attract audiences, not because of their educational or persuasive content, but because they are compelling drama." [35] All else being equal, the better the narrative quality, the higher the persuasive effects. Therefore, CANs must be well-told stories to stand a chance to be effective.

While each story is unique, they often have a discernable structure and follow a certain logic or chain of events referred to as **plot**. Being able to follow a plot with relative ease is important for both narrative reception and comprehension. This may seem banal, because we are so used to stories that we know how a story evolves and that it follows

a basic structure, but plots are a foundational element of narrative development. While the content of plots may be unique to each story, the underlying structures or 'plot shapes' often recur and can be used as guideposts for the creation of new narratives. These recurring shapes are sometimes referred to as 'basic plots' or 'archetypes.' In a recent study, a team of researchers analyzed over 1000 stories and found six basic plots that shape most stories. [36] Other researchers found seven or even twenty basic plots. [37] Ultimately, it does not matter how many there are. The key takeaway for practitioners is that there are basic, recurring structures to draw upon when creating new narrative campaigns. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel; P/CVE actors can utilize well-known, existing narrative arcs to structure their CANs. Making use of such popular plots may even yield benefits for narrative persuasion. Familiar plot structures are part of a 'story bank' within each of us: Plots we've encountered time and time again throughout our lives are more easily processed than unfamiliar narratives, which may increase narrative enjoyment and resonance. [38] These plots can be filled with new content to keep audiences interested while benefiting from the familiarity that a well-known plot offers – think, for instance, 'boy meets girl' and all the variations that are developed based on this basic theme. P/CVE actors too could draw on such basic plots to support the creation of appealing CANs.

Another element worth discussing is **emotional flow**. The emotional flow refers to the ups and downs audiences experience when consuming a narrative. An emotional flow makes narratives more interesting and enjoyable, increases the audience's attention, influences how immersed and engaged audiences are, and can support narrative per-

suasion effects. [39] While it seems clear that narratives should not be emotionally 'flat', research conducted so far is inconclusive as to which types of emotional flows are particularly persuasive – possibly because the effect of different emotional flows may depend on an interplay between narrative content, narrative presentation, and audience preferences. Therefore, emotional flow is a "promising, if currently under-explored vehicle for increasing effectiveness" of narratives. [40] Nevertheless, P/CVE actors should consider the emotional flow of the stories they tell and consciously create narratives that offer audiences an ebb and flow rather than a 'flat' experience.

Furthermore, the degree of **realism** may influence persuasion effects. All stories must be plausible within their own frame of reference for narrative persuasion effects to occur. However, it is not necessary for stories to mirror reality to be persuasive. When audiences consume narrative, they engage in 'willful suspension of disbelief', i.e. they process the story *as if it were real despite knowing that it is not*, regardless of whether the story is set in a fictional world or in the real world. [41] We can distinguish between external and internal realism of a narrative. [42] *External* realism is degree of consistency between narrative and the real world, i.e. in how far the story mirrors real world setting, whereas *internal* realism describes the internal coherence and logic of the storyworld. [43] For instance, *Lord of the Rings* is low in external realism, whereas *James Bond* has a high degree of external realism.

Crucially, *narratives* do not need to be high in external realism to be persuasive. Neither a high degree of fictionality (e.g. setting the story in a magical world or an alien planet and/or having non-human characters) nor explicitly

labeling narratives as fictional, negatively influences narrative reception and persuasion. [44] It does not matter in how far a narrative corresponds to lived reality. Rather, it is decisive that narratives have a high degree of internal realism, i.e. are perceived as consistent and *plausible within their own frame of reference.* [45] A high degree of perceived internal realism supports immersion into a story, emotional involvement, identification with the characters, and increases overall narrative persuasion effects. [46] But if audiences are faced with inconsistencies and perceived internal realism decreases, narrative persuasion is hampered. For instance, if a dragon appears in *Lord of the Rings*, it is consistent with the logic of the storyworld and is not perceived as weird or incoherent by audiences and, therefore, does not threaten narrative persuasion. The appearance of a dragon in *James Bond*, however, violates the internal coherence of the narrative and would decrease narrative enjoyment and persuasion.

In addition, regardless of the setting, narratives must be perceived as relatable and relevant by audiences. "A story may take place on Mars, and the characters may even be Martians, but they must interact in a way that matches our understanding of social interaction, or be motivated to achieve goals that correspond with motives and goals that one might encounter in one's *real world*." [47] Narratives do not need to be high in external realism and correspond to reality to be persuasive. Audiences are capable of transferring messages, lessons, and themes from a fictional setting low in external realism to their lived reality with relative ease. But in order to do so, narratives must be coherent and possess a high degree of internal realism to not break immersion into the storyworld by introducing dissonant elements. They must also be

socially, emotionally, and psychologically relatable, no matter where they are set or who the characters are.

To make it unmistakably clear: This means that narrative campaigns can be fictional and may be low in external realism, e.g. set on an alien planet and starring non-human characters, *without compromising their persuasive appeal*. Currently, there are very few CAN campaigns that use fictional elements and, to my knowledge, none are low in external realism. This indicates that P/CVE actors are currently not utilizing the full range of possible (types of) narratives and that they are freer than previously thought in developing different kinds of CAN campaigns and making use of fictional stories. Current research efforts clearly demonstrate that fictional narratives, including those low in external realism, can be persuasive and can influence real-life attitudes, perceptions, and values. Therefore, future CAN campaigns should consider a variety of narrative types and P/CVE actors should consciously include fictional campaigns low in external realism in their repertoire.

Another message-related element to consider is **processing fluency**. Processing fluency is "the subjective experience of ease with which people process information." [48] The easier it is for audiences to process a narrative, the more immersed they feel, the higher their engagement with the narrative content, and the higher the likelihood that they are persuaded. On the flipside, if processing is perceived as difficult, arduous, or cognitively challenging, narrative enjoyment, immersion, and persuasion can be hampered. [49] All else being equal, stories with a higher degree of processing fluency elicit less reactance and counter-arguing. [50] To achieve processing fluency, narratives should be "visually clear

(perceptually fluent), phonetically simple (linguistically fluent) and semantically primed (conceptually fluent)." [51] This means narratives should have clear image compositions, be aesthetically pleasing, ideally have a high production value, should be coherent and told in such a way that audiences can easily follow, and should employ language audiences are familiar with.

Lastly, **transportation** is a crucial element of narrative persuasion. Transportation describes the degree of immersion into a story and "the degree to which the message recipients is cognitively and affectively invested in a narrative." [52] Transportation is a spectrum and individuals can be more or less transported into a story. When audiences are transported, they experience the story as if they were 'in' it and "all mental systems and capacities become focused on the events occurring in the narrative." [53] Transportation is one of the key mechanisms of narrative persua-

sion. The higher the degree of transportation, the more profound the narrative persuasion effects, while everything that hampers transportation negatively impacts persuasive effects. "When we're transported, our beliefs, attitudes, and intentions are vulnerable to being altered, in accordance with the mores of the story"; we are "especially susceptible to attitude change." [54] Transportation reduces reactance and counter-arguing, and makes it more likely that audiences adopt story-congruent beliefs and attitudes. All factors detailed above can contribute to transportation: It is more likely to occur when the narrative is well told (i.e. a high degree of narrative quality), when the narrative is easily processed, when it is high in internal realism, and when audiences perceive the narrative as relevant and emotionally engaging. [55] Because transportation is key to narrative persuasion, P/CVE actors should develop CANs that elicit a high degree of transportation and draw audiences into the story.

Messenger

In contrast to the literature on CAN campaigns, *in* narrative persuasion research the concept of messenger mostly refers to the characters in the narrative rather than individuals organizations involved in designing, implementing, or funding the narrative. There are three important messenger-related factors that influence narrative persuasion processes: The point of view, identification, and parasocial interactions and relationships.

Narratives can be told from different **points of view**. Most popular are either first-person narrators telling the story from their personal perspective or third-person narrators tell-

ing the story from an observer's perspective. While some studies found mixed results, the evidence accumulated so far largely suggests that narratives told from a first-person perspective tend to be perceived as more persuasive than those told in third-person. These narratives also tend to elicit the highest degree of identification with the protagonist, which in turn supports narrative persuasion effects. [56]

Together with transportation, **identification** is the most important mechanism of narrative persuasion. Identification describes the process of putting oneself in the shoes of

a character and temporarily adopting their perspective, goals, and emotions. [57] This includes "emotional empathy (the ability to feel what the characters feel [...]), cognitive empathy (adopting the point of view or putting oneself in the place of the characters), sharing or internalizing the character's goal, and having the sensation of becoming the character (or a temporary loss of self-awareness and imagining the story as if one were one of the characters." [58] Certain attributes of characters may increase the likelihood that audiences identify with them, including

| homophily (*perceived* [but not necessarily objective] similarity in appearance, gender, age, nationality, interests, experiences etc between audience and characters)
| psychological proximity (sharing a character's perceptions, beliefs, opinions or thinking styles)
| likeability (the character is displaying appealing character traits)
| social attractiveness (the character is well-liked, displaying accepted and desirable social traits, and could be part of the viewer's friend group or social circle) [59]

Crucially, contrary to popular belief, homophily is not the only or the dominant factor for identification. Audiences may identify with characters that are highly dissimilar to themselves, including characters from an out-group and different social background but also non-human characters such as animals, fantastical creatures, or robots. [60] For instance, if identification processes were largely based on homophily, many non-human characters in Disney and Pixar movies would be extremely difficult to relate to. The opposite is the case, because identification processes

are more complex than merely saying "this character looks like me, therefore I relate to him/her." On the flipside, homophily in and of itself is not a guarantee that identification processes occur: Even if a villain looks like us, we are usually not willing to identify with him or her due to the undesirable personality traits the character displays. Hence, homophily is one of several factors that can influence identification processes, but it is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor and, consequently, it is not enough to simply select a messenger with a high degree of similarity to reach target audiences effectively.

Research consistently demonstrates that identification is crucial and increases the likelihood that narrative persuasion effects occur. [61] It facilitates the development of story-congruent attitudes and beliefs and increases the likelihood that audiences adopt the character's views even on controversial political and social issues. A high degree of identification also reduces reactance and counter-arguing and increases the emotional appeal of the narrative. Ultimately, "the extent of the recipient's sympathetic response to the character's own development and experiences may lead to at least temporary acceptance of values and beliefs that represent a shift from the individual's existing beliefs." [62] It is therefore important for CANs to display messengers audiences can relate to and identify with, but it is not always necessary or sufficient to select a messenger that is very similar to the target audience.

In addition to identification, audiences may also experience **parasocial interactions** (PSI) or form **parasocial relationships** (PSR) with characters. [63] PSI refers to the illusion of interaction between viewers and media personas. Over time, through continuous PSIs – for

instance when watching a TV series regularly – audiences may form deep connections and feelings of intimacy with the people on screen, which is referred to as the development of PSRs. Although audiences are aware of the distinction between actor and the (fictional) character, they form PSI/Rs with the media persona rather than the real persona, i.e. the character and *not the actor*. PSI/Rs can also be formed with non-human and fictional characters. Similar to identification processes, the development of PSI/Rs with characters is more likely when the character is perceived as similar, likable, socially attractive, trusted, competent, and displaying desirable personality traits or values. [64] PSI/Rs may develop automatically, but can also be facilitated by having characters explicitly address the audience as they would in real conversations and looking directly at the camera. The development of PSI/Rs may support narrative persuasion processes, because it reduces reactance and counter-arguing, enhances engagement with the narrative, and improves trust in the messenger. [65]

Audience

Even well-told narratives with relatable messengers are not equally appealing to all audiences. Narrative reception and narrative persuasion effects are not homogenous. Rather, they are influenced by a multitude of individual factors. These may include situational factors such as the consumption situation, distractions, or comments made by others regarding the narrative (e.g. via comment sections under YouTube videos). Situational factors are difficult to control when creating and implementing narrative campaigns, but there are other, more stable audience-related factors such as personality traits that can guide the development of tailored narrative campaigns. These include: vested interest, sensation-seeking, the Need for Affect/Need for Cognition, and retrospective reflection.

When audiences have a **vested interest** in the story, they tend to perceive the narrative as more persuasive. The higher the perceived personal relevance of a narrative, the more motivated audiences are to follow the story carefully, the higher the degree of involvement and identification with the characters, and the more likely they are to reflect how the story relates to their own lives. [66] Importantly, even fictional narratives low in external realism can elicit vested interest, because audiences are capable of relating and transferring the (abstract) themes depicted in the narrative to their own lives. It is the *social truth*, not the factual truth, that is decisive in this respect. [67] Therefore, as mentioned above, a narrative does not need to mirror reality. The "story may take place on Mars and the characters may even be Martians" as long as the social and emotional themes are perceived as relevant, relatable, and transferable to the real world. [68]

Generally speaking, audiences prefer narratives that match their personality traits. A well-known personality trait influencing narrative reception and persuasion processes is **sensation-seeking**. Audiences scoring low in sensation-seeking favor narratives with a low Message Sensation Value (MSV), whereas audiences scoring high in sensation-seeking

prefer narratives with a high MSV. [69] The Message Sensation value describes "degree to which formal and content audiovisual features of a televised message elicit sensory, affective, and arousal responses" and refers to the style of narrative presentation. [70] For example, fast cuts, prominent sound effects, and upbeat music all contribute to a higher MSV. When a narrative matches the audience preferences and personality traits, it decreases reactance, facilitates narrative engagement and enjoyment, makes it more likely that viewers pay close attention to the narrative, and supports narrative persuasion effects.

Other important personality traits influencing narrative persuasion effects are the **Need for Affect** (NFA) and the **Need for Cognition** (NFC). The NFA describes the "general motivation of people to approach or avoid situations and activities that are emotion inducing for themselves and others", including the desire to experience and understand emotions of fictional and non-fictional characters in narratives. [71] Individuals scoring high on the NFA scale purposefully seek out emotional content and may be more easily immersed in emotional narratives. They are also more likely to use affective information to form attitudes and report a higher degree of persuasion when exposed to affect-based messages. Similar to sensation-seeking, audiences prefer the narrative to match their personality trait and individuals with a high NFA may not only favor but be more persuaded by highly emotional narratives. [72] The Need for Cognition describes the "motivation to engage in and enjoy effortful cognitive activities." [73]

Individuals scoring high in NFC are less likely to take affect-based information into account when forming judgments and are more receptive to complex stories requiring cognitive effort to understand. They not only enjoy these narratives more, but experience more transportation into the narrative and more profound persuasive effects. [74] Ideally, narratives should be tailored to the audience's preference and match an individual's personality traits to increase the likelihood that the narrative has a persuasive impact.

In addition, narrative persuasion is more likely to occur when audiences engage in **retrospective reflection**. Retrospective reflection describes the "recall of self or other-relevant memories evoked by transportation into a story, which validade and extend story-implied beliefs into the readers world", i.e. the extent to which individuals reflect upon characters and events depicted and reflect upon the relevance of the narrative for their own lives. [75] Retrospective reflection is associated with stronger and longer persuasion effects and a higher likelihood that audiences display story-congruent attitudes and behaviors. The more audiences engage in retrospective reflection, the higher the likelihood that persuasion effects occur and carry over to the real world. [76] Retrospective reflection is often an automatic process that audiences engage in on their own, particularly when audiences are deeply immersed and invested in a story. [77] However, it can also be facilitated by the storyteller, e.g. by explicitly prompting audiences to reflect on (certain aspects of) the story.

| What does this mean for P/CVE narrative campaigns?

Decades of narrative persuasion research and hundreds of case studies from around the world clearly demonstrate the persuasive potential of narrative campaigns. Narratives influence perceptions, attitudes, values, and behaviors. They can shape views on controversial social issues, they can reduce stereotypes and stigmatization, encourage perspective-taking, decrease perceived social distance, support shifts towards positive social norms, and influence political opinion. Hundreds of entertainment-education campaigns have been successfully implemented in various contexts, providing practical insights and guidance on successful narrative persuasion in diverse circumstances. [78]

But those insights and experiences are rarely mentioned, much less built upon in the P/CVE context. Most guidelines on CANs are not grounded in narrative persuasion research and do not benefit from decades of studies on narrative persuasion. The discussion above indicates that this is a missed opportunity and that utilizing existing knowledge on narrative persuasion would be tremendously beneficial for CAN campaigns. In fact, as I show in my dissertation, integrating and learning from research on narrative persuasion and entertainment-education campaigns implemented in other contexts can decisively improve both theory and practice of P/CVE narrative campaigns against extremism.

Theoretical foundation

It is lamented that CAN campaigns lack a "fully articulated theory." [79] As shown above, narrative campaigns already have a well-established theoretical basis. Therefore, narrative persuasion research can supply the much needed theoretical foundation for CANs in the P/CVE context. This body of research also addresses many of the criticisms the CAN approach faces: The alleged lack of a sound proof of concept, the alleged lack of a proof of effectiveness, the absence of an overarching theory of change, the uncertainties surrounding the mechanisms by which CANs are supposed to achieve the desired effect, and ambiguity as to what constitutes a 'good' narrative campaign.

The narrative persuasion literature helps address all of these issues: As detailed above, narrative persuasion research demonstrates that narratives are indeed persuasive (proof of concept). It also shows why narratives are persuasive and details the mechanisms by which change in attitudes, perceptions, and opinions occurs (theory of change). In addition, it provides hundreds of case studies of narrative and entertainment-education campaigns implemented in other contexts and proves that narratives do not only elicit impact in 'clean' laboratory settings but can have the desired persuasion effects in 'messy', real-world conditions (proof of effectiveness). More than that, existing case studies demon-

strate that narratives can elicit persuasive effects in areas that are *immediately* relevant to the P/CVE context, including the reduction of stereotyping, an increase in perspective-taking and empathy, a decrease in perceived social distance and skepticism about out-groups etc. These insights must merely be transferred and applied to counter-extremism, prevention, and inoculation efforts. If narrative campaigns can shape attitudes, values, perceptions, opinions, and social norms in highly polarized societies such as post-genocide Rwanda, there is no reason to believe that the theoretical foundation of these campaigns should not be relevant for CANs and that narratives should not be impactful in the P/CVE context. [80]

Practical application

In addition, insights from narrative persuasion research and entertainment-education campaigns are immediately transferable and applicable to P/CVE practice and the development of impactful CANs. P/CVE actors can benefit from established knowledge and principles of narrative persuasion to improve their narrative campaigns. The concepts described above can be applied directly to guide the development of persuasive CAN campaigns. To do so, it is not necessary to change the current approach. Rather, transferring insights from narrative persuasion research to the P/CVE context modifies and sharpens existing frameworks. For instance, the findings described above do not contradict but complement and expand the RAN's GAMMMA+ model structuring CAN development. [81] All components of the model remain relevant, but are expanded and improved by integrating narrative persuasion research.

GAMMMA+	CAN LITERATURE	NARRATIVE PERSUASION LITERATURE
GOAL	CAN campaigns should have clear, realistic, and measurable goals. There should also be an explicit theory of change detailing how the campaign will achieve these goals.	The narrative persuasion literature provides a general theory of change for narrative campaigns, detailing the mechanisms of narrative persuasion as well as specific elements that influence narrative persuasion processes (see above). It emphasizes the need to keep the persuasive intent of narrative campaigns hidden to decrease reactance and counter-arguing. In addition, it underlines that the main objective in the development of persuasive campaigns must be to tell good stories. High quality storytelling is the *foundation and necessary precondition* for narrative persuasion effects to occur and must therefore be the primary goal of every narrative persuasion campaign.
AUDIENCE	P/CVE practitioners are advised to select specific target audiences for their campaigns based on as much information as possible, including demographic characteristics, level of education, needs, motivations, interests and hobbies, the (digital) social spaces the target audiences frequent etc. There is a debate about how targeted CAN campaigns must be (also referred to as narrowcasting): Some guidelines emphasize the need for hyper-targeted campaigns, others assert that CANs should have a broad appeal.	The narrative persuasion literature offers information on a diverse range of audience-related factors that may influence narrative reception and persuasion such as personality traits or retrospective reflection. Narrative campaigns can and should be tailored to adhere to target group preferences and traits (e.g. NFA/C or MSV). The literature also indicates that many entertainment-education campaigns are aimed at very large (sometimes nation-wide) audiences, challenging the notion that narrative campaigns must be hyper-targeted to be successful.
MESSAGE	Messages should be tailored to the target audience and resonate with them. Practitioners should also consciously choose whether to employ counter-narratives, alternative narratives, or a mixture in the specific circumstances they wish to address. There are different "genres" of CANs, including ideological, ethical, humorous, argumentative, psychological, historical, philosophical, social, identity-based or religious narratives. Not all of these genres may be equally applicable in all situations and must be selected on a case-by-case basis. In addition, CANs should be emotionally impactful.	Narrative persuasion campaigns should be understood and developed as narratives. They should be "candy with vitamins" and not "chocolate covered broccoli", i.e. they should be entertaining and high quality storytelling should be a priority in order to develop enjoyable and effective narratives. Storytellers should consciously employ narratives known to improve the narrative experience and the likelihood of persuasive effects (see above).

GAMMMA+	CAN LITERATURE	NARRATIVE PERSUASION LITERATURE
MESSENGER	CAN campaigns should feature credible messengers. Peers of the target audience, young people, former extremists, victims of extremism, and community leaders or civil society organizations are deemed particularly suitable messengers. Existing guidelines emphasize the need for homophily: Messengers should speak, dress, look, behave, and come from the exact same background as the target audience in order to be accepted as credible.	Identification is crucial and a key mechanism of narrative persuasion. Several factors can influence identification processes, including homophily, likeability, psychological proximity, and social attractiveness. Importantly, audiences can identify with highly dissimilar characters, e.g. because they are particularly likable. Telling stories from a first-person perspective and consciously facilitating PSI/R may also support narrative persuasion processes.
MEDIUM	P/CVE efforts should meet audiences where they are: CAN campaigns should utilize media spaces and platforms audiences are familiar with and use frequently rather than trying to draw them to websites or unfamiliar (social) media platforms. Ideally, campaigns should match extremist propaganda content in speed, quality, and quantity.	The general principles of narrative persuasion (outlined above) are applicable in any medium, although they might need to be adapted to specific media environments. The literature also provides additional resources on digital storytelling in particular, including mulit-media storytelling (using several different media, e.g. text, video, images), cross-media storytelling (telling a narrative across different platforms, e.g. Instagram and YouTube), and trans-media storytelling (a web of interwoven narratives, delivered across a diverse range of media channels). [82]
CALL TO ACTION	Narrative campaigns should offer an explicit call to action, using strong words to address the audience directly and elicit emotional responses.	A call to action does **not** feature prominently in research on narrative persuasion and entertainment-education campaigns, suggesting that it may not be necessary to generate persuasive impact.
+	There is a strong emphasis on the need for monitoring and evaluating CAN campaigns, particularly their persuasive impact. However, it is lamented that it is extremely difficult to evaluate the actual impact of a CAN campaign. [83]	Communication, narrative persuasion, and media research offers several well-established approaches, instruments, and tools to analyze reception and impact of narratives, which could be utilized in the evaluations of CAN campaigns, including approaches to examine the degree of transportation into a narrative, the degree of identification with characters, PSI/R, the MSV and more.

The table above clearly shows that the CAN literature and the narrative persuasion literature do not stand in contrast. I do not argue that the existing approaches to CAN campaigns are false. Rather, existing CAN approaches are often unnecessarily limited. Narrative campaigns can be much more flexible than the current state of the art of P/CVE narrative campaigns suggests and narrative persuasion is influenced by many more factors than those mentioned in existing CAN handbooks and guidelines. By transferring insights from narrative persuasion research, we can expand the realm of opportunity for the development of CAN campaigns and benefit from a range of new possibilities to create persuasive narratives.

A clear example of this can be seen in the "messenger" segment of the table. While the CAN literature focuses largely on homophily, this view is not supported by the narrative persuasion literature. Homophily is one of many factors that can influence identification and, thereby, narrative persuasion processes. Homophily in and of itself does not automatically lead to identification and, in fact, audiences may identify with highly dissimilar (even non-human) characters, e.g. when they are particularly likable, which may support perspective-taking, decrease stigmatization and stereotypes, and facilitate positive attitudes towards out-groups. Therefore, the CAN guidelines are unnecessarily restrictive in their view of appropriate messengers. There are many more suitable messengers and many more factors influencing identification processes than current CAN guidelines suggest. Transferring insights on narrative persuasion to the P/CVE context may therefore grant P/CVE practitioners more freedom in the development of CANs.

The discussion above also showed that fictional narratives and fictional characters can be employed to elicit persuasive effects on real-world attitudes, perceptions, opinions, and values. Narratives do not need a high degree of external realism to be perceived as persuasive, relevant, and relatable. A narrative that matches the audience's viewing habits and character traits, immerses them, and is perceived as emotionally and/or socially relevant, the story and characters can be entirely fictional without hampering the narrative's persuasive appeal. Nothing in the literature suggests that this does not apply to narrative campaigns against extremism. Therefore, P/CVE practitioners can and should consider the possibility of telling fictional stories.

Integrating insights from narrative persuasion research therefore expands the realm of opportunity for CAN development. Many more types of narrative campaigns can be successfully implemented than previously thought and P/CVE practitioners are not as limited in their narrative choices as they might have believed. There are more possibilities to tell compelling, appealing, and persuasive narratives against extremism than the current guidelines suggest. Better yet, there are hundreds of case studies of entertainment-education campaigns and a theoretical basis with well-established insights on narrative persuasion to draw from to develop a diverse body of CAN campaigns.

While this was not part of my dissertation, it may also be fruitful to discuss how existing tools and approaches to measure narrative persuasion could be applied to the evaluation of CAN campaigns in the future. Media and narrative reception studies offer a range of tested approaches to do so. It may still be difficult to measure the impact of CANs directly,

particularly the impact of digital campaigns, but it may be possible to evaluate the quality of the narrative experience instead. For instance, there are tools available to measure how much transportation and identification audiences experience, in how far a narrative matches their personality traits and preferences, or the degree of parasocial interaction elicited by a campaign. Because we know that (all else being equal) a narrative eliciting higher degrees of transportation, identification etc is more likely to have the desired persuasive impact, an evaluation of these components may provide insights into the potential persuasive effects of the campaign. However, more work is needed to integrate and apply these tools into existing frameworks for CAN evaluation.

| Challenges

In addition to the theoretical work laid out above, I conducted 31 interviews with experts from Germany and the UK involved in developing, implementing, analyzing, or evaluating digital CAN campaigns against extremism. I wanted to learn more about current approaches to CANs, the underlying assumptions and beliefs guiding these approaches, potential challenges faced by practitioners, and to gain a deeper understanding into the perplexing absence of well-established insights on storytelling, narrative persuasion, and entertainment-education campaigns in the CAN approach. In other words, I wanted to uncover why CANs are not based on decades of research and practical experience with narrative persuasion campaigns. I discovered crucial assumptions and preconceived beliefs about narratives that must be overcome in order to successfully apply the concepts laid out above and improve the quality of P/CVE narrative campaigns.

1. Interviewees reported a **lack of storytelling skills** and lack of knowledge on how to approach the development of engaging narratives. They acknowledged that "missing from the counter-narrative is the *narrative*" and that "this is one of the main reasons why maybe many counter-narratives do not work. Because they are not narratives. They do not tell stories." But they found it difficult to change this due to a lack of storytelling experience. Telling good stories, they said, is "quite hard to do" and they lamented the lack of "proper storytellers" in P/CVE, because "it's really hard to tell a really, really good story at a level where you are competing with really good stories in every other media." This suggests the need to ground the CAN approach into existing research and frameworks on narrative persuasion, learn from entertainment-education campaigns in other fields, and develop storytelling skills as a crucial asset for effective P/CVE work.

2. Unexpectedly, several interviewees questioned the validity of narrative approaches in P/CVE, were highly skeptical about the effectiveness of CANs, and suggested that **narratives may not 'work'**. This is extremely puzzling. To reiterate: I only interviewed experts who work on CANs, yet was faced with skepticism about the very foundation of narrative campaigns. Even more puzzling: No interviewee questioned the importance of narratives for radicalization processes or that narratives

are extremely persuasive when used by extremist actors. They *only* questioned the effectiveness of narratives in P/CVE. Apparently, the belief that CANs do not work is widespread *despite* knowing that narratives elicit persuasive effects in other contexts, including radicalization into extremism. However, when asked what would happen if there were no CAN campaigns at all, experts largely agreed that it would be "dangerous" and "increase radicalization." They felt that "leaving the playing field to extremist propaganda (...) cannot be right." Therefore, it seems that the skepticism surrounding CANs largely revolves around the *form* of current narrative campaigns against extremism and their alleged lack of impact, rather than a belief that narratives generally 'do not work' in P/CVE contexts. Therefore, discussions on how to improve the form and design of CAN campaigns are necessary. As shown above, insights from narrative persuasion research and best practice examples from entertainment-education campaigns in other fields can provide these avenues for improvement and support P/CVE practitioners in creating high-quality narrative campaigns.

3. Narrative persuasion research often studies the reception and effects of fictional narratives. Similarly, entertainment-education campaigns are often delivered in the form of fictional narratives such as soap operas. There are, however, very few CANs that employ fictional elements. The interviews suggest that one of the reasons for this lack of fictional narratives may be that P/CVE actors are skeptical about and

sometimes even vehemently opposed to the **use of fiction**. Some interviewees believed that non-fiction is "more effective" than fiction, because fictional stories are "too abstract." They believed that "showing real stories and real experiences" is important and CANs must be a "faithful, accurate portrait of (...) life." This, they argued, is a sign of being "truthful and (...) honest with your audience." When interviewees were prompted to consider the use of fictional narratives, they equated fictional storytelling solely with addressing very young target audiences, stating that fictional CANs are only suitable to address children "ages 5,6 to 11" but not for older target audiences. Paradoxically, they still reported their own narrative consumption to include many fictional stories, which they perceived as interesting, engaging and persuasive even as adults, suggesting that there is a disconnect between personal media consumption and underlying assumptions about CAN campaigns.

The narrative persuasion literature does not support the belief that fictional narratives are only suitable for young audiences. On the contrary, fictional narratives are perceived to be highly engaging and persuasive by audiences of all ages. Therefore, fictional narratives are a viable option for CAN campaigns and have important benefits. Indeed, fictional narratives provide benefits that non-fictional narratives do not. For instance, fictional settings make it possible to discuss controversial and contentious issues through a fictional proxy, which increases the audience's psychological distance to the narrative.

This may be beneficial when seeking to address controversial issues likely to cause an emotional reaction in target audiences. For example, rather than telling a 'realistic' story about racism, a narrative campaign may display the discriminatory and racist practices on an alien planet to decrease the likelihood that target audiences immediately engage in counter-arguing and reject the narrative because it does not fit their preconceived beliefs about racism. A fictional setting makes it more likely that audiences are willing to accept content that may cause cognitive dissonance and backlash when presented in a realistic setting. Fictional stories also afford P/CVE practitioners more freedom when creating campaigns, e.g. to develop characters to their liking and tweak stories to fit the audience's preferences and characteristics. [84]

4. Relatedly, interviewees also displayed what I termed **realism bias**: The implicit assumption that CANs must be high in external realism, i.e. closely correspond to and mirror reality. "Ultimately, our job is to sell reality (…) That is the communications challenge here. Coming up with really compelling ways to sell the real world", they argued. They were not only skeptical of fiction in general, but specifically of fictional narratives low in external realism, stating that such narratives are too abstract for audiences and not useful in the P/CVE context. Several experts argued that fictional narratives are only acceptable when they are realistic representations of reality or, at the very least, realistic representations of religious and social backgrounds of the target audiences. "Something like

Miss Marvel as a Muslim girl, who thinks about how to combine being a superhero with wearing a hijab", was one of the suggestions. Even when I challenged these interviewees and nudged them to think about the possibility of developing CANs low in external realism, e.g. a CAN campaign with fluffy aliens as the main characters akin to a Pixar movie, the realism bias remained: "But if the alien is a Muslim and then does things that a Muslim would never do (…) that would lead to (…) not believing in the story." The implicit assumption here is that CANs only 'work' if characters behave like 'real' target audiences even if these characters are entirely fictional and even non-human.

This assumption is not supported by narrative persuasion research. Neither narrative reception nor the enjoyment or persuasiveness of the narrative depend on external realism. Rather, it is the internal realism of a story that is decisive: As long as the story is believable within its own frame of reference and relatable in some shape or form, it can elicit persuasive effects. "A story may take place on Mars, and the characters may even be Martians, but they must interact in a way that matches our understanding of social interaction, or be motivated to achieve goals that correspond with motives and goals that one might encounter in one's *real world*." [85] But it is not necessary to mirror reality or particular elements of reality such as 'realistic' religious practices in order to make fictional stories and characters engaging and persuasive. Audiences are capable of understanding (abstract) fictional sto-

ries and transferring content, messages, and lessons from fictional worlds low in external realism to their lived reality. This is good news for the development of CANs, because it frees P/CVE practitioners from the constraints of reality and the limiting assumptions about the type of stories that can be employed in narrative persuasion campaigns. It is possible to tell fictional, abstract stories low in external realism that elicit real-world persuasive effects on audiences.

5. The interviews also revealed a considerable **fear of being misunderstood**. Some interviewees believed that narratives carry an inherently higher risk of being misinterpreted and are more easily misunderstood than other forms of communication. "Narrative is risky because people don't necessarily receive it the way that you intend", they warned. A good story "is very powerful but it is not necessarily an easy or reliable instrument", because it is by design open to interpretation, which may make audience reactions unpredictable. P/CVE actors "have to be cautious [not to be misunderstood] and that's one of the reasons why a lot of material (…) is so lame." This fear of being misunderstood may dissuade P/CVE actors from utilizing the full spectrum of storytelling opportunities and may explain why many CANs are not actually well-told narratives. However, there is nothing in the current literature that suggests that stories carry an inherently higher risk of misinterpretation. If anything, the studies summarized above suggest the opposite: It is often easier for audiences to process and comprehend information delivered in narrative form. In addition, neither researchers nor practitioners working on entertainment-education campaigns in other fields report strong adverse effects such as audiences constantly misinterpreting key messages of the narrative campaigns. This suggests that the fear of being misunderstood may be overstated.

6. Unexpectedly, some interviewees also reported the fear that narrative persuasion constitutes a form of **manipulation**. They worried that narratives, in particular fictional narratives, may be viewed as an attempt to manipulate audiences. They struggled with the fact that the persuasive intent of narratives is not made explicit even if narrative campaigns are developed for persuasion purposes – which is, as we have seen above, one of the main reasons why narratives are persuasive in the first place. On the one hand, the interviewees recognized that "the most successful counter-narratives are those that are not recognizable as counter-narratives" and that CANs should be subtle to be successful. Many CANs, they lamented, "haven't been useful, because they are easily identified as being persuasive in nature." On the other hand, some experts felt very uneasy about such subtle persuasion attempts. Points of concern were that narratives persuade by way of their emotional appeal rather than 'objective', rational, argument-based messaging, that the persuasive intent is not made explicit, and that audiences do not expect to be persuaded by a narrative, which means they are 'defenseless' and caught off guard. Because of these

characteristics, they feared that narrative persuasion constitutes "manipulation" or even "unacceptable ideological engineering." [86] Some of these experts viewed narrative persuasion as an unethical or 'dirty' (because covert) form of influence; an illicit attempt to persuade audiences 'through the backdoor' without them knowing they are being persuaded. A few interviewees also expressed concern about seeking to persuade audiences by way of emotion rather than rationality, and classified fictional narratives as 'untrue' and 'lies', which they deemed unacceptable in the P/CVE context.

This controversy is not new and is largely based on the ideal that political communication should be purely based on logic, rationality, and arguments rather than emotions and stories. Political opinion formation, in this view, is based solely on the objective, rational weighing of arguments. The basic assumption is that the better argument always 'wins'. However, this is not an accurate view of how opinions are formed: Humans, no matter how rational they believe themselves to be, are always also using emotional information and appeals when making judgments. "We may still cling to what we think of as the Enlightenment idea that we're rational animals; that our decisions about important issues are the product of sober deliberation; that we weigh the facts, probe their consequences, and then come to a balanced and reasoned decision on which we can then act. But this simply isn't the case most of the time. Instead, we make decisions based on the way we feel

about an issue." [87] Opinion formation is always rooted in both a weighing of arguments and our emotional involvement in an issue.

Therefore, stories do not stand in contrast to arguments, but rather complement them, because stories speak to the emotional side of opinion formation that rational arguments cannot reach. Considering that emotions are central to the development of opinions, perceptions, values, and norms, they must feature prominently in holistic communication and persuasion strategies. The easiest option to do so is by way of narrative, because stories persuade largely through their emotional appeal. This is particularly important for the P/CVE context, because radicalization processes are not the result of rational deliberation, but are mostly driven by emotions. Consequently, many extremist actors heavily emphasize emotional concerns rather than rational arguments in their communication strategies. It seems hardly desirable to surrender emotional appeals entirely to extremist actors and to (unsuccessfully) seek to counter the emotional impact of their narratives through argument-based messages. Rather, emotional appeals should be central to P/CVE efforts and CAN campaigns against extremism.

In addition, we know that narratives are impactful precisely because the persuasive intent is not explicit. This is a key mechanism of narrative persuasion. Hence, the assumption that this constitutes 'manipulation' questions the very foundation of narrative persuasion.

Nothing in the literature on narrative persuasion or entertainment-education suggests that audiences feel manipulated by stories or that this is an issue that requires particular attention. Why, then, would this be an issue in the P/CVE context? This does not mean that there is no place for discussions about an ethical framework of narrative persuasion in P/CVE, including a dialogue regarding when such campaigns may not be the appropriate approach. However, realistic expectations management is key. Narratives are not simply accepted at face value simply because they lack an explicit persuasive intent. They are still scrutinized by audiences, narrative campaigns are simply processed differently (but not necessarily less critically) than argument-based messages. Narratives are not a tool of manipulation.

Lastly, the view that fictional narratives are untrue and automatically involve lying or deception is problematic. Narrative campaigns can be explicitly labeled as fiction without decreasing the persuasive impact of the campaign. [88] Therefore, audiences do not need to be deceived or led to believe that a story is 'real' for it to have the desired persuasive effects. In addition, narratives can convey truth even when they are fictional, namely social truths and emotional lessons. For instance, parables such as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* are not factually true (and audiences do not falsely believe them to be factually true), but convey social truths such as 'people who constantly lie are not believed when they speak the truth'. Fictional CANs may also convey social truths by way of a fictional story without needing to lie to or deceive audiences.

These challenges and assumptions are currently limiting P/CVE actors in the development and implementation of well-told (fictional) CANs and may hamper the transfer of insights from narrative persuasion research and practice to the P/CVE context. The skepticism regarding narratives in general as well as the specific concerns outlined above, must be addressed to ensure the successful adaptation of the narrative persuasion principles in P/CVE narrative campaigns against extremism. I have tried to provide insights on why the concerns are largely unsupported by the current state of research, but more discussions are needed to ensure that practitioners are informed about these insights and that narrative persuasion is used in a responsible and ethically sound manner in the P/CVE context.

Conclusion and ways forward

The discussion above clearly points to the potential of improving CANs by transferring established principles of narrative persuasion to the P/CVE context and grounding narrative campaigns against extremism in existing narrative persuasion research. In fact, there is no reason not to make use of decades of narrative persuasion research and learn from the hundreds of successful narrative and entertainment-education campaigns implemented across the world. Nothing in the existing literature – neither on CANs specifically nor on narrative persuasion or entertainment-education generally – suggests that what works in other narrative persuasion contexts is not applicable to P/CVE campaigns. The principles, mechanisms, and factors influencing narrative persuasion outcomes remain the same, regardless of the context they are applied in.

While there are a handful of studies utilizing elements of narrative persuasion research in the P/CVE context, the majority of the literature on CAN campaigns as well as guidebooks and frameworks for practitioners lack any reference to what I discussed above. [89] The CAN literature and guidebooks are not wrong, but they do not incorporate insights on narrative persuasion research and practice and are often unnecessarily restrictive in their recommendations. This is a major shortcoming of the current CAN approach. How can we hope to develop successful narrative campaigns against extremism if we do not make use of well-known principles of narrative persuasion? Why would we try to reinvent the wheel if a pathway to effective narrative per-

suasion campaigns already exists and can be easily integrated in existing approaches such as the GAMMMA+ model? In order to improve CAN campaigns and increase the likelihood that they have the desired impact, we must anchor them in established narrative persuasion research and practice.

Practitioners need to lead this effort. As shown above, the required basis to advance the CAN approach is provided by existing narrative persuasion research. It must simply be transferred and put into practice by P/CVE practitioners to improve the quality of CAN campaigns. To reiterate: There is proof of concept, there is proof of effectiveness, there is a solid theory of change and knowledge on the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, and there are insights on various factors shaping narrative reception and persuasion. We also know that high quality storytelling is the *foundation and necessary precondition* of narrative persuasion. Good storytelling is decisive and must guide the development of narrative persuasion campaigns. Therefore, it is essential that future CANs are developed accordingly: Not as "chocolate covered broccoli" but as well-told, entertaining stories that can stand on their own in terms of their narrative quality and that adhere to the mechanisms of narrative persuasion laid out above. All the tools necessary to improve P/CVE narrative campaigns are already available, we simply need to start using them and begin developing and implementing narrative campaigns against extremism that are based on the principles of narrative persuasion.

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