

conference | paper

THE FUTURE IS NOW
NEW FRONTIERS IN DIGITAL P/CVE

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| Table of Contents

Introduction	4
The Level Up! Project	6
Executive summary of the Level Up! Project	6
Recap Closing Conference “New Frontiers in digital P/CVE”	8
Interviews with the Level Up! project partners	10
Ways forward for digital narrative campaigns against extremism	39
Spotlight: Storytelling Against Extremism:	39
Entertainment-education campaigns in other fields	72
Fictional storytelling and entertainment-education campaigns	75
Next frontiers for digital P/CVE	80
Mainstreaming	80
Strategic Communication	83
Inoculation	89
Visual Communication	92
New digital platforms and formats	95
Borderline Content and Digital Strategies of Islamists	98
Metaverse	101
Gaming	105
Disinformation and conspiracy narratives	108
Artificial Intelligence	112
Deep Fakes	115
Conclusion	119

| Introduction

Over the last decade, the boundaries between the online and offline realm have become increasingly blurred. Young people in particular are constantly online – to communicate with both friends and strangers, learn new knowledge and skills, gain information about current events, play games, watch videos, and spend their free time. Consequently, the digital world has also become progressively more important for efforts to prevent and counter (violent) extremism (P/CVE). Today, many P/CVE projects include digital components or are entirely implemented online. This is necessary, not only because our target audiences spend more time in the digital world than ever before but because extremist actors have swiftly and skillfully adapted to the full spectrum of new technological opportunities to spread their propagandistic messages, communicate with each other, engage at-risk audiences, disseminate their narratives, and draw attention to their ideological beliefs.

However, despite the progress made over the last decade, we are still facing a “digital capacity gap.” [1] While extremists have seemingly adapted effortlessly to the digital sphere and are exploiting the manifold opportunities these spaces offer in their entirety, P/CVE actors are struggling to adjust to the ever-changing online environment at the same pace. The “digital frontrunners” of online P/CVE work face important challenges in a highly volatile digital environment, which requires constant adaptation to new trends, new platforms, and new media formats. [2] From deepfakes to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Reality (VR), from an increasing fragmentation of the ecosystem of digital platforms to the rise of entirely new forms of digital spaces such as the Metaverse, from gaming to disinformation warfare, and many more, P/CVE practitioners are constantly faced with new, complex digital challenges and must display a high degree of flexibility to constantly readjust their approaches.

[1] Chalk, R. (2024). *A Strategic Communications Approach to Tackling Current, Emerging and New Violent Extremist Threats in Europe*, ICCT Policy Brief

[2] Radicalisation Awareness Network (2022). *Digital frontrunners: Key challenges and recommendations for online P/CVE work*, RAN Conclusion Paper

The Level Up! project, lead and implemented by modusIzad from 2021 until 2024, was aimed at supporting German P/CVE practitioners and civil society organizations in dealing with these new digital challenges by enabling collective learning and capacity building for effective online P/CVE work. This publication brings together crucial insights gained during the Level Up! project and highlights pressing new frontiers for digital P/CVE.

Part I includes a summary of the Level Up! project, recaps the closing conference held in June 2024 on new pathways for digital P/CVE work, and features interviews with our project partners.

Part II highlights how digital counter- and alternative narrative campaigns can be improved. Lin-

da Schlegel provides a spotlight paper detailing how narrative persuasion research can guide the development of high-quality P/CVE narrative campaigns. The section also includes two interviews with leading experts on storytelling and entertainment-education.

Part III details a range of important future issues P/CVE practitioners need to take into consideration when planning and developing digital campaigns. Several interviews with international experts shed light on new frontiers for digital P/CVE work, including (visual) digital communication strategies, the mainstreaming of extremist ideas, inoculation, gaming, the Metaverse, AI, deep fakes, the rise of conspiracy narratives, and more.

PART I

| The Level Up! Project

| Executive summary of the Level Up! Project

The production of sophisticated digital content, effective dissemination of narratives and new forms of messaging by Islamist extremist actors starting with the rise of the so-called Islamic state in 2014, opened up challenges for organizations working on preventing and countering (violent) extremism (P/CVE) far greater than we all anticipated at the time.

In the following years, federal structures for the *offline* prevention of Islamist extremists were rapidly established in Germany to prevent, for example, young Germans from traveling to Syria to join ISIS. But it seems fair to say that on the whole, the German P/CVE landscape was ill-equipped to deal with what we were encountering *online*.

There were a number of very foundational challenges to even getting started. Most of the P/CVE actors in Germany at the time employed social workers, but we did not have social media managers on our teams. modus|zad, as one player of the P/CVE landscape, struggled with even the most basic digital tools. For example, we were trying to build licensing costs for Adobe Suites into our prevention project budgets but weren't able to hire graphic designers or video editors given the structural constraints of budget caps for our projects. Furthermore, it felt nearly impossible to keep up with Islamist messaging online – few of us had the required knowledge about digital platforms, technical skills, or capacity on our teams to conduct comprehensive social media monitoring and analysis. Our experienced

educators could no longer adequately address this new phenomenon by themselves: it felt like we needed researchers, data analysts, creative directors, script writers, copy editors, designers and videographers to meet the challenge.

This is the point at which we at modus|zad conceived of the Level Up! project. If all our fellow online prevention providers were struggling with the same challenges that were severely limiting the potential impact of their online interventions, then it was time to pool some resources!

The goal of the Level Up! project was to help online intervention providers collaboratively address the set of common hurdles to improve and maximize the impact of their efforts. It was aimed at organizations or teams in Germany already involved in implementing measures in the area of online P/CVE or those willing to develop them. Level Up! provided consultations, networking opportunities, peer-to-peer support as well as expert coaching to P/CVE actors across Germany.

Over the past three years, nine German P/CVE projects across several German states participated in Level Up!. For each member organization, the engagement began with an assessment of their resources and specific needs as well as untapped potential for achieving a greater impact online. Based on the results of this initial assessment, the Level Up! team then developed a bespoke support package that included, for instance

- | Customized monitoring
- | Support in developing social media advertising campaigns and acquiring advertising funds
- | Coaching from experts based on acute needs, such as online security training, and help with issues such as doxxing, shitstorms etc.
- | Peer-to-peer coaching and case consultations
- | Improving existing P/CVE measures
- | Development and implementation of new measures
- | Campaign design and increased reach
- | Development of evaluation tools and approaches
- | Networking with external experts

It is often difficult for an individual project or P/CVE actor to cover and incorporate all requirements of effective digital prevention work due to limited resources. But especially online, it is essential to be able to implement campaigns or consulting offers swiftly and flexibly as the digital sphere is constantly changing. Aligning P/CVE content and strategies precisely with current monitoring results, reacting to trends in real time, and, at the same time, ensuring high-quality social media marketing and advertising strategies, are overwhelming challenges for individual project teams and must be addressed by a support network of P/CVE actors. This is exactly what the Level Up! project provided to its members.

The project team supported German P/CvE actors by providing tailor-made recommendations to improve digital campaigning, for instance in the areas of

- | Target audience identification and access

The following resource pools are available to the project for this purpose:

- | **Insight pool:** Monitoring relevant extremist actors/scenes on various social media platforms and sharing (individually tailored) insights
- | **Support pool:** Offering collegial case advice, connecting with and input by experts (content production, social media marketing, legal advice, data protection, etc.), financial support for testing measures such as social media advertising campaigns, etc.
- | **Content pool:** “Promising Practice” Examples of online extremism prevention formats as orientation in the development of new approaches and campaigns.

The Level Up project! is funded by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth as part of the federal program “Living Democracy!”.

| Recap Closing Conference “New Frontiers in digital P/CVE”

On 12 and 13 of June 2024, modusIzad hosted the Level Up! closing conference titled “New Frontiers in digital P/CVE”. We invited internationally renowned experts from research, P/CVE practice, and civil society organizations to discuss new avenues for digital prevention and intervention work. Our goal was to provide a space to discuss big, bold, forward-looking ideas, including new frontiers that have previously flown under the radar or deemed too futuristic to be immediately relevant for prevention work. The ever-changing digital space is full of opportunities and this conference was meant to encourage discussions on how to make use of these new digital pathways to mitigate the influence of extremist activities online.

Day 1 was dedicated to exploring new frontiers and innovative approaches in digital PCVE. While digital P/CVE has become an integral component of holistic counter-extremism strategies, there is still a lot of room for improvement, particularly because the digital landscape is constantly evolving and requires swift and effective adaptation by P/CVE practitioners. We looked back at our achievements in digital counter-extremism work, discussed important current trends, and looked ahead towards crucial new developments and potential opportunities for digital P/CVE in the years to come.

Ross Frenett, co-founder and CEO of Moonshot kicked the conference off with a keynote exploring the digital sphere as a new area of influence for P/CVE work. He stated that a key point is the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to prevention work. Ross Frenett emphasised that professionals from different sectors need to work together to effectively tackle complex problems such as extremism and organised crime. Advancing digitalisation and the increasing blending of online and offline worlds are also crucial. It is essential that prevention programmes work effectively both online and offline and are interlinked. Organisations should therefore develop strategies at an early stage to make this integration seamless. Furthermore, the increasing blending of extremist ideologies, crime and political movements poses new challenges for prevention work, as the traditional boundaries between these areas are becoming increasingly blurred. Prevention work must therefore be broadened by integrating different social problem areas, such as mental health and domestic violence, to a greater extent. Lastly, Ross pointed out that the use of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality also comes with ethical challenges in prevention work. Whilst these technologies offer huge opportunities, there are also potential risks that need to be carefully considered.

On the panel titled “Challenges, opportunities, and ways forward in digital P/CVE”, we welcomed **Zahed Amanullah**, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, **Mareike Stürenburg**, researcher at the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, and **Jordy Nijenhuis**, co-founder Dare to be Grey.

We closed the day with a presentation from **Galen Lamphere-Englund**, co-founder and co-convenor of the Extremism and Gaming Research Network (EGRN), on innovative (future) approaches to digital P/CVE. He focused on the best practices in the current landscape, assessed prevalent gaps and challenges and gave an outlook on future opportunities such as the use of artificial intelligence for the prevention work.

Day 2 of the conference focused on storytelling and narrative persuasion in digital P/CVE narrative campaigns. Counter- and alternative narrative campaigns are a promising avenue for digital prevention work but have received substantial criticism over the last 15 years. We therefore focused on exploring pathways to improve P/CVE narrative campaigns by inviting an interdisciplinary group of experts, who are involved in researching or implementing narrative persuasion campaigns, entertainment-education projects, and other (strategic) communication approaches P/CVE actors could learn from. The goal was to learn from insights generated in other fields and transfer existing knowledge on effective communication to the P/CVE context.

We started the day with a keynote by **Dr. Freya Sukalla**, researcher in communication and media studies at Leipzig University, who introduced the foundations of narrative persuasion: Why narratives are persuasive, which factors influence their appeal and persuasiveness, and the mechanisms of narrative persuasion.

The second keynote, held by modusIzad’s **Michèle Leaman**, built upon existing knowledge on narrative persuasion and explored the perplexing fact that these insights have not been used within the P/CVE context until now. While the literature on counter- and alternative narrative campaigns is often not in direct conflict with existing narrative persuasion research and entertainment-education approaches, it has an unnecessarily limited view of narrative development. Transferring insights on narrative persuasion to the P/CVE context would open a host of new possibilities for narrative development and could address many criticisms the approach is faced with. Ultimately, making use of insights on narrative persuasion could lead to substantial improvements and the development of more appealing and impactful P/CVE narrative campaigns.

We closed the conference with a panel discussion on ways to improve the development and implementation of digital narrative campaigns against extremism with **Jared Shurin**, strategic communication expert at Greater London Authority, **Dr. Lauren B. Frank**, Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication at Portland State University, and **Dr. Daniela PISOIU**, Vice-Chair of SCENOR The Science Crew.

| Interviews with the Level Up! project partners

AMADEU ANTONIO FOUNDATION

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are a part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them. For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention. As part of the 'Level Up!' project supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) we actively promote projects and organisations involved in extremism prevention that intervene online. We are interested, for example, in the question of what findings from preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be applied to the digital world, and where new approaches in hybrid disengagement work should be developed, and what these might look like. In order to shed light on this, we are talking to representatives from the participating projects. We are delighted that the project 'Good Gaming – Well Played Democracy' is part of the 'Level Up!' network and that Mick is here with us today to tell us about their work. Welcome, Mick.

Mick: Hello Micheal, I'm very happy to be here. Many thanks.

Mick, "Good Gaming – Well Played Democracy" is a project set up by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation that addresses the various

facets of group-related hostility on gaming platforms and promotes a strong civil society within this increasingly popular digital recreational space. As part of the project, you have created content monitoring, offer training and development sessions, and are active online as so-called digital street-workers [social workers who carry out social outreach work online or via social media]. You are active within gaming communities, advocate non-discriminatory and constructive interaction with one another and offer advice for those seeking help.

Half of Germany are gamers: Up to 43% of Germans regularly play video and computer games and spend a considerable amount of their free time online or with digital media. And corresponding communities across the various platforms play a specific role. In your opinion, what are the arguments in favour of creating a political education project focussed on this kind of digital recreational space? And how do you succeed in sensitising young people to socio-political messages in a place which, for many, represents escapism?

Mick: That is a very good question, and one that we ask ourselves regularly: how can we reach our target group? How can we reach young gamers, reach gaming communities, reach e-sport organisations in order to begin to engage them in political education work in this field? I think an

important answer is that gaming has become a big interactive space. Gaming doesn't only mean sitting in front of a PC and playing a few video games, normally it also involves interacting with others in the voice-chat in the game itself or via platforms such as Discord. Many people also stream themselves while playing and then upload it onto Twitch and communicate with others in the comments section. **What I want to say is: Gaming is not only booming as a means of escapism, but also as a space for interaction.** We can see that a lot of different topics are being discussed. It's not only about how to win *League of Legends*, or *Rocket League*, or *Velofanti*, it's also a space where many different political topics are discussed. For example, the new Harry Potter game and to what extent you are supporting J.K. Rowling's transphobic views if you buy it. Or mandatory face masks are discussed and how much the law is changing. Or the World Cup in Qatar. There's hardly a topic that isn't discussed within gaming communities.

We therefore decided that it's an area where political education can work, especially because there is void and the need is there. In some places it's not so easy because there are of course gamers who say "Keep your political debates away from all this. I just want to switch off and have some fun." But there are also many communities who are really up for talking about this kind of content.

With 'Good Gaming – Well Played Democracy' we have a sort of three-way approach. For example, we offer workshops for gamers. These can be gaming clans who contact us and say "Hey, we re-

ally want to talk about how political video games are and the many stereotypes that appear in video games." Or they want to talk to us about how they can moderate their own server on Discord. But it could also be a streamer who wants to discuss with us about how the new Hogwarts Legacy that's coming out at the beginning of February is possibly problematic. Or it could be a teachers' association or social workers who have no idea about gaming and want to find out the basics. So yes, these are the places we go to. At the same time, we generate quite a lot of content which focuses on this topic, for example in the form of publications. We appear on podcasts, like this one now. We've also got together with streamers, for example the really great "Freiraumreh", who we spoke with about neo-Nazis on the platform Steam. There are many different possibilities to generate public awareness about this topic and to share knowledge. The third area, which you also mentioned earlier, is this so-called 'digital streetwork'. Sounds quite fancy at first, but at second glance it is the shifting of in-person social work, or street social work, to the digital world. This means that especially on Twitch we go to the comments section of some of the big name streamers and rather than talking to hardcore neo-Nazis, we talk to people where we maybe notice an antisemitic or racist pattern of behaviour. We engage with them and try to untangle it a bit.

These three areas are our way of bringing political education work into gaming. I think it's really important to do this, especially as there is a huge need for it.

Really interesting. In the area of P/CVE trust is above all a very valuable asset. Can you explain, what data protection measures and safety mechanisms you have in place regarding your 'digital streetwork' activities, in particular for the online users and your educational staff members?

Mick: I'll try to maybe briefly explain what 'digital streetwork' is a bit more vividly first. So, we have many social workers in our team who are active on the relevant platforms, and who have very clear standards. We don't just do this any old way, we follow the standards that have worked in 'analogue streetwork' over the last 20, 30 years. This means that for us it's really important – especially when engaging with 'toxic users' – that everything is done on a voluntary basis. We don't want to impose our opinion on anyone, and we don't want to force anyone into a conversation or exchange. This means that voluntary action is the top priority, as well as the principle of not imposing our opinions on other people. We want to discuss different topics and of course ultimately to set certain mechanisms and levers in motion. But without going at things with a sledgehammer and forcing our opinions on others, just like in social work. It is an exchange on equal terms. **It is really important for us that we're not talking down to people and at the same time we are very open in these online discussions. So we say "We are social workers, and we're up for talking to you about these topics. Are you up for it too?"** In other words, we don't use any ominous fake profiles and try to somehow trick people into conversations, instead we're transparent

about what we're trying to do. To do this we have our own 'digital streetwork' accounts and have set (work) times when we are available to chat. This is a safety mechanism for our staff members, so that we can set boundaries for this type of work. There should be set times when people are available and approachable. At the same time, there must be a point when our colleagues as well as the people who are active on the platform get a break and time to switch off from the topics. Regarding data protection, it's really important to anonymise personal information. This means that if we have an interesting case, which we possibly use in an interview or on a podcast or in a workshop, we of course anonymise any personal information, so as not to compromise the person we had an interesting discussion with. At the end of the day, it is important for us that there are standards, that 'digital streetwork' works similarly to 'analogue streetwork', and that the voluntary nature of the project is underscored.

Ok, you have previously briefly mentioned the topic of influencers. How do you manage to sensitise influencers in the gaming sector to socio-political topics? And maybe you have a few positive examples of people who couple their influence with taking a clear stance.

Mick: Firstly, it's really great that more and more gaming influencers are engaging with political topics. I have noticed over the last few years that there are more and more streams out there that address political issues or YouTube videos that

take a certain stance. This is of course not the case with everyone. There are also lots of streamers who quite deliberately say: "Pah, we want to keep politics out of our stream or we maybe don't want to touch on certain political topics." Maybe also because these people don't know much themselves about the topics and that is of course their right. But I think it would be good if people at least said: "Hey, I'm creating a safe space here where no one will be discriminated against, no one will be attacked in my Twitch chat, and I as a streamer of course won't target other groups of people." That should be a consensus that streamers get on board with, and a lot of them have, but unfortunately not everyone. We can see that there are streamers who are problematic, but at the same time there are many really great people who are developing political formats on Twitch, for example. You just asked for examples: Someone who I would really like to recommend is Shurjoka, Pia. She gives regular political talks on Twitch but then she also plays a strategy game where she talks about how, for example, marginalised groups are affected by discrimination. She takes a very clear allied position, she stands up for, alongside, and behind oppressed groups of people and gives them a voice. I have already mentioned the Harry Potter game: she posts a lot of educational content on that. There are also some other really great people like "Freiraumreh", for example. I mentioned her briefly earlier and her talk on neo-Nazis on Steam. That was really exciting because it reached a whole different community.

On the other hand, there are the big gaming streamers, for example 'Head of Blood' or 'Kalle Kosinski', who don't want to talk about political issues, but do for example stream *Diablo2*, a game from a studio which isn't entirely unproblematic. In the last few years, the gaming studio has been involved in major sexism scandals. Both said influencers don't only stream the game, they also talk about the sexist incidents or about sexualised violence against women in the gaming world. And I find this a good middle ground, to realise that you can't talk about everything, but that there are certain topics you should tackle and at least call out.

This is something I observe more and more in gaming, sadly not everywhere, but luckily more and more often.

What would you say are for you perhaps the most interesting findings from your content monitoring in relation to group-related hostility and gaming? And what should really everyone be aware of?

Mick: That is a huge question, which I'll try to compress and break down as much as possible. So, we primarily focus on neo-Nazis on gaming platforms.

We mostly start off with a contextualisation and by saying: "Yes, there are neo-Nazis in gaming." And this also isn't surprising, because there are neo-Nazis in our society. And, of course, neo-Nazis use spaces where they're not shut out, which

are often gaming platforms. This can be Steam or Discord, or a platform like Roblox, where right-wing extremist structures are formed. **This is sadly not surprising because there are after all toxic and hateful messages in our society. Nonetheless, we can't make the mistake, for example, of talking about this loud minority of neo-Nazis in gaming, as if they represent the gaming community as a whole.** This is the first appeal I would make to people: Because when I talk about the many negative developments in gaming, it sometimes sounds as if the gaming world is completely awful, as if there's only rubbish there. And this definitely isn't the case. There are some really great, positive developments in this area, like the influencers I just mentioned.

But with regards negative experiences, it has to be said that there aren't, for example, so many explicitly neo-Nazi games and the few that there are, luckily don't have much of a reach. More problematic are the gaming platforms themselves or what happens on them: right-wing extremist groups come together or some kind of *Wehrmacht* fan groups or modifications are uploaded to existing games (especially strategy and shooter games), where you can play as Hitler or with SS weapons. We have seen a lot of rubbish. In our experience, neo-Nazis instrumentalise gaming for three main reasons. For one, to connect with each other; there often isn't much comment moderation in gaming rooms, nor much counterargument. Therefore, gaming rooms are places where right-wing extremist groups can network and discuss topics, which they maybe couldn't do so intensively elsewhere. The second reason would be

that neo-Nazis use the gaming area to mobilise. Not necessarily to recruit new people, but more to to reactivate their own ingroup, for example their mates, who they want to be active again, by organising patriotic e-sport tournaments or similar. And the third reason is the so-called "metapolitics of the New Right", which we also see in gaming. This means using video games and gaming platforms to spread an ideology and narratives. And this works through something like modification. But it also works through groups of and individual phrases which are shared in video game chat groups.

A further finding, or actually the main finding, is that neo-Nazis spread fragments of their ideology in the spaces which they're not shut out from. That's why it is so important that gaming platforms take a strong stand against right-wing extremist tendencies. And this has to happen more and more, for example also from the side of gamers. Fortunately, we are also seeing positive developments – there are community standards and gaming communities who are taking a clear stand against neo-Nazis. But despite this there are platforms like Steam, a platform used by a lot of gamers, where we see a crazy amount of right-wing extremist content.

Lastly, it is important to emphasise that an objective classification is required and that gaming can't be equated with right-wing extremism.

Yes, absolutely. We've already spoken about data protection and safety mechanisms.

What conditions do you create to ensure the safety of your staff members who are active online?

Mick: I'll answer this slightly cryptically, because security works best when you don't reveal too much about internal security precautions. We have put various safety precautions for our staff in place, so that they are better protected on the internet. But above all, we provide support to our colleagues who are active in the field. This means we offer intervision sessions within the team, where we sit down with colleagues as a team or across teams and speak in depth about online content. For example: If there is a horrible article about one of us, then it's clear that we won't be the first one to read it, colleagues will scan it first and then say "This is the content, do you want to read it?" This is a form of self-protection, digital self-protection, which we push hard for. And what we also have is the opportunity to use supervision, so that we have the chance to talk to professional psychologists, for example, about digital hate and hostility. This is extremely important. When we for example look at things like manifestos of far right terror organisations or videos by far right terrorists, this of course does things to us and doesn't leave us unaffected. It would be awful if it did. It's really important for us to create possibilities for our staff to discuss these things within a professional setting.

What would you say – to what extent do you think it's the responsibility of video game developers and operators of online gaming

platforms to take action against group-related hostility?

Mick: I think, **video game developers and platforms are two actors who definitely have to start being more active. But there are whole number of issues that need to be addressed. Video game users, as I've already mentioned, must for example make much more use of the 'report' function.** Lots of video game users still look the other way when hate-filled rubbish is posted or ableist, sexist, or racist messages fly around in in-game chats. A lot has to change there too. But above all the platform operators have to moderate things properly. There are platforms such as Discord and Twitch which attempt to moderate, at least in phases. Discord was much worse one or two years ago, as far as right-wing extremist servers are concerned. There still are problematic servers, but they are becoming fewer.

The main worry is Steam because the platform has a crazy number of these problematic groups on it. And I would be really happy if companies were to do a better job of protecting democratic content and marginalised groups, or if they at least saw this as their duty to do so. But it has to be said that it isn't mandatory to ensure the platform is moderated, because many of the laws still don't include gaming communities or gaming platforms. They aren't mentioned in legal texts. But I would like to see us protect marginalised groups and moderate far-right issues more strongly. A lot still has to change there. As I mentioned, Steam is a really horrible example.

You talked about game developers and I have to say they should be forced to take a stronger stance. I would also like to mention a positive example, which in my eyes has worked really well over the last few years. The studio CD Projekt RED is a Polish studio known for the *Witcher* series and for *Cyberpunk*, released two years ago. It's a studio that takes a very strong stance in favour of the LGBTQI+ community, for example. They have, for example, not only posted about this issue on Twitter, but also shared pictures on Instagram of them taking part in demos in Poland. I think it's really great when a studio says "Hey, we don't just convey values in our games." Because *Cyberpunk*, for example, includes a lot of political content, as does *Witcher 3* with regard to sexualised violence etc. It doesn't work well in all places, but in many it does, and I think it's great when studios like Project White take a stand. What's shocking is to see, time and again, how toxic communities react to

this. Some of the posts about the demonstrations received comments like "We didn't expect this from a Polish studio" or "We're going to boycott your games now" or "Less politics, more games" and the like. So, we also see that these political statements don't always result in a positive response from the communities, which is of course a great shame. That's why I'm calling on video game players to offer more of a counter-point.

Great, Mick, many, many thanks for your time and sharing your fascinating insights into your project. And we are looking forward to working together with you on exciting projects in the future. See you again soon.

Mick: See you soon. Many thanks for the invitation.

BERGHOF FOUNDATION

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them. For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention. As part of the 'Level Up!' project supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) we actively promote projects and organisations involved in extremism prevention that intervene online. We are interested, for example, in the question of what findings from preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be applied to the digital world and where new approaches in hybrid disengagement work should be developed, and what these might look like. In order to shed light on this, we are talking to representatives from the participating projects. We are delighted that the project #vrschwrng is a part of the 'Level Up!' network and that Carolin Sokele and Sabine Ulmer are here with us today to tell us about their work. Welcome Caro and Sabine.

Sabine Ulmer: Hello!

Carolin Sokele: Hello!

#Verschwörung is a project set up by the Berghof Foundation which encourages young people to critically engage with conspiracy narratives. You have created a digital toolkit primarily intended for practitioners, i.e., teachers, social workers etc. In addition, you offer in-person workshops for schools as well as extra-curricular settings. Your project combines digital offerings with analogue formats in order to ensure an approach which is tailored towards your target group. What, in your opinion, are the general arguments in favour of thinking in an increasingly digital or hybrid way with regards to P/CVE?

Sabine Ulmer: Yes, young people are coming into contact with conspiracy narratives predominantly online. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube or Telegram are just a few examples of channels which play a big role in young people's lives and where they are confronted with conspiracy narrative content. And that's why it is important for us to actively incorporate the digital world in our P/CVE work. Specifically, we use tablets in the workshops which young people can use, for example, to explore interactive infographics. Or we discuss selected real-life social media posts which spread conspiracy narrative content. Besides this they can play "Actionbound". It's a quiz which tests your knowledge on algorithms, social media, and certain platforms. These are the basic components of our interactive toolkit, among other things. The workshops generally take place face to face because we think direct communication between young people is very important. We find that this direct contact with the target group

enriches the learning atmosphere, both for the participants themselves and for those giving the workshops.

Could you briefly explain why you see conspiracy myths as a challenge for young people in online environments, and why dealing with this topic is so vital for youth work within schools as well as in extracurricular settings.

Carolin Sokele: Young people are at a very sensitive phase in their lives, in particular regarding forming an identity. They're searching for orientation and values. And conspiracy narratives, especially in our globalised and complex world, offer easy explanations and divide the world into a simple good and evil. They prey on feelings of powerlessness and insecurity. And this is exactly where we want to take preventive action and make young people less susceptible to such content. In our view, prevention work is really necessary, because if people have already built and consolidated their world view based on conspiracy narrative content it's very difficult to then try and later debunk it. And that's why P/CVE work, which starts before such a world view has become entrenched, is hugely important.

And what would you say – how is your project structured? What formats have you chosen and where has the connection between digital and local approaches been particularly successful?

Sabine Ulmer: The workshops are definitely at the heart of our project. And that's where our toolkit against conspiracy narratives comes in. The toolkit itself is made up of various modules. For example, we provide basic information about conspiracy narratives, and there are modules on the potential dangers and conflicts that can arise from conspiracy beliefs. By developing the learning materials together with a peer group, we have been able to create resources which are actually orientated towards young people's lives. We generally offer the workshops face to face, but we also understand the importance of incorporating digital learning material. From the perspective of our project, the nexus between digital and local approaches is beneficial when conflicts, or the potential for conflict, start online and then manifest themselves in our analogue world. We can observe that conspiracy narrative content and alternative facts or disinformation on the internet has an impact on our offline life. This can lead to a loss of trust in our democracy and its institutions and the media. We saw this happening with conspiracy narratives around the COVID-19 vaccine.

Now, you have already mentioned peers. You adopted a peer-to-peer approach when developing content for the project. To what extent could you involve peers and how did this benefit the project?

Carolin Sokele: The toolkit modules were developed in collaboration with students from the University of Tübingen as part of a seminar which we ran. The workshops are also run by our team members, who are “peer team members” so to speak and therefore closely connected to young people’s lived reality. So far we have trained around 30 people as part of our team. In this way we are able to ensure that the #Verschwörung content is really orientated towards our target group and their lived reality. By working together with peers, we have had valuable interactions, gained contacts, and received helpful suggestions regarding the concept for the materials. For example, we have found out via peers about relevant influencers, certain film trailers, or also trends popular with young people. This knowledge is hugely important in terms of communicating our content and is very conducive to the dissemination of ideas and information.

To conclude, I would be interested to hear what kind of feedback you have had so far from participants.

Sabine Ulmer: We have heard from young people that they feel like their topics and questions are being taken seriously. And this is exactly what our approach is about – in the workshops we actively include issues which are important to the participants. We succeed in doing this by allowing participants to co-design the workshops themselves, so that it really is their workshop. We once had feedback from a pupil, for example, that she liked the fact that we didn’t rely on formulaic solutions. Really important are the contributions from the young people, which we then want to use to start a conversation. But we also get positive feedback about the methodology, the use of tablets and the interactive and multi-media learning materials. These methods are often seen as a welcome change from the regular school day.

Great. So, many thanks to you both for your time and your fascinating insights. And we’re really looking forward to more exciting projects with you in the future!

Sabine Ulmer: Many thanks for the invitation!

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them. For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention. As part of the 'Level Up!' project supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) we actively promote projects and organisations involved in extremism prevention that intervene online. We are interested, for example, in the question of what findings from preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be applied to the digital world and where new approaches in hybrid disengagement work should be developed, and what these might look like. In order to shed light on this, we are talking to representatives from the participating projects. We are delighted to have Fabian here with us today. He works for the Centre of competence for Open Youth Work in Austria (boJA). Welcome Fabian.

Fabian: Hello and best wishes from Vienna.

Thank you. Fabian, in your function as a social worker you are, and have been, involved in various P/CVE projects which intervene online. For example, "Jamal al-Khatib X Nisa" is an online video project by the organisation TURN, which provides young people with alternative narratives to jihadist and Islamist

propaganda. In the videos, those who have left the jihadist scene explain the dangers of closed religious ideologies associated with violent actions, and at the same time deal with topics relevant to young people's everyday lives. The educational materials developed for the project are now being used by multipliers in various educational settings, for example, prisons, youth work, probation services, as well as in schools. In cooperation with the organisation JUVIVO.²¹, you have also created the online campaign "Bro und Contra", a YouTube series which covers the attack by Grey Wolves sympathisers on a Kurdish demonstration in summer 2020. In addition, you are the co-author of the book "Die Wütenden" (The Angry Ones) which urges a re-evaluation of our approach to jihadi terror. We are delighted to have you here to tell us more about your many years of experience in extremism prevention and your observation of online phenomena. "Jamal al-Khatib X Nisa" was launched in 2017 and today the internet video series is currently in its fifth season. You can also find the videos on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. On which social media channel does the project have the highest reach, and why do you think this is? And which platform is best for building up and managing an online community?

Fabian: So, back to 2017. That is when the first season of Jamal al-Khatib aired. The topic we chose at the time was foreign fighters. So, it was in fact the case, that young people who sympathised with the so-called Islamic State and who

wanted to leave the country, some of them were prevented from doing so, had a change of heart and wanted to do something about it. They realised that it wasn't the right path. And we made videos with them relatively quickly. And we then posted them on Facebook. We really were in the right place, at the right time. So, in 2017, a long time ago now, Facebook was still relevant for young people. That really did work very, very well. All the IS propagandists in Austria were active on Facebook, especially Oliver and Firas who had their own Facebook pages where they chatted directly from Syria with fans in Vienna. We did something to counteract that. Season two was then two years later.

We changed to Instagram as our main channel and tried to move to YouTube. In season two we worked mainly with counter-narratives, meaning we looked at important, ideological basic components from the jihadi and neo-salafist scene. For example, the concept of Takfir, the shirk and democracy concept, or Kufr bit-Taghut and we tried on the one hand to develop counter-positions and offer an alternative narrative. This worked quite well on Instagram, but not as well as before on Facebook, because we were two, three years too late. That just has to be said. And there were already so many channels, so much content, so many adverts, which made it really hard to get the content out into the real world. It also has to be said that the transfer from Instagram to YouTube, so from one platform to another doesn't really work, or is very, very difficult. Interestingly, despite this it still worked quite well on YouTube. Possibly because people are even more any-

mous on there and we so had the main discussions on difficult topics on YouTube. On Instagram we were involved in a shitstorm initiated by the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, which was also very interesting. Basically, it was possible to reach the kids, but it was much, much more difficult than two years earlier on Facebook.

For the third season of Jamal al-Khatib we changed the approach a bit and decided to no longer select concepts and then take a counter-position, but instead to see which topics actually play a role in jihadi and neo-salafist propaganda. Then we tried to find a different framing for these topics. And so, this was on the one hand the third season in 2020, the Srebrenica campaign, where we tried to give the Srebrenica genocide a progressive framing. The aim was to show that the world didn't look away because they were Muslims, but that the Serbian attackers wanted to wipe out Muslim culture. This is all a part of it. Of course, it's a bit more complicated than that, but it really did work very, very well on Instagram. In other words, if you address underlying issues, you can reach kids who are otherwise very, very hard to connect with. And we are now taking this idea, of addressing underlying causes or topics, further on other channels. I'm on Instagram with "Die Wütenden" where we actually mainly address the topic of Chechnya, Russian mobilisation in Chechnya, and also possibilities of fleeing the war. And this is interesting for many young people at the moment as it affects them directly, because it's partly their relatives, their friends who are being pulled into it, being forcibly sent to Ukraine to end up as cannon fodder. That's why it works quite

well because we're actually doing something. We are supporting people in a concrete way, and this is also maybe one of the most important levels on which to reach young people. You have to do something, especially online, and you have to address certain topics and show that you are there and willing to help – so this 'youth-social-worker classic'.

With your project you use the content-based method of online digital outreach work. And digital social work has above all the advantage of the anonymity of the internet, so the barrier for young people to open up and speak more honestly is lower. But at the same time this anonymity makes long-term and binding communication more difficult. From your experience, what would you say is more important?

Fabian: Both things are very, very important. In my view. I just think we have to completely change our way of thinking. We as youth social workers and fundamentally as a society. There aren't separate online and offline worlds anymore. It's all the same for those who have basically grown up like that. And so, I think you should adopt these approaches, and it works best when you combine approaches. Here maybe a small example. I work together with a young guy who does a lot offline in workshop settings in youth facilities where there are kids. There are actually a lot of people converting in Austria, and I mean converting to this 'global protest Islam', because it represents

the most exciting counter-position to our prevailing societal model, this parliamentary democracy within the context of neoliberalism, so to speak.

This is a great opportunity to take a counter-position and so we are out and about quite a bit to try and connect with these young people. In one offline workshop we met two young people, connected on Instagram and the young guy who I do this with is mainly also active on TikTok. We all have to be on TikTok. I'm very sorry. Bad news, but that's the way it is (laughs). Young people aren't on Instagram or Facebook anymore. I don't know if anyone still is apart from Mark Zuckerberg (laughs). So, we basically got to know them and showed them our online channels. We connected online and that's how the trust grew, because they could see what content we were sharing, and so when a friend of the young guy's actually became radicalised, he contacted me, sent me a private message and I then connected him with the other guy, we went there and talked to them again offline. So, actually you need both. And that's maybe also because the approach we have is content based. It doesn't really work without content, not anymore. This separation that maybe somehow still made sense in 2017/18. In reality, it doesn't make sense anymore. It just doesn't work without content. And that's why I think you have to combine the approaches.

With P/CVE and disengagement work trust is also a very valuable asset. Can you explain what data protection measures and safe-

guards you have put in place for online social outreach work activities?

Fabian: It is a very complicated question, and one I don't really like talking about to be honest (laughs). Because it really makes it very, very, very, very difficult and I also fundamentally believe that in our institutionalised world, we have to operate in something of a grey area. We generally have to operate in a grey area, otherwise we won't be able to reach any young people. One thing that is important for me in this context, which I maybe want to pass on, is whatever I do in online work, it's important that I always have an educational goal. If I can no longer pursue this goal, and the path I need to take to pursue it is no longer possible, then I have to let it go. That is the most important thing.

We are very often in a grey area, especially on TikTok etc. Just because TikTok is owned by the Chinese government, this doesn't mean it's any better or worse than Meta. Because these are all companies who of course function according to neoliberal logic and aren't therefore allies in the fight for a free and democratic society or whatever. In other words, I think that the most important thing with any intervention is to think carefully about what my educational goal is, and if I can't achieve it and I can't justify it anymore, then I have to let it go.

Yes. The basis for the projects "Jamal al-Khatib X Nisa" and "Bro und Contra" is a peer-to-peer approach, where you work directly

together with young people who have left the jihadi scene and young Muslims in Austria to create videos. What, in your opinion, is especially important for this approach to succeed?

Fabian: You need a lot of time and a lot of patience (laughs). I don't need to explain much about participation, of course it's hard work, it also requires a lot of self-reflection, so of course in dialogue with young people, if it's to work, you have to be able to express criticism. You also have to be able to take criticism and it also has to hurt. So, real participation is when I don't always have control of everything etc. This means that you often have to take decisions which you can't take alone or where you have a difference of opinion, but that's the only way it works.

We work with a common ground approach, this means that with everything that we do we have to have consensus, if someone vetoes something, then we of course don't do it – doesn't matter who it is or why. That is really, really important for us. What's also important is to pay the young people. Always letting young people work for free etc., doesn't really work so well. I think it's also fair to look at things like that. But it doesn't work any other way. If I made content alone no one would be interested, but when I make for example content together with Ahmed, who we're making all the TikToks with, then it works. That's a fourth thing. And on a basic level, I think making content together with young people is also an opportunity, where you can see straight away: the journey in itself is very often the goal.

If we take “Bro und Contra” as an example, very often, the world views were different at the start of the project from what they then were at the end. I am a big fan of Paulo Freire: “actions and reflections” – it’s not enough just to talk about problems, you have to do something. And that’s what our projects are about.

So maybe just quickly, young people didn’t want to go to Syria to talk, they wanted to finally not just talk anymore, they wanted to act. I think that’s really, really important. And with “Bro und Contra”, we were also primarily concerned with making perspectives visible, making the inner voice visible and making ambivalence visible, which young people have, which we all have when we are in difficult situations where it’s possible mob action might occur. So, we all have a critical voice. Whether we listen to it, is another matter and that’s what it is about: making ambivalences visible, and the inner voice.

Our goal has always been for young people to develop an inner autonomy, in other words, to think and act in a way that is guided by their own values. I would like the kids to think critically about everything that they perceive in the adult world. But that also means that they have to think critically about the things I say (laughs). This means that in reality, the goal is if I’m contradicted and the kids criticise me and say “No, Fabian, that’s rubbish, let’s do it this way”, it’s not so nice for me, but in reality, we’ve won – goal achieved.

Both projects have accompanying educational material and the project “Jamal al-Khatib X Nisa” has also been accompanied by academic research. Can you maybe tell us something about the findings so far?

Fabian: Yes, basically I can say: it works. Well, you can reach kids. You can reach a diverse mix of kids. You can actually also reach young people who you definitely can’t reach offline anymore. That’s one thing. Above all, the participative aspect works. So of course, the online target group is a key group, but so is the offline group. That means the kids with whom I specifically create content; that works as well, perhaps to bring that in again: Basically, the internet, whether it’s Instagram or now TikTok in particular, is a kind of playground for identity formation and development. Kids watch things and create their own internet identities, which are more exaggerated, and they try things out. And of course, the comments section and the discourse are relevant for forming opinion. So, it’s even more important to work offline with kids to empower them to have their own opinions online. Because, to bring in the Islamist or jihadi context again: IS doesn’t care what I as an Austrian or German say about IS, but when young Muslims, especially girls, speak out against them in the comments section that’s very, very dangerous for IS. And that’s why we have to empower young people online as well as offline to take things into their own hands.

So, Fabian, many, many thanks to you for your time and the fascinating insights into your project. And we are, of course, excited about working with you in the future.

Fabian: Thank you. Many thanks.

CLICK!

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them. For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention.

As part of the 'Level Up!' project supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) we actively promote projects and organisations involved in online extremism prevention that intervene online. We are interested, for example, in the question of what findings from preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be applied to the digital world and where new approaches in hybrid disengagement work should be developed, and what these might look like. In order to shed light on this, we are talking to representatives from the participating projects.

We are delighted that the team from drudel11 is here with us today to share their insights into their project 'CLICK! – digital training for right-wing extremism prevention'

The CLICK! project offers digital training courses aimed at helping young offenders actively reduce hatred and violence.

How do you get in contact with young people or how do they find out about your training courses?

Drudel 11: Participants come to us one of two ways, either they have been referred to us or they register voluntarily. Whilst the latter find out about us via the internet because they themselves want to work on their behaviour or specific topics, we get in contact with the former through youth work and youth welfare organisations, or justice institutions. These are, in particular, youth welfare services in criminal proceedings, probation services, and youth detention and therefore participation in our courses has often been recommended or instructed by the courts.

You work with a high level of confidentiality, as the online courses as well as the pedagogical support you provide operate via an anonymous text messaging system. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?

Drudel 11: Our digital and anonymous approach is very accessible and creates space for participants to express themselves openly, which is necessary for reflecting and working on behaviour which ranges from problematic to criminal. Not all

participants would be able to achieve this equally in a group and/or immediate face-to-face setting. Because of its accessible and flexible nature, it can also be used as a form of early intervention and as a means of opening the door to other services, such as exit programmes. This form of communication can, however, also limit the capacity to build relationships – this doesn't work as well for everyone. We therefore see our online training courses as an important addition to the existing range of services on offer. For example, we have already successfully carried out hybrid versions of the CLICK! training courses. We also work closely with intermediary organisations. We assist specialists in various ways when conducting in-person training support. This allows the participants to remain anonymous to us without making the training any less binding.

What do you need to be most aware of when communicating and interacting with course participants?

Drudel 11: The most important thing is to communicate on equal terms with an honest, non-judgemental, and confidential openness, whilst at the same time maintaining a critical distance. Experience has also shown that short, direct, and focussed chat messages and questions are better received and initiate conversations more effectively than long and detailed texts. Reviewing and, if necessary, adapting our text messaging communication is an ongoing part of our work.

COP & CHE

What topics are the young people most concerned about and how specifically can you address these concerns through the additional chat service? How often during online counselling sessions do you direct participants to external (counselling) services for example?

Drudel 11: The most common concerns for the young people are their views on the offence committed and how it fits into their own biography (when looking at their past as well as their current or desired trajectory), their own strategies towards aggression and impulse control, as well as (additional) problems such as alcohol and drug abuse. As part of our chat support, we can identify problematic behaviour, encourage pro-social behaviour, initiate a change of perspective and develop de-escalation strategies. The two-way conversation can also help participants recognise problems in relation to their own mental health and drug use and highlight the need for external counselling services. In these cases, we try, if necessary, together with the intermediary organisation, to coordinate support services and offer help in finding concrete support.

In Germany, within marginalised groups there is often a negative image of the police. Is the situation comparable in Austria, and have you been able to change this image at all with your project 'Cop&Che?'

Yes, it's exactly the same with us as it is with you, as it is all over the world. We've definitely been able to break down this image a little, especially by showing young people, via Uwe the messenger, that there is a human being behind the uniform. However, it's not our job to do PR for the police, our aim is rather to make the multi-layered issue of police/police violence a topic of discussion and in doing so reach our target group (i.e., the exact same marginalised groups you are talking about). The online format takes into account young people's need to criticise social rules and norms and their sense of injustice at them, while at the same time providing them with concrete information to give them confidence when dealing with state institutions. We also simply help with concrete information about important topics.

In the videos you react to comments from your online community. Are there questions which you get asked a lot?

What am I allowed to do, what are the police allowed to do are the most common topics, so questions to do with the law and police conduct.

To what extent is the 'Cop&Che' project an example of online (extremism) prevention?

Basically, it's not an example at all, but in an ideal world it would be an example. We are being watched by the far-right (there have been several videos by Irfan Peci [a prominent former Islamist who now warns against the spread of radical Islam], several articles in the Heimatkurier [an Austrian far-right media organisation] / Identitarian Movement, which even led to a parliamentary enquiry by the FPÖ [a far-right political party in Austria], at the same time as there have also been videos by Realität Islam [a social media channel which posts radical Islamist content]) because through our reach and the story we tell in our videos we deconstruct their us vs. them construct (i.e. that a peaceful coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims is not possible).

The storyline behind the videos is as follows: Uwe tries to connect with Che's community, because the police often feel helpless and have limited options when interacting with 12- to 15-year-olds. Ahmad himself has had bad experiences with the police, but doesn't want this to define his life – in fact the opposite: he wants young people not to have to experience police violence in the way that he has. Ahmad and Uwe have discussed many topics, found they have many things in common and identified many misunderstandings that have been easy to clear up. On some things they have

different opinions, which is good. The project isn't acting nor is it propaganda, it's neither for nor against anything, but rather an attempt to start a conversation. We all live in this city and have to somehow get along with each other.

This means that we are on a meta level and telling a nice story about the friendship between Ahmad and Uwe, the perfect alternative narrative to extremist narratives. The specials work best, for example the two of them in the Prater amusement park in Vienna, the two of them wrestling, the two of them doing various live challenges.

What's the most important thing for you to keep in mind when deciding which topics to cover and then later when filming?

It's important that we don't censor anything and that we cover any topic that comes up, this begins by making sure we take the young people seriously by answering their questions even if they have spelling mistakes in them or seem so absurd. We also read out the usernames, as strange as they may be. When choosing topics, we try to cover everything the kids are into, so, weapons, drugs, mopeds, cars, tuning, self-defence, face coverings etc. (...) – what does the law say about how high the penalties are, but most of all about police conduct, racial profiling, how to make a complaint and so on.

Fabian, you have been part of project since the beginning. What has surprised you the most? Have there been moments where you've been sceptical?

What has really surprised me most has been Uwe, that he got involved with the project (it's pretty hard for him to create content with people who are so critical of the police haha), but also what kind of effect the two of them have had on young people. It's really crazy how everyone (!!!) recognises them when we're out and about!

DERAS_ON

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them. For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention.

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We are delighted that deras_on is a part of the 'Level Up!' network and that Anne-Maika Krüger is here with us today to tell us about their work and the project.

Your project aims to carry out digital outreach work on social media for people with antisemitic views, and in the best case provide them with ways out of extremism. Can you tell us more about how the project was originally set up and what the objective was?

So maybe not “for people with antisemitic views” but rather with them and against antisemitism. But yes: Originally, we wanted to concentrate above all on the so-called fringe of social media, i.e., those with ideologically committed antisemitic views, who also mostly come from the Nazi spectrum. This was also to do with the fact that our partner organisation Drudel 11 e.V. already had many years of experience with exit programmes for the extreme right – but mostly offline. Our goal was then, as it is now, to respond to antisemitic statements online. We want to try out approaches where we can connect with users – a basis on which to build a conversation.

For various reasons you have had to adapt your approach to the project. Can you tell us why this was the case exactly, and in what ways you have had to adapt.

We have had to constantly adapt our approach to this project, and still do. The reasons for this were partially to be expected: Those we reach out to online often don't respond at all, or more often respond with aggression or malice. Or they take the social worker's interest as an opportunity in the semi-public sphere of Telegram to ignore arguments or questions and instead throw around

even more disinformation intended to emotionally mobilise subscribers.

And above all the digital distance is a hindrance. It reinforces the effect that the social worker can become a projection surface for all kinds of things. Relationship building is really hard to do. What's more, people aren't in these Telegram groups for nothing. They firmly believe in the world Jewish conspiracy and its sub-narratives about killing children, vaccine murders etc.

We now want to approach the less established antisemitic groups and users. To do this we screen Telegram groups according to the categories/metaphors 'hell' and 'limbo' with the assumption that the world views in the latter are not yet completely closed off. The antisemitic attitude patterns in these groups are still more likely to be coded and the members are (presumably) not bound to a particular scene. Approaching these people could work better.

Has your work with the project dramatically changed since the Hamas terror attack on the 7th of October and the current war between Israel and Gaza? If so, what impact has the current situation had on the project?

Since the Hamas massacre, antisemitic statements have increased online as well as offline. This has created more opportunities for us to engage with people. It is striking that even in the Telegram groups which at least tolerate antisemitic content, there is no consensus on the con-

DISTANZ E.V.

flict in the Middle East more generally nor on the current war specifically. Positions on the war are as diverse as they are wrong. Some are as openly racist as they are antisemitic. In their imagination, Israel is a white ethno-state, a bulwark against Arabs and Islam. Others blame Israel itself for the terror or even suspect a controlled expulsion of Palestinians to Europe. In doing so they repeat the antisemitic 'Great Replacement' narrative. It is true that there is a tendency in Telegram groups to allow anything: sharply contradictory comments can sit side by side – without discourse, dispute, or exclusion. Although sometimes space for discourse can open up in which social work can operate.

Your project "Echt Jetzt?!" ["For real?!"] is based on an educational approach to conspiracy narratives. In the first phase, young people invent their own conspiracy narratives and in the second you present their stories to a wide online audience. The aim is to reach as many people as possible and to increase critical awareness surrounding such myths. What have been the funniest/most interesting narratives young people have come up with (of course anonymously and just the general idea)?

Our workshop participants have come up with many very original, creative, and highly conspiratorial ideas! Some stories have been totally crazy, others have come across as deceptively 'real'. Did you know, for example, that the government is allegedly sending satellites into space in order to manipulate our thoughts? Or that the *Bundestagsgartenschau* [federal horticulture show in Germany] is actually the devilish plan of an evil scientist who wants to wipe out humanity with genetically modified poisonous plants? Or even more shocking: A secret elite invented time travel in the future and has been controlling history for its own purposes ever since? How else do you explain all these crises we are facing!

As you can see, there are no limits to the imagination – and if you want to see all the stories, you can find them on our Instagram profile ;)

How do young people react when you talk to them about the topic of conspiracy nar-

ratives? Can you share some of your experiences? Have there maybe been any 'aha moments'?

Most of them are really interested and want to know more. Although the level of individual experience varies greatly. Many have "just heard something superficially" but others have come into more intense contact with them and know of concrete examples. This shows us that we are working with the right age group. Because at some point or another coming into contact with conspiracy myths is more or less inevitable. This is why early on we engage, not only with the content, but also with the underlying, manipulative tricks of conspiracy myths. Most of the participants find this really interesting, but also recognise the dangers.

What makes me optimistic, is the impression I get that the majority of young people have a critical, sceptical attitude towards most conspiracy narratives. They often can't believe how far people go down a rabbit hole and become radicalised by fake stories. These are really valuable, eye-opening 'aha' moments!

We want to strengthen this basic resilience in the long term and encourage young people to adopt a critical stance. This empowerment is really important because all too often they are under a lot of pressure to agree with conspiracy narratives, at least outwardly. This often comes from their social environment, such as family or friends. A clear stance and preventative education are im-

portant here – through projects like ours, but primarily through youth and educational institutions.

In your experience, where do most young people get the inspiration/motivation for their conspiracy ideas?

It's actually really surprising how easy it is for young people to come up with their own, sometimes very convincing, conspiracy stories.

On the one hand, this shows us the deeply rooted patterns of 'good storytelling' that these narratives follow. Every one of us is shaped by stories – or "narratives" as we sometimes call them. We develop a kind of gut-feeling when it comes to story-telling, thanks to all the fairytales, books, films, and now also online stories which we consume in the course of our life. This is exactly where conspiracy stories come in: In order to be memorable and definitive, they follow the universal recipes of exciting storytelling!

On the other hand, we see that many young people have come into contact very early on with concrete conspiracy myths and their often extremist, dehumanising messages. This happens primarily in their online world. And this is also why these fictional conspiracy stories can be easily reproduced. If they are never questioned, they can reinforce anti-democratic or hostile attitudes – and not just among young people. This is exactly where our educational work comes in.

THIS KIND OF INSPIRATION

How can you be sure that none of these invented conspiracies “take hold”?

That’s a very good question! We did a lot of research beforehand, by speaking to other experts and discussing how we could on the one hand make the project appealing and interesting, but at the same time ensure that we didn’t become part of the problem. We made the decision to always stay authentic and transparent, and to present ourselves as the media education project that we are. This framework ensures that we’re not spreading any additional fake stories. At the same time we try to make very clear that we are open to discussion. We want to connect with our online audience about the stories and also address bigger issues. How does a conspiracy become, for example, (un)believable? What is manipulation, what is ‘truth’? Anyone who would like to join in the discussion is welcome to visit our social media profile or our website! www.wonderlink.de/@echtjetzt

PRE:BUNK

Your project ‘pre:bunk’ aims to help young people put different kinds of information and messages on social media into context. To do this you have set up a TikTok account in order to connect with young people. You post educational videos which deal with issues that concern young people and us as a society. How do you decide which topics to address? Do you take up suggestions from your online community? Or do you react to trends that you yourselves are aware of?

Theresa Lehmann: With **pre:bunk** we are testing out digital streetwork [a form of digital social outreach work where social workers seek out and connect with young people online or via social media] in an audiovisual format. It’s a pilot project supported by the Federal Agency for Civic Education. The aim of the videos is to help young people navigate TikTok in a media literate way, to offer support in the event of acute crises, and to proactively counter the spread of disinformation. Prebunking therefore provides the framework for deciding which topics to address.

Michelle Pantke: We do react to suggestions and questions, but we often make videos on topics which interest us. Because of the focus of the channel, we of course look at topics where a lot of disinformation is circulating online and try to tailor our videos to where we see needs that can be addressed by the prebunking approach. We also encourage our viewers to suggest topics in the comments section that they would like to see videos on. In order to know what the latest trends are on TikTok you need to stay up to date

and have a certain know-how about how the platform works. This is the only way to stay connected to the real world and the target group so that we can respond to their needs. We generally are aware of trends and develop ideas for videos from them – although you have to be fast, otherwise lots of other people will have made videos on the same topic and people are not really interested anymore.

What is the most important thing to be aware of when communicating and interacting with your users?

Michelle Pantke: We take care that interaction with one another is always respectful, and we do not tolerate any antisemitic or racist content, insults or hate speech in the comments section. To try and mitigate this we have a video on our account on 'netiquette', which explains the kind of interaction we would like to see and what kinds of comments will not be tolerated. Comments can sometimes be a bit funny if the original comment has a similar tone. The interaction should be relaxed, but at the same time polite. It's important to adapt to the language and tone of the users, it should sound open and friendly, but at the same time distanced enough that it stays professional.

Theresa Lehmann: As well as being on equal terms with our users and being accessible, it's also important for us to not only focus on the facts. This is what separates us from a fact-check approach. What we can additionally offer is to connect on an emotional level by addressing emotions such as anger, feeling overwhelmed, and fear.

Have you ever had to delete any comments?

Michelle Pantke: We have had to delete comments a few times. In those cases, it was to do with people posting antisemitic conspiracy narratives in the comments section. If such things continue to be posted after the first comment from us, the content will be deleted.

What is an example of an interaction which you found particularly rewarding?

Theresa Lehmann: We are actually currently trying to reach a bigger audience. To do so it is important to build up trust and to post regularly. We want to continue to build on this in 2024. At the moment, we are happy about every question, opportunity for discussion and any constructive feedback we get because it shows us that our support is reaching people. In contrast to propagandists and anti-democrats we do not use emotionally overpowering, sensationalist, and populist means, things which often do well on TikTok. We try to set a good example, by providing sources and trying to create access points to

channel young people's mistrust and criticism of society, which are not problematic per se, as well as creating access points for how this can be used constructively as part of a democratic civil society. At first glance, we might seem to be at a disadvantage compared to some of the phenomena that we can observe with concern on TikTok, but this is the wrong way to look at it. Because what we offer can reach more young

people than an analogue approach would. There is therefore a basic tension between educational criteria for action and platform logic or attention economy. Our goal is to offer live streams soon in order to expand our range further, for which we need 1000 followers.

Link to the pre:bunk channel: <https://www.tiktok.com/@prebunk>

STREETWORK@ONLINE

There has long been consensus in research that digital spaces and experiences are part of radicalisation processes or can accelerate and intensify them.

For this reason, connecting with young people in a digital context in a way that resonates with their lived reality is particularly important for actors involved in extremism prevention. As part of the 'Level Up!' project supported by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) we actively promote projects and organisations involved in extremism prevention that intervene online. We are interested, for example, in the question of what findings from preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work can be applied to the digital world and where new approaches in hybrid disengagement work should be developed, and what these might look like. In order to shed light on this, we are talking to representatives from the participating projects. We are delighted that streetwork@online is a part of the 'Level Up!' network and that Sergio Castellón is here with us today to tell us about his work and the project.

Your project streetwork@online carries out 'digital streetwork' [a form of digital social outreach work] – this entails reaching out to young people in particular on social media. How do you go about doing this? Which 'digital streetwork' strategy has proved most successful so far?

streetwork@online: Exactly, we carry out social outreach work on the most important social media platforms and messenger services. We actively seek out contact with diverse groups of people – many of whom are young, and this is mostly because social networks like TikTok, Instagram, or Discord are increasingly used by young people.

Our interdisciplinary team of online social outreach workers typically proceeds as follows; they log onto social media platforms via mobile phone, tablet, or computer and then screen the relevant groups, channels, or profiles. These groups have been pre-selected by our scientific monitoring team according to certain indicators.

The team then pay particularly close attention to the comments section. They either respond directly or via private chat to comments which, for example, target the liberal democratic order or groups of people, or they ask the right questions when very dogmatic views on religion are propagated. At the same time they respond to comments where it may seem that the person wasn't doing so well at the time of writing.

The methods we use in order to connect with people include a power-sensitive approach, non-violent communication, and systemic questioning. In doing so we want to be able to connect with people on equal terms and create space for communication, and normally this works quite well!

Is this approach well-received by your target group? Or which target group is more open to this approach than others?

streetwork@online: Yes, as I said this approach seems to go down well! It is sometimes difficult to measure satisfaction or quantify success, especially when the work doesn't take place face to face. Although we do get regular positive feedback from people we are in direct dialogue with as well as from other users in the comments section. Of course, there are also encounters which don't lead to the result we want or exchanges which aren't fruitful. But even in these cases, at least we are able to insert a counter-narrative into the online world, which is hopefully read by other people. In this way, we can stand up for democracy, dialogue, and tolerance.

Our approach seems to be especially well-received in bigger groups or communities. It becomes more difficult, however, in smaller Telegram or WhatsApp groups where there are people who have already been radicalised or where there is a lot of mistrust. But even in these groups it shouldn't be impossible!

You have extended your digital outreach work to include Discord and Telegram. What differences have you noticed so far com-

pared to more mainstream social media platforms, for example Instagram (necessary approaches, dynamics, networks etc.)?

streetwork@online: That's what we're trying to find out ourselves! One of the biggest differences is how these platforms are structured. Compared to Facebook or Instagram, which in the real world would be similar to public spaces, these platforms are more like closed, private spaces. Certain users can decide who is allowed in and who isn't. This makes our work more complicated because we can't easily enter this 'space': not everyone has access, and even those that do, can't always participate within it. Transparency, which is very important for us, can at first seem like a hindrance, it does however, also enable us as online social outreach workers to offer people the opportunity to enter into direct dialogue within a small group, and to connect to people in an accessible way in the safe spaces which they retreat to. There are of course closed groups on Facebook too, which you can only be permitted to join by admins; but they aren't as exclusive. In the closed spaces on Discord or Telegram – these bubbles or echo chambers – the previously mentioned shift towards extremism can become entrenched or progress more quickly because, among other things, there aren't any voices offering a counter-narrative.

There are probably also sometimes encounters online which aren't so pleasant, how do you deal with these?

streetwork@online: You're right, unpleasant encounters are sadly part of the job. It is important that we, on the one hand, keep in mind the individual person and their needs and remain a means of support for them. On the other, we have to protect our own mental health and safety. In order to meet the first objective, we resort to the methods mentioned earlier, such as non-violent communication and systemic counselling techniques. Of course in an online context there are many reasons why a conversation can end abruptly, you just have to be aware of this and accept that a conversation isn't always welcome or that you don't exactly know how the support on offer will be received. The well-being of the team is ensured by maintaining regular contact with another and, if necessary, by bringing in external experts and supervisors.

Have online communities emerged with whom you're in regular contact, and in contrast, are there any that you avoid (particularly on Telegram)?

streetwork@online: That's also a very good question! And one that isn't so easy to answer. As already mentioned, the reaction until now has been mostly positive – but not always. We have for example had intense interactions with famous

preachers who haven't been in agreement with our views. We've also been temporarily blocked from well-known sites and our own posts have sometimes received trolling comments by bots or angry users.

Our aim remains, however, to spread our democracy-promoting approach wherever we feel that democracy and human rights are being called into question and where tolerance of ambiguity could be helpful. Even when there are groups which temporarily shut us out, or when there are certain channels which we have to approach with great caution, patience, and with a solid safety concept in place.

The good news is that our online community is continuing to grow: 2023 saw a growth of 25% in our number of followers on Instagram. We are getting more and more responses to our comments, we've been able to build up good relationships with some users via one-to-one conversations and targeted offers of support, and our online digital outreach profile has already been recognised as part of a larger actor. And despite growing recognition, the big actors don't have us on their radar – this is thanks to our transparent approach with users on equal terms and can be seen as a success in the area of digital P/CVE. All these factors show that streetwork@online has established itself as an important actor in the digital world, offering democracy-promoting empowerment, support in different life situations and a few funny memes.

PART II

| Ways forward for digital narrative campaigns against extremism

| **Spotlight:** Storytelling Against Extremism:

How Insights From Narrative Persuasion Research Can Improve Digital P/CVE Narrative Campaigns

Linda Schlegel

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 focus-

ing on what we are ‘for’ rather than ‘against’” [6] and put “forward a positive story about social values, such as tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy.” [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 accord-

ance 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 suc-

cessfully 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 crunching 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 beginning 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 is 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 persuasion 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 audi-

ences 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 persuasion. 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 individual organizations involved in designing, implementing, or funding the narrative. There are three important mes-

senger-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 telling 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 will 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 the 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 validate 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 demonstrate 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 <i>foundation and necessary precondition</i> for narrative persuasion effects to occur and must therefore be the primary goal of every narrative persuasion campaign.

GAMMMMA+	CAN LITERATURE	NARRATIVE PERSUASION LITERATURE
Audience	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
Message	<p>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.</p>	<p>Narrative persuasion campaigns should be understood and developed as <i>narratives</i>. 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).</p>
Messenger	<p>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.</p>	<p>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.</p>
Medium	<p>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.</p>	<p>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 multi-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]</p>

GAMMMMA+	CAN LITERATURE	NARRATIVE PERSUASION LITERATURE
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 identifi-

cation 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 stories 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 persuasion 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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| Entertainment-education campaigns in other fields

What are entertainment-education narrative campaigns, and why is storytelling a useful persuasion technique?

Entertainment-education narrative campaigns use stories to promote prosocial change. They can be a powerful persuasive technique because audience members choose to engage with the campaigns. The more that audiences identify with characters and become absorbed in the story, the less likely they are to resist the persuasion attempts. Such stories can also shape audience views of how the world works. Theories such as the entertainment overcoming resistance model suggest that we process narrative stories differently from more traditional, didactic persuasive attempts.

Based on your research, what makes a narrative campaign appealing and effective? What should P/CVE practitioners know when designing entertainment-education campaigns against extremism?

The most effective campaigns are those that are inherently entertaining. For these campaigns to work, audiences need to elect to listen to or view them. Thus, the entertaining aspects are even more important than the social message. I recommend beginning with a compelling narrative, and then slowly adding relevant and appropriate content against extremism. The stories themselves should be plausible and feel personally relevant to the intended audiences. Changes happen slowly over time, and any single campaign is

only one part of a broader context of prosocial messages. Drawing on Bandura's social cognitive theory, Miguel Sabido developed a methodology for using positive, transitional, and negative role models to demonstrate consequences and show the potential for positive social change. In addition to considering the storylines, it is equally important to consider distribution. The best campaigns employ the channels and genres that audiences already appreciate, meeting them where they are.

In which contexts are entertainment-education campaigns being successfully implemented and what changes in attitudes, perceptions, behaviors etc. can these campaigns have?

Entertainment-education campaigns have a long history in a variety of contexts. Campaigns have been conducted in countries all over the world. They have tackled issues from health topics (especially sexual and reproductive health, family planning, and HIV/AIDS) to other forms of social norms change (e.g. promoting gender equity and against intimate partner violence). Early campaigns took the form of long-running serial dramas developed intentionally for the purpose. Increasingly, campaigns also incorporate prosocial messages into existing television shows that already have an engaged audience base. These campaigns can impact attitudes, behaviors, and social norms. The size of the impact is often small, but these impacts can be spread across large

audiences and amplified through repeated exposure.

What approaches and best practice examples could P/CVE practitioners learn from?

For practitioners working to prevent and counter violent extremism, good examples from entertainment-education include campaigns against domestic violence (most notably *Soul City*) and campaigns to reduce inter-ethnic conflict. I especially recommend BBC Media Action's radio drama, *Tea Cup Diaries*. Their research and production teams worked together to iteratively create a program that celebrated ethnic and religious diversity and aimed to work against negative stereotypes.

Are there any risks or ethical considerations associated with entertainment-education campaigns?

Many entertainment-education campaigns use negative and transitional role models. These role models begin with behaviors that do not match the recommended prosocial message. The transitional role models are shown over time changing their attitudes and behaviors to adopt the more positive message. Negative role models receive negative consequences for their actions. However, if audiences do not engage with the entire story or identify with the wrong characters, these

efforts can backfire. In other words, a story that is not well told could actually increase sympathy toward extremism. To prevent this, research with the intended audience is essential throughout the process. Another ethical consideration that we must always consider is who tells the stories and about whom they are told. Storytelling comes with a great deal of power.

When are entertainment-education narrative campaigns not the right approach?

Entertainment-education narratives work especially well with complex topics that can be examined through stories. For simple and urgent directives, the time and expense of developing and testing a narrative campaign may not be a good use of resources.

Dr. Lauren Frank is a Professor of Communication at Portland State University. Her expertise is in the development and evaluation of social and behavior change communication campaigns. She has studied pandemics, infectious diseases, vaccinations, maternal and child health, gender norms, adolescent sexual education, and a variety of other topics. As part of this, she studies how people make health decisions and how social norms affect our choices. Much of her research examines entertainment-education, the process of intentionally adding educational information to entertaining media, including television and social media.

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| Fictional storytelling and entertainment-education campaigns

Why is storytelling a useful technique in strategic communication efforts?

Storytelling has gone from being a niche pursuit to an acknowledged, and appreciated, aspect of strategic communications within the P/CVE sector. It is a matter of personal perspective, but it certainly feels like this is a recent transition, and a very welcome one. Stories – and the craft of creating, curating and disseminating them – should not be taken for granted. They're a powerful tool.

Stories have always been a fundamental part of the human experience. They're how we make sense of the world; how we explain and express ideas. From a pragmatic perspective, stories are able to do the following, amongst others:

- | Create role models (*This is what an admirable person looks like...*)
- | Introduce or amplify positive aspirations (*This is an inspiring dream to have...*)
- | Describe social norms (*This is how people should behave...*)
- | Explore consequences (*This is what would happen if...*)

All of these are immensely valuable to P/CVE practitioners.

A quick trip through Amazon reviews shows us the power of stories: they 'grip', 'immerse', 'carry us away'. Stories transport their audiences into

realities that we design for them. That is undeniably powerful. A well-constructed story creates a world for the reader (or viewer, or listener, or player). They experience that world, connect with the characters, and experience the conflict and its resolution. The audience then takes what they learn back to their own life when the story is finished. They're the ultimate in controlled environments.

Stories are experiences and corner stores of people's identity. Stories can also be the basis for a community or an identity. People can be united by their love of books, games or movies; even as they experience a story individually, their appreciation of it can create a shared identity.

In recent years we've seen story-based-communities ranging from *Star Wars* to comic books radicalise in (a misguided) defense of their beloved stories. This is due to bad actors in those communities understanding the importance of the stories to people's identity and composing their own stories about a perceived existential threat. (*'Diversity is taking Star Wars from us!'*) It is easy to overlook these in favour of more overtly ideological threats, but time has shown us how movements like GamerGate have led to more sinister activities. Extremists can prey on collective identities as diverse as faith, fitness and football; 'fandoms' based on a storytelling property can be just as central to an individual's identity. People take their stories seriously.

Can fictional narratives be used in entertainment-education campaigns? What are the benefits and potential drawbacks of fiction vs. non-fiction?

Myths and fables guided humanity for thousands of years, and don't show any sign of letting loose their particular hold on us. Even if a story isn't based on factual events ('fiction'), it can still be rooted in people's feelings or emotions, and therefore true to their lived experience. A powerful story doesn't have to be right, it just needs to be true.

The 'truth' of a story is whether it actually understands and reflects the audience's own lived experience. A true story is one that recognises their hopes and fears and aspirations. *Lord of the Flies* and *1984* (or, for that matter, *The Color Purple*, *On the Beach*, or *Harry Potter*) are not real, but they still contain persuasive power because they resonate with what people feel as truth.

Whether or not a story is based in fact and accuracy is secondary. This decoupling of fact and truth is not without danger. Thus the power of mis- and disinformation narratives: they understand that stories that the audience want to be right can be more persuasive than the stories that are actually so. As far as the practicalities of intervention development: it is ethically important that we don't present fiction as non-fiction, but, even when clearly presented as such, there's still plenty of scope for fantastical narratives to contain truth.

Some people worry that fictional narratives in particular are more easily misunderstood than argument-based messages or may be seen as attempts of 'manipulation' by target audiences. What are your thoughts on that?

Fictional narratives *are* more subject to interpretation, which is a double-edged sword. People can somehow read *Lolita* and think of it as a charming romance, or take a monarchist message out of *Game of Thrones*.

However, it is worth the risk. Interpreting a story is what makes storytelling into a participatory mechanic. The stories that challenge us in this way are more resonant. We enjoy them more, engage with them more, and take in the lessons more deeply. It is less about being didactic than encouraging the audience to distill, and therefore co-own, the lesson. Parables have more power than instructions.

It is also worth noting that, sadly, objective truth is no longer automatically accepted as such. Audiences are increasingly unlikely to take argument-based messages at face value, especially when coming from an unknown or unfamiliar messenger. Stories that encourage people to think through to their own conclusions can be a way of circumventing their natural suspicion.

From your experience, what makes a narrative campaign appealing and effective? What should P/CVE practitioners know when designing entertainment-education campaigns against extremism?

We've already learned a lot about narrative campaigns in P/CVE. An appealing and effective campaign should be:

- | Relevant to the audience
- | Resonant with their lived experience (this includes emotional experience too – e.g. although very few people have actually crawled through magic wardrobes, many more can understand the sensation of being lonely and displaced)
- | Coming from a trustworthy messenger (and for this, I use Russell Hardin's notion of trust as a belief in shared self-interest. The audience should believe the objectives of the storyteller are either aligned with, or, at the very least, not in conflict with, their own interests.)

Beyond that, we have vast expertise and 'best practice' in storytelling from other disciplines. These range from marketing to children's books; speech-writing to sermons. Much of what is 'appealing' (or, for that matter, 'effective') will depend on the context and format of the story. Anyone working in any of these formats shouldn't start from first principles, as there's centuries of knowledge to draw upon.

If a P/CVE practitioner is designing a form of entertainment, they need to understand that form of entertainment. It doesn't matter if it is 'good P/CVE' if it is a crappy game, a dull video or a boring story. Making a 'bad' story not only fails to achieve your objectives, but also can turn the audience against you.

What approaches and best practice examples exist that P/CVE practitioners may learn from?

I am genuinely delighted that P/CVE practitioners (and donors) are embracing the importance of storytelling, however, I have concerns that we are going about it with the sector's typically heavy-handed enthusiasm. There seems to be a desire to make *big* stories: feature films, documentaries, and even games. This ambition fails to account for the vast amounts of resource and – more importantly skill – that goes into making stories at this scale.

These are vastly challenging industries who are already battling for the limited attention of our audiences. P/CVE has less budget, more constraints, and infinitely less experience. We are not in a position to design competitive products, and I suspect we never will be. There's no shame in not being able to create *Fortnite* or *The Walking Dead*. The actual experts in these actual industries have a very low success rate; it is naive to think we'll somehow do better.

In our delight at designing stories, we also tend to overlook the challenge of getting those products, once created, in front of the audience. Simply making a game or app or website or video or TikTok is not enough. How do we get our audiences to willingly engage with a P/CVE storytelling product, in their own time, through their own free will?

Again, professional filmmakers and game companies are experts at marketing and publicising their own products. They have invested in their channels, built the influencer and media relationships, and have already developed the appropriate platforms. They have substantial marketing budgets and teams. Industry experts have already done the hard work to make fetch happen. We cannot replicate that from a standing start, in a six-month design-to-evaluation timeline.

With the above in mind, I urge P/CVE practitioners to strongly consider the following approaches:

1. Influence those who are already telling the big stories. What could we teach to producers and platforms who are already making popular shows and games? How do we get them on board with weaving resilience into their products, embedding positive values, demonstrating desirable social norms, or providing positive role models? In one successful example, the long-running British TV drama *EastEnders*, included a storyline around a character being recruited into the far right, including a realistic depiction of how it affects families and communities.
2. Connect with the communities that already exist around storytelling properties. How do we reach *Star Wars* fans or *Call of Duty* players or comic book readers? What can we be doing to engage with fan-fiction communities, or romance readers? One of the challenges of P/CVE is finding a way to speak about difficult issues in a way that promotes discussion, and not reactance. Thanks to the power of (existing) stories, we know there are huge discussion communities (with their own influencers, platforms, spaces, social norms, values, etc), and we already know 'what they like'. How do we enter those spaces, authentically and genuinely, and prompt positive discussions within these networks? If this seems manipulative, it is worth noting that *hostile actors are already doing this*. We have a narrow window of opportunity in which to build resilience.
3. Think small. We don't need to build AAA games or film documentary series. An anecdote has incredible power. The antivaxx movement spread through memes and Facebook posts about fictitious uncles dropping dead after receiving their shots. We need to think at that level. How do we write stories that people share with their friends at work, or in their WhatsApp parenting group? How do we design stories that are shared by cabbies or in Reddit comments? These personal, authentic anecdotes are immensely powerful. Currently, we're too focused on broadcast, and not focused enough on this level of interpersonal communication.

Storytelling is powerful and, as exciting as it is as a 'new' discovery to us, it has been around for a very long time. As enthusiastic as we are about the practice of storytelling, we should think carefully where we – as P/CVE practitioners – can add the most value.

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PART III

| Next frontiers for digital P/CVE

| Mainstreaming

What is mainstreaming and why is it relevant?

Mainstreaming refers to the gradual process by which radical and extremist ideologies are subtly integrated into the broader society. This makes these once-fringe ideas seem more acceptable and less noticeable over time. The relevance of mainstreaming lies in its potential to shift public opinion and normalize extreme views, which can erode democratic values and increase societal polarization. As these ideologies gain acceptance, they can influence public policy and public opinion, making it a concern for those aiming to preserve social cohesion and democratic values.

Mainstreaming can be strategically and intentionally fostered by radical and extremist actors and can (simultaneously) be unintentionally facilitated by societal changes and processes. In our recently published concept paper, my colleagues Heidi Schulze, Prof. Diana Rieger, Dr. Brigitte Naderer, and I propose a model of mainstreaming understood as a meta-process involving multiple directions, actors, and sub-processes that ultimately 'aid' the overall mainstreaming process. We also discuss several practical mechanisms, factors, and bespoke sub-processes, as well as how they can contribute to mainstreaming in that piece.

What are the mechanisms of mainstreaming and how do extremist actors use it?

Extremist actors employ several communication tactics to mainstream their ideas. Key to mainstreaming is the very fundamental step of content positioning. This describes inserting radical or extremist ideas into public discourse. Crucially, these ideas must be repacked in such a way as that they can theoretically be consumed by a broader mass, which means that very explicit statements would not work since they tentatively would deter and trigger reactance. Radical ideas would be communicated as subtly, subliminally, and implicitly as possible for the purpose of mainstreaming.

This is pursued through methods such as hijacking popular hashtags or reinterpreting specific terminology to introduce radical and extremist ideas in a subtle manner. Dog whistling uses coded language that appears innocuous to the general public but conveys specific meanings to extremist audiences, increasing the salience of radical ideas without drawing overt attention. Calculated provocations, where extremists make provocative statements to gain public attention and normalize extreme views, are also commonly used. Social media is exploited extensively by extremists due to its capacity to amplify messages quickly and widely. Techniques such as coordinated liking and commenting may be used to ma-

nipulate platform algorithms to increase content visibility. Extremists also use alternative and hyper-partisan news outlets to reinterpret current events in line with their ideologies, promoting the salience of radical frames. Gaining attention in mainstream news outlets through high-profile campaigns or calculated provocations helps further legitimize and spread extremist ideas.

All these factors and mechanisms can help to position content within the broader society. Still, as we argue, there is a second important component that is determined on the individual recipient's side: its susceptibility. Susceptibility involves leveraging specific audience characteristics to increase the public's receptiveness to extremist content. Just to name a few practical examples: Humorous and entertaining communication formats, such as memes, disguise hateful ideologies, making them more palatable and shareable – and certain audiences, such as those prone to 'trolling', might contribute to reproducing them. Compelling visuals, like images and short videos, attract attention and convey emotional messages effectively, making extremist ideas more appealing. Targeted appeals to specific demographic groups, such as using social media influencers, can enhance the persuasiveness of the message among certain target groups.

What should P/CVE practitioners know about mainstreaming?

I think the most important thing for P/CVE practitioners, as well as everyone trying to observe

and tackle mainstreaming, to understand is that mainstreaming is a subtle and long-term process involving multiple steps and actors. Mainstreaming does not happen from one moment to the other. Recognizing the nuanced and gradual nature of mainstreaming is crucial for identifying early signs of mainstreaming. Additionally, I would say that practitioners should be aware of the strategic communication tactics used by extremists, including the exploitation of social media algorithms and cultural shifts that unintentionally facilitate the integration of radical ideologies into the broader discourse. Understanding these mechanisms allows P/CVE practitioners to better monitor and counter these tactics effectively. Of course, research and policymakers are also in charge here – the former specifically in monitoring mainstreaming and in evaluating or observing new trends that might contribute to the mainstreaming of radical and extremist ideology, and the latter in structurally creating a framework that enables effective and long-term monitoring, subsequent prevention, and counteraction. Finally, I want to highlight and thank P/CVE practitioners for all their hard work: It is such an important job that they are doing; they really work on the frontline in countering and preventing such worrisome dynamics.

How could P/CVE practitioners use (the mechanisms of) mainstreaming to facilitate positive discursive changes?

That is a very good question. First and foremost, I think it's important to say that the systematic

study of mainstreaming is quite a new field, which is why there exists little evidence that empirically measures mainstreaming, much less tests and evaluations of counter and prevention measures. I think a potential here may lie in the collaboration between practitioners in designing counter and prevention campaigns and researchers in accompanying them with evaluation approaches. Notwithstanding, I would say that some of the mechanisms, factors, and sub-processes we propose might be worth to be used “the other way round”, to interrupt or reverse mainstreaming dynamics.

What is crucial is promoting inclusive and positive narratives, perhaps using similar mechanisms. They can strategically position content that highlights diversity, tolerance, and democratic values and engage with mainstream media to amplify positive stories that counter extremist frames – as kind of a counterweight to all the negative news we’re currently confronted with. Crafting messages that resonate with the susceptibility of specific at-risk groups, targeted addressing their concerns and aspirations using visually appealing content or communicators that can access these individuals in a more simplified way (like social media influencers) can make messages of unity and equality engaging and shareable.

Furthermore, I would say that education and awareness-building are important pillars. Sensitizing the public and stakeholders for the subtle nature of mainstreaming is vital in that regard. This involves raising awareness about how extremist ideologies can quietly infiltrate the broader discourse and the long-term impacts of these shifts. By understanding the gradual and often unnoticed ways in which radical ideas get more normal over time, individuals can become more vigilant and resistant to potential influences and can be equipped with the knowledge to recognize and counteract mainstreaming dynamics, ultimately helping to build a more resilient and cohesive society.

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| Strategic Communication

What is strategic communications and why is it relevant?

I see strategic communications, or StratComms, as the artful persuasion of audiences. It goes beyond just sharing information and, typically, seeks a change in an audience's behaviours. Far from being reactive or based on a Mad Men-styled advertising room filled with whisky-powered ideation, good strategic communications

depend upon a robust understanding of the audience obtained via research, coupled with insightful and creative use of messaging tactics to reach them. An ideal StratComms cycle, illustrated below, encompasses everything from goal setting and research to audience selection and segmentation, crafting and delivering messages, selecting the appropriate channels and timing, and evaluating how well the communications met the objectives of the campaign or organization.



1 GOAL

Set a defined purpose or P/CVE related behaviour to target with a stratcomms intervention.

2 AUDIENCE

Identify a target audience and segments, along with their messenger and media preferences.

3 MESSAGE

Use narrative and message testing techniques to hone content for the target audience.

4 REFINE

Finalise content and strategy based on audience segmentation, messaging, and stratcomms goals.

5 IMPLEMENT

Deploy comms assets, partners, and messengers to actualise the strategy.

6 EVALUATE

Assess the effectiveness of approach at achieving behavioural or normative change. Revise accordingly.

When applied to the field of preventing and countering violent extremism, StratComms should be viewed as a contested space. Terrorist and extremist actors seek to persuade their audiences to change their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours towards their ideological, political, or religious aims. Conversely, StratComms seeks a similar art of persuasion, except applied to pro-social, non-violent ends. When effectively done, it can result in tailored messaging that resonates with specific audiences, addressing their unique concerns, motivations, and contexts. Through this, practitioners can help build community resilience against violent extremism by, for example, equipping credible messengers to promote social cohesion, encourage constructive, difficult dialogues between groups, and to develop narratives that nudge audiences to reconsider their behaviour.

What should P/CVE practitioners know about strategic communication in the digital sphere?

The divide between the offline and online worlds is fully permeable for many people today, especially for younger audiences. What happens online is as real as what happens offline, while the communities built in virtual spaces like online games are as (or sometimes more) powerful than those started in the physical world. As such, in my opinion, P/CVE practitioners neglect online

settings at their own peril. From digital social work, to powerful positive narrative campaigns, engaging in digital spheres is imperative, especially when trying to reach younger audiences.

After working on digital P/CVE campaigns and research for nearly eight years, I think there are four key lessons that P/CVE practitioners should keep in mind:

- 1. Institutionalize digital strategic communications in long-term prevention programming.** Behaviour change takes time, whether offline or on. Digital engagement campaigns of the sort that run briefly on social media are often one-off and not integrated into longer-term programming, which hinders results. Because of that, practitioners should co-design strategies with program and wider intervention teams, and foster a culture of experimentation and digital creativity. And, I would say, they should also invite in folks who know online ecosystems inside and out: video gamers, livestreamers, like-minded (and vetted) influencers, social media strategists, white-hat hackers, and the like. Online prevention programs should also link up with offline violence and extremism prevention pathways that have already been established through, for example, community centres, mental health practitioners, and referral systems.

2. **Learn where your audiences are. Then figure out how to reach them through good monitoring and research. Don't expect your audience to come to you.** As part of this process, normalize gathering evidence for digital stratcomms by integrating research into prevention proposals and projects, then disseminating research insights frequently and early on so that cross-cutting teams can easily plan interventions. Waiting for years on academic research in this space often means that the insights generated are too stale to apply to programs and audiences, but it doesn't have to be that way.
3. **We (practitioners) are not usually the best messengers.** Messengers need to be credible with their audience; trusted. P/CVE practitioners and government folks are often not. Consider working alongside local partners to build messages for their communities – sometimes innovative and online, sometimes targeted and old school, offline.
4. **Lastly, don't just push people and partners to put out narratives.** Preventing violent extremism, terrorism, and other types of targeted hate is a long-term endeavour. We need to build coalitions across partners who convene and provide systematic mentorship, solidarity, and comradery for supporters to advocate for more peaceful, inclusive societies in the long-term.

How could it be used in the P/CVE context?

Tons of ways! One type that I'm particularly fond of are **online mentorship and digital streetwork programs**, which are designed to connect youth with counsellors, social workers, or mentors through digital platforms such as Discord, game servers, Reddit, and other forums. Initiatives that pair youth with professionals offer career advice and life skills, alongside mental health and psychosocial support, significantly reducing their vulnerability to radicalization. One of the main advantages of these programs is their ability to build on existing social work methodologies, offering a familiar and effective framework for support. However, challenges are rife in implementation, ranging from varying levels of digital literacy among practitioners and potential GDPR and data privacy issues, particularly regarding the use of private versus public accounts.

OTHER STRATCOMMS APPROACHES INCLUDE:

- a. **Platform-based campaigns**, which can utilize algorithmic amplification to redirect users to content that prioritizes tolerance, empathy, and critical thinking. By partnering with P/CVE organizations, such as Moonshot, which popularized this method, platforms can flag and boost positive narratives or offramps to support services, ensuring they reach a wider audience. Integrating links with referral pathways to violence prevention services can provide immediate support to those at risk.

- b. Also, building **dedicated social spaces within platforms**, such as servers, sub-Reddits, groups and pages, for constructive dialogue and community engagement can foster a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Implementing features that encourage positive interactions and reward constructive behavior, such as badges and recognition, can further enhance these community-building efforts.
- c. Running platform-wide **awareness campaigns** to educate users about recognizing and countering extremist content, or enhancing their digital literacy and critical thinking skills can, in theory, empower users to identify and resist extremist narratives effectively.
- d. **Influencer-driven campaigns**, on the other hand, are built through collaborating with popular content creators and streamers to promote positive messages, public service announcements, or discussions of challenging toxic content. By providing training and resources for influencers, they can be equipped to create content that fosters empathy and counters extremism. Offering grants or funding for creators to develop projects focused on building resilience and understanding can incentivize high-quality, impactful content. However, building relationships and vetting influencers can be challenging, costly, and time-consuming.
- e. A similar approach can be to **host competitions or bootcamps** that encourage individuals to create content (videos, podcasts, games) promoting pro-social messages or that discuss individual experiences with extremism. By providing incentives and recognition for high-quality content, these competitions can stimulate the creation of impactful media that contributes to P/CVE goals. This approach not only engages the community through the process of co-creation but also generates diverse content that can be amplified across platforms.
- f. **Working with online gaming communities and companies** can also offer robust opportunities for P/CVE interventions. On the platform side, helping companies develop safety-by-design products and policies can proactively address potential risks. For example, shifting from content-based to behavioural-based violent extremism enforcement and content moderation policies powered by AI and LLMs, can improve detection and intervention methods. Similarly, enhancing user reporting and takedown methods will empower users to participate actively in maintaining a safe online environment.
- g. More broadly, though, promoting **community norm change** through online Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) strategies inside of games and gaming-adjacent platforms like Discord or Steam – something P/CVE practitioners can help with – can foster a culture of non-toxic behaviour and mutual respect. Examples include building “digital resilience” within gaming and other online communities through bystander intervention training for community moderators,

which can prepare individuals to identify violent extremist recruitment and propaganda and support each other in maintaining healthy digital environments.

Are there approaches from other contexts we could learn from?

Absolutely: from public health, to social and behavioral change communication (SBCC) in the humanitarian field, to marketing and political communications, there are plenty of fields with strong lessons that can be distilled for P/CVE engagements in digital spaces. Public health campaigns, such as those for anti-smoking or HIV/AIDS awareness, demonstrate the power of strategic communication in changing behaviour and attitudes. These campaigns often use a combination of emotional appeals, factual information, community engagement, and, sometimes, prebunking false information—approaches that can be mirrored in P/CVE efforts. In particular, the work to address vaccine hesitancy and counteract vaccine disinformation offers directly applicable lessons for P/CVE actors seeking to push back against other forms of targeted malign influence. Political campaigners, meanwhile, are masters at targeting messages to specific demographics, utilizing data analytics, and creating persuasive narratives, which are all techniques that P/CVE practitioners can adopt to better understand and reach their audiences. Human rights guardrails, however, are critical to avoid veering into outright propagandistic manipulation. Lastly, the way corporations build and maintain their brands

through consistent messaging, storytelling, influence engagement, and customer engagement offers lessons for P/CVE campaigns, particularly in building trust and credibility with audiences.

If funding was no issue, what types of strategic communication campaigns would you like to see in the P/CVE sector in the future?

I love this question. What if we could establish a global network of P/CVE practitioners, content creators, influencers, and community leaders who can produce and disseminate localized positive narrative content across gaming ecosystems? This network would leverage the power of online gaming communities, social media, video platforms, and other digital channels to reach diverse audiences with tailored messages linked into bystander intervention pathways.

Developing sophisticated, gamified educational platforms that teach critical thinking, digital and media literacy, and prebunk propaganda techniques might be another priority. These platforms could be integrated into school curriculums and community programs.

And we should also be pushing for funding comprehensive community-based programs that combine strategic communications with grassroots activities in online settings: mentorship programs, gaming community moderator and educator trainings, and trust & safety knowledge building to focus on building strong, cohesive communities resistant to violence.

Lastly, we should work on establishing dedicated research and innovation labs focused on exploring new technologies and methodologies for StratComms that would allow for the testing of cutting-edge approaches, from VR/XR/AR simulations and trainings, to AI-driven content analysis, to new engagement strategies via game creation. To put those into a bit of a more practical list, I would like to see, in no particular order:

- a. **Better positive interventions**, such as improved digital street work models that shift social work and prevention professions into online gaming environments and which work on addressing online toxicity in neglected online environments like gaming communities.
- b. **Adding gaming- and online elements** to existing local-level, school-based, and law enforcement prevention programming.
- c. **Strategic communications** campaigns, including PSAs and behavioral nudges on gaming and adjacent platforms designed in partnership with public safety actors. In-game ads, anyone?
- d. **Technical assistance** for smaller platforms and studios to enhance their content moderation and trust and safety efforts, as well as local municipal governments and law enforcement to enhance their existing prevention programming.
- e. **Education and digital capacity-building** efforts targeted at tech industry, P/CVE

practitioners, law enforcement, and educators alike.

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| Inoculation

What is inoculation and how does it work?

Attitudinal inoculation – also called psychological inoculation – is a counter-persuasion strategy intended to undermine messages intended to get people to adopt specific beliefs and attitudes. For most of its history, it has been used to undermine messages in the context of health communication, standard political communication, and other traditional communicative contexts. However, in the late 2010s, there were several studies that showed that inoculation could be used to undermine messages from extremist groups, including propaganda and disinformation.

The inoculation process involves first eliciting persuasive threat from your target. That is, you expose the target with messages that make them feel as though their beliefs and attitudes are at risk of changing. This motivates them to defend those beliefs and attitudes, because humans generally don't like to think that their beliefs and attitudes are changeable. This can be accomplished by telling the target that people like them have been persuaded in the past. You then engage the target with an implicit or explicit threat message. The implicit threat message involves exposing the target with a weakened form of the kind of persuasive message you want to defend against. The explicit threat message informs the target that they are likely to encounter a message intended to affect their beliefs and attitudes. After this, you offer counter arguments against the message you hope to defend against. This gives them the “shields” they need to defend against

those messages when they encounter them outside the confines of the inoculation treatment.

For example, think about how you might get a target to avoid drinking a dangerous form of alcohol. This was actually a problem for health professionals years ago with the increased popularity of caffeinated malt liquor (e.g., Four Loko). It was useful for health communication specialists to deliver messages that would increase resistance to advertising that promoted the consumption of these beverages. Inoculation messages are one tool they used to do so. In these messages, they first raised targets' perceptions of persuasive threat by describing how advertising for caffeinated malt liquor had persuaded so many people. An example of this kind of message might say:

“We know that you have no intention of drinking caffeinated malt liquor, but individuals just like you have been persuaded by these tricky marketing campaigns designed by the producers of the beverage. You might think that your attitudes about drinking it are set... but in reality, they can change very easily.”

Following the elicitation of persuasive threat, the next step is to provide refutational preemption – counter-arguments that targets can use to undermine the persuasive messages they will encounter. Here, this can include negative effects of the beverage or descriptions of how the product fails to live up to its claims:

“When you see these advertisements, it is important to remember that caffeinated alcohol will not give

you energy while you have 'a buzz.' The nervous system does not work like that. The caffeine will negatively influence your heart while the alcohol will depress your nervous system. Their claims are easy to debunk. Don't let them persuade you."

Research has shown that by inoculating targets in this way, they perceive the source of the message you are hoping to defend against as less credible, experience greater psychological reactance (anger and counter-arguing) in response to persuasive messages, and less intention to engage in the behavior being advocated.

Why is it relevant for the P/CVE context and what should practitioners know about it and how can inoculation be applied in the P/CVE context?

Although inoculation has most readily been practiced in the context of more traditional persuasive messaging, recent research has shown that it can be useful against extremist propaganda/disinformation as well. Given this, P/CVE practitioners should recognize that it can be an effective means of preventing persuasion by this kind of messaging.

In the past, counter-messaging has traditionally consisted of either attempting to refute messages presented by extremists or telling stories (i.e., counter or alternative narratives) that trigger psychological responses intended to challenge

the themes in extremist messaging. In either case, the counter-persuasive strategy is "direct." That is, it is reactive to messages delivered by extremists. Inoculation attempts to undermine extremist messaging before it is delivered by leveraging targets own natural tendencies to defend their beliefs and attitudes from change. This is incredibly powerful.

As such, P/CVE practitioners can utilize attitudinal inoculation to the degree that they know what kinds of messages extremists will spread to vulnerable targets. If we can "get ahead" of these messages, we can effectively undermine them by leveraging the psychological responses that inoculation engenders.

If funding was no issue, what types of inoculation-related digital P/CVE projects would you like to see in the future?

Assuming funding is no issue, it would be most useful to empirically investigate the moderators that influence the effectiveness of inoculation in the context of P/CVE. For example, two perpetual questions associated with the efficacy of inoculation relates to the timing and regularity of inoculation treatments. We know that inoculation is more effective when inoculation treatments are delivered more than once, but the jury is out as to how often inoculation treatments should be provided, as well as how many times.

So, I think the optimal use of funding would be to facilitate the evaluation of huge studies that allow for the comparison of 30+ treatment groups and their responses to inoculation treatments. This would allow researchers to pinpoint the best number of days/weeks to lag inoculation treatments to maximize their effects. Although I am undertaking this research at present, funding would facilitate this effort in a way that would allow for greater accuracy in when inoculation treatments should be presented.

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| Visual Communication

Why is visual communication important in the digital sphere?

Social media has become crucial to the ways in which extremists communicate their ideas and memes and short-form video content have become primary vehicles for those wanting to disseminate far-right ideologies. The introduction of emerging technologies, particularly deep learning and generative models have enabled the creation of convincing 'deep fakes' which help manipulate public opinion and have thus also become a threat to democracy. Because so much extremist communication online is now image-based, visual analysis is crucial for understanding how extremist ideologies are interwoven with cultural imagery. Images are a particularly important communication strategy because they can convey complex ideas simply, and are often coded and cloaked, which not only shows an in-group out-group divide but also help evade automated content removal systems.

How do extremists use popular visual formats such as memes and popcultural references in their propaganda? Is there a difference between right-wing extremists and jihadist actors in this respect?

Different extremist groups/movements utilise imagery in propaganda in similar ways, largely because it is so effective. Movies/video games/pop cultural icons/historical figures important to the movement/ideology are common visual elements. You will also see an overlap in terms

of the use of aesthetics e.g. both far right and jihadist utilise fashwave aesthetics [linking synth-based music and right-wing/fascist aesthetics], or borrow each others mascots, e.g. Isis used Pepe the Frog and eco-fascists have used Animal Liberation Front/Earth First imagery. Many of these memes are replicated with slightly contrasting versions which makes it difficult for content to be hashed [assigning images a unique identifier, which can be used to trace these images across the online sphere] and automatically removed.

Imagery is really important when considering the subcultural elements of radicalisation as a lot of the time the coded references (numerology/figures/mascots) will require some in-depth knowledge to understand. Additionally, a lot of the time the imagery itself is not the issue, but rather the concordance of the hashtags, which allow mainstream and fringe content to overlap without the viewer necessarily being aware. This is common with environmentalist imagery overlapping with eco-fascist material. I think a lot of the times with this type of content, the imagery/pop cultural references can come before the ideology, as people may be attracted to certain games or references and then be introduced to more insidious narratives once they are within a community.

Why are these formats important for propaganda efforts and how do they impact reception of extremist narratives?

These allow propaganda to be coded and cloaked to circumvent content removal systems. Many people might not recognise the severity of the content or narrative if it is concealed within a humorous meme or caricature. The use of particularly historical or pop cultural/celebrity figures helps propagandists target different communities and imagery. Memes in particular transcend language barriers, allowing propaganda to become more impactful on a global scale. Due to generative AI, aesthetically pleasing propaganda imagery can be disseminated in seconds and then posted online. As stated above the use of popular culture may lead audiences into a false sense of security that they may not be viewing content that is insidious in nature, particularly if they are not aware of the meaning of the accompanying hashtags.

What should P/CVE practitioners know about extremists' use of visual communication online?

It is widespread and very difficult to stop. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the material, it is difficult to combat it with technological solutions alone, which is why making the general public aware is crucial – particularly those most vulnerable to certain narratives as to the risks posed. Visual communication is often coded and cloaked making it appear innocuous, which in turn, helps

it travel. The more widespread use of generative AI poses a particularly severe threat as deep fakes and automated content generators, specifically those relating to the far-right, can produce content in seconds that can then circumvent take downs and spread across multiple platforms.

How could popular visual formats and pop-cultural references be used in digital P/CVE?

In counter narratives, I think short-form video content is a really good way of combatting certain extreme narratives that might be circulating at that time. The recent UK election had really good examples of this in terms of legitimate political parties: The Labour Party made TikToks to respond to the fake news coming from official Conservative accounts. However, I think you also have to be careful with this, as, for example if you released content informing people about a narrative/video/image that might be extreme that they wouldn't ordinarily have come across, this could lead to people searching it out of curiosity, unintentionally exposing them to content they could never have seen. I think examples could be used in digital literacy campaigns, particularly for schools etc. I have done this for parents/teachers as well as students, helping make them aware of problematic imagery/gateway figures. More academics/researchers working with P/CVE to help keep them up to date with new image-based content that they can utilise in their areas would also be beneficial. This is particularly important around elections.

Dr. Ashton Kingdon is a lecturer in Criminology at the University of Southampton. Her work is interdisciplinary combining Criminology, History and Computer Science to examine the ways in which technology and imagery act as accelerators of radicalisation.

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| New digital platforms and formats

The digital ecosystem is always evolving. What (types of) new platforms and formats have become popular over the last years?

What we can observe over the past years is a move away from text and static formats toward more interactive and visual formats. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook are decreasing in popularity due to several reasons, but one of the main ones is that platforms like TikTok have become incredibly popular. TikTok is often primarily labelled as a platform where young people share videos of themselves dancing and lip-syncing to popular songs. Yes, this type of TikTok content exists, but what makes TikTok so engaging for many is that users get a highly curated feed of videos where creators directly engage with them, e.g. cooking videos or book reviews, or create a certain aesthetic and feeling. The last part, creating a feeling, is what makes it so popular. Another format are so-called immersive realities, such as virtual reality, digital games, augmented reality (VR), and mixed reality (XR). Digital games, like *Minecraft* allow for a certain level of immersion into and creation of another world. It can feel limitless what we are able to do, who we can be, and how we want to experience these digital worlds. These spaces and platforms attract entire communities around them, whether it is #booktok or *Discord* Servers dedicated to different games, they are places where people come together to share their interests and experiences. What all of these new platforms and formats have in common is that they bring up emotions in consumers, such as comradeship, anger, or fear, which can be utilised for mobilisation or recruitment by extremist

actors. Lastly, we can observe a withdrawal from public platforms into closed digital spaces, such as *Telegram* groups or *Discord* servers, and more niche social media platforms.

What trends and new platforms do you foresee becoming popular in the future?

We will continue to move toward more immersive digital experiences and content. Certain technologies, such as VR headsets, will become more accessible to a mass audience and, with that, more people are able to engage with immersive spaces. This does not mean that we will live our lives in an “all-encompassing” virtual world, but rather that the way in which we experience digital spaces and interactions will engage more of our senses and emotions. VRChat is one of the prime examples. We will continue to see audio-visual platforms and formats gain in popularity, as they allow people to be more expressive with their creativity and identities. Lastly, the use of so-called decentralised autonomous organisations (DAOs) and networks by extremist actors is gaining traction. They are supposed to be blockchain-based social media platforms that are decentralised, user-controlled, free from outside moderation, and allows for more security and anonymity. We already see them pop-up here and there, but a lot of them are not as technologically “advanced” as they claim to be. Nonetheless, this speaks to the withdrawal into more self-governed spaces mentioned earlier. Certainly, a trend the P/CVE field need to be aware of.

Why are these trends relevant for P/CVE practitioners and what should they know about it? Are the risks associated with new digital formats?

To know about and understand these platforms and formats is relevant for P/CVE practitioners, because it helps us to gain insight into how extremist actors use new avenues to recruit and mobilise, but also how we can utilise them in their work to reach and empower others. Newer platforms like TikTok engage audiences more as they bring up emotions within them, which makes it easy for extremist actors to abuse these mechanisms. The most recent example is how right-wing extremist actors utilised TikTok to mobilise young people and were able to translate this online engagement into real-life votes in the European parliament elections. This presents a clear risk, when we consider the hyper-personalised content that users get presented through the platform's algorithm. Users easily fall into a digital rabbit hole. Another risk associated with such content and new capabilities through AI-driven content creation is that influence is possible in real-time, e.g. through large scale dissemination or live-streaming of events. And lastly, immersive environments like digital games can be used to create experiences that glorify certain time periods, people, and events, such as the recreation of terror attacks. Such formats are increasingly becoming more realistic and with that normalise certain acts of violence. These blurred lines between online and offline may have wide-reaching consequences.

What new approaches, formats, and platforms could be used in digital P/CVE efforts?

As much as there is potential for extremist actors to utilise and abuse these platforms and formats, P/CVE efforts can and should benefit from the affordances of these new digital spaces and formats as well. New platforms like TikTok are often dismissed or, when we use them for digital campaigns, we do not take the time to understand what type of content and formats work on there. As counter intuitive as it may sound, it is worth looking at what video formats extremist actors create to reach different audiences, such as what hooks or other stylistic elements do build their narratives and mobilise around them. Other approaches are to amplify positive content or other campaigns, such as Jigsaw attempted with their pre-bunking videos on *YouTube*. Also, the linking to further information we see implemented on other platforms like *Facebook* in the case of COVID-19 disinformation or so-called "nudging" efforts, such as prompting users to read an article first before sharing it further. Such efforts should happen in a coordinated manner and as a co-operation between tech platforms and P/CVE organisations. Partnerships and collaboration with influencers are another avenue for positive impact, by empowering creators to speak out on issues they feel comfortable with or supporting them in fostering a safer space for their community and addressing hate speech in their comment sections. Lastly, we should collaborate with different (marginalised) communities to implement features and spaces they deem necessary. An example for this is building safe platforms for

constructive dialogue or hosting trainings/workshops. What is important to remember for all these platforms, formats, and audiences, is that we are not able to come up with a one-size-fits-all approach and need to be aware of the different needs and affordances present.

If funding was no issue, what new digital P/ CVE formats would you like to see?

I would love to see us being more creative through games and storytelling. With the different immersive technologies, like VR or AR, we can build spaces where users are able to emotionally experience different lived experiences of marginalised communities. I believe that it will help break down the social distance we often experience in current discourses and instead bring

us a bit closer to each other while accepting our differences.

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| Borderline Content and Digital Strategies of Islamists

Which digital strategies are used by extremist actors online?

The bpb-basic monitoring of modus|zad is covering Islamist content in German language on YouTube, TikTok and Instagram. We are focusing on content which meanders at the borderline of freedom of speech and religious freedom. A RAN Discussion Paper described it as “awful but lawful”. Four digital strategies are most important in this communication zone or the “periphery of extremism” as modus|zad calls it:

1. Avoiding the posting of content that stands in conflict with legal boundaries or the moderation policies of the tech companies is one of the most important strategies. Being present on the most popular platforms is essential for the success of these periphery actors, because their offline opportunities for mission and mobilization are much more restricted. The digital world is the central forum, where they can foster a successful growing community, establishing a long-standing relationship and reputation. Therefore, they make compromises and tailor their messages accordingly but give conspiratorial hints to their audience that they would speak in a more radical manner about that topic elsewhere.
2. Meanwhile the Islamist content producers have developed significant online competencies. The most successful once have established a “Social Media Orchestra” by building up a presence on different platforms. Thereby

they can hollow out easily the uncoordinated platform moderation and legal restrictions by varying their content and publishing slightly different messages on different platforms. Many accounts are offering now links to “[linktree](#)” where you can find a complex portfolio of different online publishing formats by one actor. There is a current trend to open closed forums, live-chats, gaming related servers or fringe platforms where one can find so called pure Islamic “*halal*” (arab. permissible) content with the promises that one can enjoy guaranteed pure Islamic content and discuss topics together more freely and secure.

3. Building an open or blurred network which creates synergies between different actors, online formats and communication strategies is a third decisive strategy. A simple example is the network of Salafi preachers in Germany. On the one hand most of these preachers are distributing their messages through their individual social media presence or “Social Media Orchestra”, but there is a core channel “Deutschsprachige Muslimische Gemeinschaft e.V. (DMG e.V.)”, where you can find most of these actors congregating in a single online space. A more complex example is the strategy of four German channels linked to Hizb ut-Tahrir. The most popular, “Botschaft des Islam”, is mainly producing Islamic content by utilizing storytelling. Two other channels (“Generation Islam”, “Realität Islam”) are focusing more on political and social conflicts through lectures. The youngest but very successful channel “Muslim

Interaktiv" is propagating political activism by combining forms of spectacular protest activities with professional produced online content. Together their combination of different communication strategies is forming an effective synergy in supporting each other content and addressing different preferences of the audience.

4. A fourth strategy is very simple but also effective. Building up reach and scale to dominate the discourse by posting mirror content on multiple accounts. Especially on TikTok, our monitoring results identified a bulk of Salafi accounts posting content that is copied from elsewhere. The actors are even appealing to their communities to open own accounts and reproduce content from Salafi preachers. One can find tutorial videos, where they explain how easy it is to use software like CapCut. They argue that to make online *dawah* (arab. mission) and earn credits in paradise is easier than ever.

Why are these strategies relevant and what should P/CVE practitioners know about it?

Borderline content is a key element for the long-lasting presence of fundamental radical views and their dissemination. Key German Salafist like Pierre Vogel started their online career at the beginning of the rise of Social Media and their content is still going viral – they are established online players with considerable reputa-

tion. Which online P/CVE practitioner or project has such a history of continuous online presence?

Regarding dissemination, P/CVE practitioners must develop knowledge regarding these variations of communication and argumentative patterns on the periphery of extremism as well as strategies to counter them. By spreading easy to consume borderline content the audience of radical preachers and influencers are adopting problematic forms of knowledge. It starts with a reduced ability of knowledge acquisition, insufficient forms to verify and discuss it. A lot of the content is identity-based, encouraging an us versus them mentality. Furthermore, it is highly imbued with emotions. Knowledge of the means through which populism, propaganda and mission are communicated, is central. Otherwise, practitioners as well as politicians, journalists or even scientists can be easily utilized as useful statistics in campaigns as can be shown in many examples from the activities of "Muslim Interaktiv".

Pragmatic flexibility is also a key factor. P/CVE practitioners must keep up with the changing online information and leisure practices of younger generations. Radical preachers and influencers show this flexibility. The experienced establishment of actors on the periphery of extremism is currently supporting much younger actors, who are establishing themselves in the latest online environments as the new shooting stars in Islamism. P/CVE has to build up competence centres with interdisciplinary teams and constant technological structures where new modules of com-

petence and technology can be added to quick and efficiently to keep pace with the dynamics.

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| Metaverse

What is the Metaverse and why is it relevant?

The term 'Metaverse' refers to virtual online spaces in which users interact with other users and their environment through avatars. It was originally coined in 1992 by sci-fi author Neal Stephenson in his dystopian novel *Snow Crash*. In 2021, the company formerly known as *Facebook* rebranded as *Meta Platforms* to signal its commitment to developing the Metaverse. In early 2023, however, founder Mark Zuckerberg backtracked and announced the company would pivot to AI development. Today, some of the best known Metaverse platforms are *Fortnite*, *Roblox* and *Decentraland* – all of which are particularly popular among young gamers.

Virtual online spaces have existed for a while, for example in the form of the popular game *Second Life* launched in 2003. However, users would usually access these older virtual worlds through desktop computers. The Metaverse, on the other hand, is much more immersive and data-hungry – users normally wear a headset device with high-resolution screens and multiple sensors collecting real-time information through microphones and cameras.

How could extremists exploit it and what should P/CVE practitioners know about it?

Just as they have demonstrated with previous communication technologies, extremists are quick to exploit the new opportunities the Metaverse offers them. Firstly, the heavy use of

crypto-currency in the Metaverse complicates efforts to combat terrorist financing. Secondly, the immersive quality of the Metaverse is a key asset for the two most important activities of (violent) extremists: recruitment (via propaganda and indoctrination) and organisation (including planning and virtual training).

Terrorist organisations have already shown how effective they are in creatively using social media for their recruitment activity, identifying vulnerable users and grooming them into hateful ideologies through ever more extreme and targeted audio-visual messaging. The degree of immersion offered by the Metaverse will further increase the effectiveness of such psychological and emotional manipulation, where avatars of terrorist 'icons' could speak directly to potential recruits, responding to sensory cues provided by the headset. Users may also be invited to virtual worlds where they are shown a dystopian future of their hometown, building on established extremist storytelling about a personal, existential threat (e.g. the Great Replacement conspiracy) that demands a violent response (e.g. terrorist attacks). The Metaverse may also be used to create virtual training grounds for terrorists, *gamifying* the planning and execution of attacks – all without the need to leave their own four walls.

Which important developments do you foresee taking place in the future?

On one hand, virtual reality gaming, enabled by the Metaverse, will likely become ever more

popular – and therefore also of growing interest to terrorists as a site of recruitment. Here, lessons learned from the growing research body on the nexus between online gaming and violent extremism and related practitioner experience will be largely applicable. One of the key questions for the P/CVE community will remain: how can we identify users that may be particularly vulnerable to virtual indoctrination? Answers to this question must consider how a combination of socio-economic factors, political grievances and personal circumstances may foster individual desires to ‘escape reality’ by seeking refuge in virtual worlds.

On the other hand, mixed or augmented reality technology – where the real world is ‘enhanced’ with virtual features to simplify everyday tasks such as navigating the city, learning information about people or objects nearby, or collaborating with distant colleagues – will see growing adoption. Terrorists and (violent) extremists may begin to use extended reality technology to identify specific targets based on demographic information, alongside enhanced training and lower planning costs. These use cases therefore also require a careful consideration on how, when and where data and privacy rights can enhance public safety and protect minorities from Metaverse-enabled terrorism.

In the longer term, terrorist strategies may adapt to the growing value associated with virtual worlds, where infrastructures and avatars in the Metaverse may themselves become places of violent extremism and targets for terrorism

– as already exemplified by ‘Nazi death camps’ that were recreated in the popular online game *Roblox*. As time spent in the Metaverse increases, the individual emotional connection with virtual worlds will grow – and so will the psychological toll associated with terrorism targeting these worlds. Additionally, there may be real-world financial damages as businesses move into the Metaverse and become targets of terrorism.

What types of interventions might be possible in the Metaverse in the future?

Content moderation will remain a major challenge to combat the spread of extremist propaganda in the Metaverse. We are already seeing today how the biggest social media platforms are struggling to remove terrorist content from their platforms, especially when terrorists use live-stream functionality. Platforms must therefore engage with the P/CVE community at the very start of the design process, and governments must insist on ‘safety-by-design’ principles as new platform functionality is introduced. This must also include the expansion and upskilling of trust and safety teams, potentially through partnerships with civil society, as a compliance requirement for platforms.

Real-time monitoring of Metaverse activity by law enforcement will similarly be a challenge – especially when attempting to balance safety concerns with online privacy rights. First and foremost, officers must be trained in the technology to be able to effectively operate within the Metaverse

and identify potential or emerging threats. The same issues apply to conducting research in the Metaverse. Here, online ethnographic research may usefully supplement 'big data approaches' to provide unique insights into how users engage with virtual worlds on an every-day basis, and hence also inform trust and safety standards.

Lastly, the immersive and interactive qualities of the Metaverse may also be used for good to create convincing counter narrative campaigns, provide tailored educational content and engaging virtual workshops. Here, the gamification element central to many virtual and extended/augmented reality experiences can be levered to lower the inhibition for engagement with P/CVE efforts, particularly among younger audiences.

If funding was no issue, what kind of (creative) Metaverse-related P/CVE efforts would you like to see?

Potentially one of the most effective P/CVE efforts in the Metaverse would be the establishment of a robust virtual social service infrastructure to provide a safety net in the form of support and resources for vulnerable individuals *before* they radicalise. Virtual youth centres and camps could offer safe spaces for young people to engage with peers from across the globe, building resilience against extremist propaganda and indoctrination. Additionally, pedagogical training programs about and within the Metaverse could equip educators and social workers with the skills

needed to recognize and counter radicalization efforts effectively – especially among at-risk users. The immersive quality of the Metaverse, and the ability to create virtual worlds modelled on real locations, could open new avenues for cross-cultural communication initiatives based on a jointly inhabited *lifeworld* in which people of different backgrounds share common spaces.

Of course, there needs to be a careful weighing of costs and benefits to ensure resources are directed to where they are needed most. Establishing a virtual social service infrastructure is only viable if the Metaverse evolves into something more than an expensive pet project for tech CEOs and becomes widely adopted across society. This also means state or civil society-led efforts should not be plugging the holes of a for-profit business and end up subsidising a private platform. If the Metaverse truly takes off, governments and civil society should help foster a version that is akin to a public space, where alternative virtual worlds not solely run by profit-oriented companies are accessible to everyone.

Ultimately, it's important to keep in mind that terrorist recruiters exploit personal grievances, pre-existing societal cleavages and a lacking sense of belonging, particularly among the youth. P/CVE efforts should therefore weigh up carefully where technology is exacerbating these risk factors, and where technology can be part of the solution.

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| Gaming

Why is gaming important?

Gaming is a mass phenomenon with a tremendous popcultural appeal. Gaming is one of the most popular leisure activities across the globe. 3 billion people, nearly 1/3 of the world's population, play mobile and video games. Individuals of all ages, from early childhood to well into retirement age, play digital games and nearly half of those gamers are female. In Germany, around 6 in 10 people play at least occasionally, either on their phones, their computers, or designated gaming consoles.

In addition, millions of users frequent digital gaming- and gaming-adjacent platforms. Gaming-platforms are digital spaces directly linked to gaming, such as the game store *Steam*, the game development platform *Roblox*, or designated gaming forums. Gaming-adjacent platforms are digital spaces indirectly linked to gaming, for instance because they are used by many gamers or host a large amount of gaming-related content. Popular gaming-adjacent platforms include the chat platform *Discord* as well as video and livestreaming platforms such as *YouTube Gaming*, *Twitch*, *DLive* or *Kick*. Gaming (-adjacent) platforms are extremely popular and millions of users regularly frequent these digital spaces. *Discord*, for instance, hosts 560 million users, *Steam* welcomes a whopping 60 million daily active users, and in May 2024 alone users watched over 1.7 million hours of streaming content on *Twitch* – that is nearly 200 years worth of video material.

The gaming sphere is increasingly important, because gaming-related content potentially reaches millions of people – equal to or sometimes surpassing the reach of traditional social media platforms. These digital gaming environments are a new, digital discursive space with the potential to influence millions of users.

How are extremists exploiting digital gaming spaces?

Extremists use digital gaming spaces in various ways. This includes the production of bespoke video games with propagandistic content. Both jihadist organizations such as Hezbollah as well as far-right groups such as the Identitarian Movement have developed and published their own digital games. However, creating such games is expensive and requires game design expertise. Therefore, extremists are often also seeking to exploit existing (commercial) games for their ends. For instance, extremist content such as digital concentration camps or modifications that allow players to re-enact terrorist attacks have appeared in popular games such as *Minecraft*, *The Sims*, or *Fortnite*.

Research has also uncovered that hateful content is pervasive on gaming (-adjacent) platforms. Recent analyses show that these platforms inadvertently host racist, antisemitic, misogynist, white supremacist, right-wing extremist, and conspiracy-related content. Islamist and jihadist content has also been identified, although it seems to be far less common (or better hidden)

in these spaces. Furthermore, extremists have used references to popular video games and gaming culture and appropriated video game aesthetics to increase the appeal and 'coolness' of their propaganda. ISIS was a trendsetter in this regard. For instance, it used footage from the popular first-person shooter game *Call of Duty* in its propaganda videos and employed gamer language in its social media posts to appeal to audiences who view gaming as an integral part of their lifeworld.

What challenges do practitioners face in the gaming sphere?

Digital gaming spaces are entirely unknown to many practitioners. Therefore, they face a range of challenges, including a lack of knowledge which digital spaces and video games are particularly relevant, what types of P/CVE approaches are suitable for these spaces, and subcultural knowledge about gaming culture, gaming references, and communication norms in digital gaming spaces. They also face a number of practical and technical challenges, including lack access to appropriate equipment (e.g. to livestream or to play certain games), lack of access to relevant digital spaces such as in-game chats because they can only be accessed if practitioners themselves participate in the gameplay, the fact that a lot of content is voice-based communication and therefore one needs to be present in real

time without the possibility for an asynchronous, delayed response, as well as the problem that most gaming-related activities take place outside of working hours, particularly when most people have free time such as during evenings, weekends, and public holidays.

What gaming-related P/CVE approaches already exist or could be piloted?

Currently, gaming-related P/CVE approaches are still a rarity. The most common approach is the development of bespoke video or mobile games to increase resilience against extremism or raise awareness about hateful narratives. There are also some initiatives making use of gaming (-adjacent) platforms and pilot, for example, digital youth work in these spaces. A few projects use video game aesthetics or gamification. But there are many more possibilities to make use of gaming-related content and spaces. For instance, P/CVE actors could try to develop modifications (often called 'mods') of existing games just like extremists do. Gaming (-adjacent) platforms also provide a range of opportunities to develop new P/CVE approaches, including, for instance, livestreaming, gaming tournaments, the creation of semi-private chat groups, digital help centers for victims of hateful conduct in gaming spaces, or the possibility to work with platforms to improve policies and train moderators.

If funding was no issue, what types of gaming-related P/CVE measures would you like to see in the future?

I'd love for P/CVE actors to think bigger, bolder, and more outside the box. That is true for all types of P/CVE measures, but it may be particularly easy to do so in the gaming sphere, because digital gaming spaces are new, uncharted territory for counter-extremism and prevention efforts. There are no 'usual paths' to take, we're currently creating entirely new ones. This is an opportunity to think about P/CVE in more creative ways and develop new, existing approaches.

I think all the initiatives listed above should be further developed and tested, but I would also like P/CVE actors to think more broadly about how to incorporate gaming as a cultural phenomenon across different initiatives. For instance, several extremist groups have incorporated visual and verbal references to popular video games in their propaganda output and appropriated video game aesthetics across different types of digital content. This is an example of how to make use of the popcultural appeal that gaming affords without having to limit oneself to the development of video games as such. I would love to see counter- and alternative narrative campaigns that employ

similarly subtle references to video games and gaming culture. Gaming-related content could be usefully implemented even outside of digital spaces directly linked to gaming, e.g. in YouTube campaigns or on Instagram channels. I would love to see P/CVE projects try to incorporate gaming in these ways!

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| Disinformation and conspiracy narratives

What are conspiracy narratives?

The term *conspiracy* refers to a secret plan by a group of people to reach a certain (covert) goal or consolidate their power even if this is unlawful or harmful to others. *Conspiracy narratives* or *conspiracy myths* on the other hand, are stories that assume a secret conspiracy is taking place. Often, the 'evidence' presented draws connections and links that do not exist in reality, and accuses influential individuals of secretly plotting ways to claim (more) power. Ultimately, the alleged goal of these groups is total control of the world, including the harassment, manipulation, or even annihilation of (certain) citizens. This supposed 'dark power' secretly pulling the strings and shaping current events is often depicted as responsible for real issues, grievances, threats, (natural) disasters, or diseases.

Who is susceptible to conspiracy narratives and why?

Conspiracy myths are widespread, around 1 in 4 people believe that politics is shaped by secret powers and influences. The likelihood of inadvertently believing in at least one conspiracy narrative or urban legend over the course of one's life, is high. The reasons are multifaceted.

Increasingly, people search for background information and insights on current events via social media. On these sites, algorithms remember not only the search and consumption preferences of users, but position information and recommen-

dations accordingly. This can lead to the display of content that is highly similar to what has already been searched for and more extreme content over time. This is problematic, because humans tend to be more convinced that a certain piece of information is true when it aligns with their existing knowledge and beliefs. On social media, users are continuously presented with information that matches their worldview. Humans also tend to seek out like-minded peers and value the opinions of their friends. This preference can lead to a limited engagement with different perspectives and information that does not align with the user's worldview, particularly within digital groups and comment threads, which may contribute to the development of a filter bubble.

There are certain characteristics that may make an individual more susceptible to conspiracy narratives. People who struggle with a sense of belonging and do not feel socially secure may be more prone to feeling powerless, a lack of control, and a lack of agency. Conspiracy narratives can provide not only scapegoats that can be blamed for the situation but also offer a much-needed (illusion of) control by 'unmasking' what is really going on behind the scenes. Individuals who believe in conspiracy narratives are convinced that they are critically scrutinizing current events, independently interpreting societal issues, and have exclusive insider knowledge to form the 'correct' judgment – a belief they often communicate to others. Within a group of conspiracy believers, they experience acceptance, recognition, and an increased self-confidence. These groups believe they are fighting a common enemy, which elicits

feelings of belonging and decreases the willingness to engage with other opinions or dissonant information. The group members are constantly reinforcing each other's beliefs, which leads to a homogenization of opinion and forbids the questioning of the worldview.

How do conspiracy narratives spread and how do extremist actors make use of them?

There are several ways in which conspiracy narratives can reach and spread through mainstream society. Their proliferation is particularly fast when citizens feel insecure and uncertain, e.g. due to (natural) disasters, pandemics or similar issues, and are searching for easy answers. These are often found in pseudo-scientific videos on YouTube, in memes and other content on social media or messenger services, through which they can spread rapidly.

Fringe parties are consciously using conspiracy narratives and frames such as "the Great Replacement" or "lying press" to discredit political opponents or critical media outlets, plant seeds of doubt, trigger emotional reactions, and polarize societies. Extremist actors have also long recognized the potential of utilizing conspiracy narratives. In combination with their take on current events, these narratives provide an easy, low-threshold entry into extremist ideologies. Extremist actors offer a clear black and white framing of the world and easy solutions to regain control in insecure times. These narratives are often

spread in digital spaces and users are redirected to platforms and messenger services with less moderation, such as BitChute, Telegram or VK to avoid detection and make private conversation possible. In these private groups, radicalization processes may progress unnoticed.

Why are conspiracy narratives relevant for the P/CVE context?

Conspiracy narratives facilitate distrust in the media, political systems, democratic institutions, research and medicine. They serve as bridging narratives and can open doors to radical and extremist influences. If nobody can be trusted, the perceived threat and insecurity becomes more prominent and leads to a heightened desire for actions to take back control. This may culminate in violence as the terror attacks in Christchurch (New Zealand), Halle and Hanau (both Germany) showed. People who believe in conspiracy narratives often see themselves as fighting for a better world, against evil and darkness, and adhere to a dualistic, apocalyptic worldview. They believe that they belong to a small, select group of people who know the truth, fight against a powerful dark power, and want to help others to see this 'truth' too. The deeper an individual sinks into conspiracy beliefs, the less willing s/he is to adhere to democratic principles and the rule of law. This makes these individuals interesting targets for extremist recruitment and, hence, for the P/CVE context.

Which important developments do you foresee in this area?

Conspiracy content can look more realistic with the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI allows to create, for instance, videos in which popular individuals relay user-defined messages, the forging of 'evidence', and, ultimately, the bending of reality. This increases the believability of disinformation and counterfeit content, which in turn increases feelings of uncertainty and ambiguity in our increasingly complex world. P/CVE actors should not just be aware of, monitor, and react to this development. Rather, we should learn to use AI in our prevention efforts, for instance by dismantling AI-generated content in our media literacy and anti-disinformation work.

How can the spread and impact of conspiracy narratives be mitigated?

We cannot stop the exploitation of new technical affordances by extremist actors. Therefore, we need to address the users of these technologies through educational and awareness campaigns. Media literacy and political education should not only be an integral part of education from elementary school onwards, but also feature prominently in adult education settings. In addition, we need far-reaching edutainment campaigns on all social media platforms. This whole-of-society approach is necessary to ensure a holistic understanding of information distribution on social media, teaches what constitutes reliable, reputable, high-quality journalism, relays the

difference between perceptions, opinions, and facts, informs about how to recognize and counter-act manipulation attempts, and builds capacity to understand and scrutinize media content before making judgments. When citizens are able to identify disinformation, pseudo-science, and AI-generated content, they are less prone to fall for manipulation attempts.

Political education is key. How can citizens trust a political system they do not really understand? Political education in schools is often not sufficient and many citizens seem unaware of their important role in democracy, about the opportunities to take action, and how a pluralistic society can and must persevere in face of differing opinions, perceptions, and beliefs. To 'vaccinate' a society against disinformation, this knowledge must be omnipresent. Because we cannot slow down or stop the proliferation of digital technologies with all their benefits and drawbacks, but we need to become faster than anti-democratic forces. Rather than simply reacting, we should work towards proactive protection. We cannot rely on policies and regulations alone to do so; this issue requires a more holistic strategy.

If funding was no issue, what types of digital P/CVE projects in relation to conspiracy narratives would you like to see?

If funding was no issue, we would have a huge media budget and would be able to develop highly effective, professional content, customized for every target audience and distributed exactly

where these audiences are. We would also be able to use AI in a highly professional manner, create durable structures to raise awareness and facilitate media literacy. In addition, we would be able to transform the P/CVE landscape and create permanent, reliable structures to be able to produce a constant stream of information and content. Right now, many great initiatives are lost, simply because the funding ends (usually after 2 years). Therefore, even the best ideas do not generate enough visibility and impact on social media.

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| Artificial Intelligence

What is artificial intelligence and why is it relevant to the current digital landscape?

What we tend to call AI in the current discourse revolves mostly around so-called Generative-AI (GenAI). This specific type of AI model can autonomously generate content based on input or prompting of users. Especially, with the introduction of ChatGPT in early 2023 AI was incredibly hyped across various sectors and numerous AI-tools were introduced that promise to support us in our work. This includes tools that generate images or text, smart editing tools, or tools that act as personal assistant across devices and platforms. These tools and many more applications of AI may support P/CVE practitioners in addressing challenges in their current work. Besides the creation of digital content, AI is also relevant in the dissemination of such content, both in quality and quantity. AI has the potential to help P/CVE practitioners to identify their target audiences and where their content may have the largest impact, or it may be used to reach a larger audience all together, e.g. in disinformation campaigns. Generally, the current development in AI has and will further increase the scale and speed of digital content. Creating content and disseminating it has become easier than ever.

In what ways are extremists currently using AI? How else might they potentially use it in the future?

We have already seen numerous cases in which AI technologies are being used by extremist actors. One prominent example is the use of deepfakes to spread disinformation. Videos and images are being purposefully manipulated through GenAI technology in a way that makes them appear as if they were real. A less visual, but nonetheless harmful is the automated production of texts and translating one's messaging into several foreign languages to reach a wider audience. Extremist actors have utilised tools like Google translate before, but GenAI makes it even easier to produce content in foreign languages and make it appear more casual and appealing. All these adoptions of AI by extremist actors are still not widely spread, but it already showcases the potential of such technologies. Other potential usages are the developing of mobile apps, creation of websites, further automation of bot networks, or the development of digital games.

What are risks and opportunities associated with AI and what should P/CVE practitioners know about it?

The potential risks associated with AI include privacy violations, biased decision-making due to biases being present in the training dataset, its potential to be used maliciously, and lastly jobs being replaced through AI tools. These are by no means the only risks associated with AI. There is

also the risk that the AI tools that P/CVE practitioners built with the best intentions in mind may be abused by other actors or lead to the over-surveillance of marginalised communities. On the other hand, AI tools present significant opportunities for the field of P/CVE. It can enhance predictive analytics, identifying target audiences for specific campaigns, or simply take repetitive tasks off our hands and giving us the time to focus on the more complex parts of our jobs. We may be able to utilise AI to retain and transfer knowledge within P/CVE organisations and across the entire field. Certain tools can support in streamlining document templates for reports, formats documents, or create a knowledge hub so all employees have access to the knowledge present within the organisation. Lastly, AI can also aid in gaining new insights from large, which can drive innovation across the field. P/CVE practitioners need to be aware of the dual sided nature of AI: its potential to harm and on the other hand its potential to contribute positively to the field in various ways. The field needs to keep up to date with new developments and listen to the criticisms of such tools, especially coming from members of marginalised communities. Central to this effort is that we learn to collaborate interdisciplinary and continuously advocate for ethical AI practices even when it means that some of our own ideas may have to be put at rest. Always thinking of the bigger picture.

How may AI be used in digital P/CVE approaches?

As for digital P/CVE approaches, AI can help to support and analyse extremist content online, monitor trends, and detect recruitment activities and strategies across different social media platforms. It can support the field in moving toward a better understanding of entire digital ecosystems and the different dynamics present. This in turn can support us in custom tailoring different P/CVE measure for the different platforms and communities. Technologies such as AI-driven sentiment analysis or tools that can analyse images and videos can give insights into present opinions, emotions, and behavioural patterns. Yet, it is important to continuously be aware of the ethical risks associated to monitoring different communities in such an automated manner. We cannot solely rely on the assessment of AI tools, and someone always needs to fact-check the outcome.

With all this in mind, it becomes apparent that such tools can help P/CVE practitioners to develop tailor-made campaigns or interventions that resonate with specific identified demographics. Predictive analytics in particular can help us allocate our resources more effectively, by focusing on specific areas or groups that are deemed more susceptible to radicalisation efforts.

If funding was no issue what types of AI-related P/CVE efforts would you like to see in the future?

One of the areas in which I see the largest benefit of AI-tools is in resource allocation and knowledge transfer within and across P/CVE organisations. Many organisations have limited resources leading to knowledge being very insular even within small organisational structures. To ease our work, AI-tools can aid in creating knowledge hubs where knowledge can be documented and streamlined for everyone. Essentially, creating a large dataset of the organisations' collective knowledge that remains even when employees leave. AI-tools can then further help us to pull pieces of knowledge from this hub, e.g. in form of an integrated chatbot that employees can prompt with questions such as "Show me all projects that worked on topic XYZ" or "Pull up all definitions we used for right-wing extremism" and so on. Other tools can further support in creating templates for different publication formats, such as reports, policy briefs, social media posts, or blog posts. Making knowledge within our organisations more accessible will aid us in transferring

our knowledge across the P/CVE sector and make it more actionable altogether. This is something I would love to see and where I can see the benefit of AI-tools being utilised sustainably.

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| Deep Fakes

What are deep fakes and why are they relevant?

The term “deepfake” refers to a range of synthetic, artificially-generated media that appear as genuine video or audio of humans or other content. Deepfakes frequently depict known individuals such as political figures or celebrities speaking or acting outrageously, in ways that reflect poorly on the individual and change perceptions of them among the public.

As the technologies improve and are made more publicly available, deepfakes will grow increasingly widespread. The development has been met with great alarm among the counter-extremism and counterterrorism community. False, inflammatory information or statements by trusted authority figures, election misinformation, or other distortions of social and political events are all likely to incite violence, presenting the possibility of a second January 6th, or something far worse. But both are also forms of voter suppression that may contribute to voters being swayed at a significant scale.

What do we know about the use of deep fakes by extremist actors or conspiracy movements?

Although extremists always use new communications technologies, they tend to do so to advance what they are already doing, rather than invent new modus operandi. Deepfake use so far, particularly for propaganda, has largely advanced

pre-existing narratives and sought to exploit pre-existing cleavages, at greater speed and at greater scale, across the ideological spectrum. Researchers Daniel Siegel and Bilva Chandra have for instance explored one case study of deepfakes amplifying the story of a Pakistani Muslim man claiming to directly communicate with the Prophet Muhammad and God, and calling for the “deepest depth of hellfire” for those questioning his prophecies.

As such technologies continue to improve, they will be used in more innovative ways: both to undermine opponents, and to support one’s own side. In the former case, we have already seen Western democracies targeted. During the New Hampshire Democratic primary election earlier this year, an audio call of President Biden was released warning his supporters to delay voting until November. This very strange case in fact was concocted by a rogue operative working for a Democratic rival. He later claimed that “This is a way for me to make a difference, and I have. I can tell you they’re not used to me. I wrestled in college.” He is now facing charges related to the scam. The UK has witnessed the disruptive potential of audio deepfakes too: after the latest outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, fake audio purported to show London mayor Sadiq Khan announcing that the city would forgo the annual Armistice Day commemoration in favor of a pro-Palestine march, the mayor’s office declaring that the audio was being “circulated and amplified by a far-right group.” Moreover, in this case, the Metropolitan Police specifically stated that the faked audio was not a crime.

Deepfakes being used to support one's own leaders have not yet been seen to as great an extent, but again, hypothetical scenarios are quite imaginable. One could imagine an extrapolation of such technology to, for instance, depict President Biden explaining how he successfully stole the U.S. presidential election. Such a video or audio clip would, needless to say, greatly contribute to right-wing radicalization in the United States.

What are risks associated with deep fakes P/ CVE practitioners should be aware of?

Firstly, deepfakes will be an equalizer for bad actors. As scholars Kat Duffy and Katie Harbath warn in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, "The level of expertise required to create and disseminate fake text, imagery, audio clips, and video recordings across multiple languages will continue to plummet, without any commensurate increase in the public's ability to identify, investigate, or debunk this media." Extremist groups across the ideological spectrum will be able to weaponize American social media platforms to advance their views through manipulated content. States, too, will use these platforms, perhaps even in tandem with extremist groups, to undermine and polarize Western countries, including during their election cycles.

Moreover, perhaps the greatest danger posed by deepfakes has been dubbed the "liar's dividend."

In this scenario, as the information space grows more saturated with artificially-generated content, and information in general becomes less reliable, actors may be able to dismiss legitimate or real content as generated or fake content. To give one example of what this looks like: in March, an individual from Illinois was arrested for firing a gun outside the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Two interesting details emerged from his arraignment: For one, he declared that he had "nothing to worry about" because Trump would be reelected in six months. But secondly, according to the Law & Crime site, he "told authorities a lot of his social media posts — including one from someone using his name in October 2023 where he appears to be racking the slide of a semiautomatic weapon — was artificial intelligence."

The liar's dividend underscores the reality that disinforming actors are actually plowing very fertile ground. According to a recent poll conducted of Americans by Gallup, "Only 32% of the population reports having "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of confidence that the media reports the news in a full, fair and accurate way." So needless to say, deepfakes may fit well with the far-right's Fake News" narrative. The Bipartisan Policy Center, meanwhile, found that "Only 50% of Republicans express confidence that votes will be counted accurately at the national level." Those numbers will not ameliorate from an environment with even greater insecurity over content and its veracity.

What counter-measures and best practice approaches to dealing with deep fakes already exist? How could they be improved?

As is often the case in counter-extremism today, social media companies will be on the front lines, and will need to design new guidelines and standards for AI content. Possible countermeasures include watermarking content, hashing content, community note programs to shed light on dubious content, and outright bans of certain forms of artificially generated content. Government will need to push social media companies to participate in ensuring a healthy online debate.

Law enforcement will also need to prepare to counter the negative downstream effects of such content. In the United States, the Department of Homeland Security is handling this problem with urgency. In an intelligence bulletin released to ABC News in May, the DHS documented that “As the 2024 election cycle progresses, generative AI tools likely provide both domestic and foreign threat actors with enhanced opportunities for interference by aggravating emergent events, disrupting election processes, or attacking election infrastructure.”

But the law enforcement and intelligence component is always going to be reactive. We also need to be proactive, and try to get ahead of this problem, by addressing demand for such content as well as supply. Governments, in concert with prevention practitioners, should be encouraging the dissemination of digital literacy tools and programs as an urgent priority. A 2023 study

found that participants could correctly identify a deepfake 73 percent of the time. That’s not bad, but it does still leave a lot of room where these technologies could corrode minds and public faith. We need to get that number closer to 100.

Could deep fakes also be used in positive prevention and intervention approaches? If yes, how? If no, why not?

Just as artificial intelligence and deepfakes will boost the speed and scale of radicalization, they might also be weaponized and turned against terrorists. Examples might include more widespread counter-narrative campaigns, or deepfake video and audio depicting extremist leaders in negative light. Those remain longer term ambitions, and are unlikely to be actionable in the next few years.

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| Conclusion

Our world has become increasingly digital. It is no longer useful to draw a sharp distinction between our online and our offline lives: They are no longer independent entities but inseparably intertwined. We no longer *go* online, we *are* online. All of us. Including, of course, extremist actors who are often early adopters of new technological advances and venture into emerging digital spaces. Extremism too no longer goes online, it *is* online – on every platform, every chat room, every digital space imaginable.

Hence, it is crucial for prevention and intervention actors to recognize the importance of the online sphere and develop new strategies to counter extremist activities in the digital sphere. While a lot of progress has been made in this regard over the last decade, the ever-changing digital ecosystem constantly poses new challenges and

requires continuous adaptation. This publication has brought together a range of international experts to discuss current trends and potential future pathways for digital prevention and intervention work, highlighting the diverse nature of challenges but also the many opportunities digital technologies afford counter-extremism efforts. It is encouraging to see how many unexplored possibilities are yet to be utilized and how many great ideas are yet to be put into practice, tested, and evaluated. There are many new frontiers for digital P/CVE to explore in the near and far future and we hope that this publication has provided our readers with more information on what this future may look like. We have all the tools we need to develop appealing and effective digital campaigns. We simply need to start somewhere.

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