

European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

Online Deradicalisation? –

What Can and What Cannot Be Done via Internet and Social Media

by Harald Weilnböck



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Everybody demands so-called “counter narratives” for the internet. Yet, first-line practitioners claim that “one cannot deradicalise on-line, anyhow!” Indeed, various misconceptions are current:

Some assume counter-narratives are self-evident: some base educational material and interviews – anything goes. Others want to learn from extremists’ web-activities and “counter-radicalize” through pro-democracy values – forgetting that counter-manipulation cannot be the solution. Few attempt to employ humour, even ridicule, ignoring that extremists lack humour and ridicule/mockery is a most explosive strategy. Modest approaches seek to communicate government’s good-will and refute misinformation and propaganda, admitting that this won’t impress extremists. Yet, others produce victims’ testimonials to deter terrorism – and are unaware that radicals and hate crime perpetrators may react highly averse because they are generally victimized themselves and in strong psychological denial. Everybody seems to believe that extremists’ communications need to be “countered”, “contested”, “combated”, “dismantled” and “ideology, logic, fact” be applied – disregarding that extremists feed on being countered. Therefore, the respective cognitive-behavioural programs are largely ineffective and just produce obedience.

Empirical good-practice research in deradicalisation and media underlines: What is needed is open-process, relational, and voluntary interventions. These operate in non-directional, trust-based, confidential, and exploratory ways – and are narrative, as opposed to argumentative: I.e. they engage in first-hand,

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co-narrative accounts of personally lived-through experiences and actions. Hence, they are dialogue which is not easily compatible with media approaches.

Moreover, so-called “extremist narratives” are not really narratives at all. In fact, recruiters avoid narrativity and/or are largely incapable to narrate personally. In turn proper narrativity is exactly what is needed. Since deradicalisation comes down to building the clients’ ability to articulate lived-through experiences – which then cannot be countered anyway. Hence, the term “counter narrative” is a most unfortunate misnomer. It needs to be replaced by “narrative interventions” or “deradicalizing narratives” – as opposed to “counter messaging” and “campaigning”.

The “Deradicalizing Narratives” project (EDNA, Berlin) concluded: (1) Sustainable media approaches need to observe the principles of offline good-practice. (2) They must always be systematically embedded in an off-line intervention process. Here a 20-80 principle applies, i.e. 80% resources go into the off-line. (3) Production procedures should be designed as counselling interventions, i.e. are maximally participative. Clients get training in narrative interviewing and video/audio editing, they explore deradicalizing principles, co-produce their own tool for future offline use, become facilitators, and keep all the rights.