European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

Rehabilitating perpetrators of violent extremism and hate crime: The importance of gender-based approaches and the limits of online interventions - Counter-messaging and counter-arguing is invaluable for the resilience of our societies, but often does not have the intended impact on the target group, since arguing only strengthens their radicalisation. So what should we do?

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Rehabilitating perpetrators of violent extremism and hate crime: The importance of gender-based approaches and the limits of online interventions - Counter-messaging and counter-arguing is invaluable for the resilience of our societies, but often does not have the intended impact on the target group, since arguing only strengthens their radicalisation. So what should we do?

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Leaving attitudes and life styles of violent extremism and group-orientated hatred is a very complicated long-term process of personal change. It may well be compared to extensive psycho-therapy. Facilitating such process is a quite challenging kind of interpersonal work which requires particular skills on the part of the practitioners and certain conditions in the work setting as well as a certain a basic awareness within society and the political environment about what violent extremism is, where it comes from and how one should go about it. Throughout the activities of the Radicalisation Awareness Network hundreds of field experts and practitioners from numerous European member states have exchanged their knowledge which they have gained from decades of work experience and from some concomitant intervention research. Building on this exchange a first description of what may constitute good-practice has been worked out and published (cf. *The Narrative Principle: Good Practice in Anti-Hate Crime Interventions, within the Radicalization Awareness Network*[1]) which will be followed by a revised second edition soon. Throughout this work two observations stood out: For one the aspect of gender – i.e. self-concepts of manliness and femininity – has thus far been overlooked and underrated. Secondly, it seemed that prevention and counter-radicalising interventions by way of internet and social media have been overrated and misunderstood in what they may achieve.

Principles of good practice interventions

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[1] http://www.cultures-interactive.de/tl_files/publikationen/engl/2013_Weilnboeck_ The_Narrative_Principle_Good_practice_in_Anti-Hate_Crime.pdf

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To resume the basic guidelines of this kind of work, good practice interventions of facilitating rehabilitation from violent extremism and hate crime …

- … are open-process interventions that do not follow a fixed curriculum or session plan. Open-process work is by definition maximally participatory, exploratory and largely self-directed by the clients; they require a high degree of interactivity and methodological flexibility on the part of the facilitators.

- … are voluntary interventions while clients may be motivated beforehand through motivational interviews (not so much by incentives) and join on the basis of incremental buy-in (hence, dropout must not have any consequences for the client's record).

- … are narrative interventions, i.e. they facilitate processes of individual narration which explore personally lived-through experiences and subjectively perceived actions. Narrative approaches steer free from any (counter-)arguments, discussions and ideological debates. For, violent extremism can be questioned but not overcome by means of discussing issues.

- … are always based on face-to-face relationship building and are thus predicated on personal commitment, mutual trust, and confidence – hence, the intervention needs to be confidential (and be not combined with assessment or similar procedures which are commissioned by institutional authorities and driven by security concerns). This is also the reason why internet and social media interaction can only have a very limited function in this kind of work.

- … . Good-practice interventions focus on social skills and emotional intelligence – in particular around emotions/ affects of anger, shame, and anxiety and around areas of personal conflict (which is why cognitive-behavioural trainings are only little useful here).

- … . Therefore, settings of group work are preferred as much as possible – which, however, may be accompanied by one-on-one settings if needed.

- Such sensitive process of personal exchange needs to be facilitated by external, non-governmental practitioners who have license to act independently within and across statutory institutions. These practitioners should be part of an inter-agency framework and are supported by governmental staff and state-of-the-art quality-assurance measures. They thus may combine both accepting and confrontational modes of interaction.

- … . Open-process and narrative (group-)work generally generates story telling about the clients' actual life-world context, biography, family, peer-group and topics around victimization, power and violence, experiences of extremist recruitment; it will also look at personal resources and capacities. Eventually this intervention process may include in-depth violent act narratives in which perpetrators speak about the instances in which they have acted out in hatred and violent extremism.

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-    … . Furthermore, good-practice intervention will, in their later work phases, also touch upon political and religious issues – as well as on personal and social grievances, without however fostering too much argumentative discussion or ideological debate. Hence, the intervention may be supported by elements of civic education and include members of the community and civil society (also of the family who may be invited into the intervention from outside at certain instances). Also media narratives/films, fictional or documentary, can be used if they are carefully embedded in the offline intervention.

The limits of internet and social media interventions

As has already been alluded to with regard to the importance of direct, face-to-face and trust-building interventions, first-line practitioners overwhelmingly agree that "one cannot deradicalize on-line!". Not even second-degree prevent work with young people who are susceptible to or in early stages of radicalisation cannot be done by internet and social media. In fact, no kind of lasting and profound personal change can be induced by on-line media interventions. However, media products may be part of any face-to-face intervention as long as the media narrative has been carefully devised for being employed to this very purpose, as they are important for supporting societal awareness and resilience.

However, before focusing on such line of work, various widely dispersed misconceptions need to be addressed.[2] They mostly stress an urgent demand for so-called "counter narratives" in the internet. Some assume it is quite self-evident how to produce counter-narratives: One only needed to put together some basic information and interview materials about extremism – and this would do. Others even want to learn from extremists' web-activities and "counter-radicalize" the audience through pro-democracy values – underestimating the fact that counter-manipulation cannot be the solution. Few even attempt to employ humour, even ridicule, ignoring that extremists and vulnerable young people tend to not share this kind of humour; also ridicule/mockery is a most explosive strategy with this target group in particular. More sober approaches seek to communicate governments' good-will and refute misinformation and propaganda. While such counter-messaging and counter-arguing is certainly valuable and necessary in view of societal resilience, it isn't able to impact on the target group (since arguing most often only strengthens their radicalisation). Yet others produce victims' testimonials to deter terrorism – but aren't always sufficiently aware that radicals and hate crime perpetrators tend to react

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[2] Deradicalising Narratives within the RAN approach – what can and what cannot be done in media based interventions. Manuscript. http://www.cultures-interactive.de/tl_files/publikationen/engl/2013_Weilnboeck_Deradicalising-Narratives.pdf

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highly averse because they are generally victimized themselves and in strong psychological denial.

Most problematic is the general belief that extremists' communications first of all need to be "countered", "contested", "combated", "dismantled" and that "ideology, logic, fact" needs to be applied – disregarding that extremists feed on being countered. Attached to this is the assumption that extremists' media communications are narrative in the proper sense of the word – which they are not. For, these communications generally do not engage in first-hand accounts of personally lived-through experiences and actions which the interlocutors may freely and actively engaged with by way of questioning, exploring, and deepening the account in a co-narrative and open-process manner of interaction. Hence, "extremist narrative" rather reflects a manner of speaking – but really is a misnomer. What makes this misconception even more unfortunate: It is precisely the narrativity in the proper sense which is needed to trigger and facilitate processes of distancing from and leaving violent extremism. But achieving this kind of narrative exchange is a quite challenging undertaking and needs an off-line setting of face-to-face interaction – which will, as was mentioned above, by all means avoid doing one thing: which is *countering* the others statements.

The "Deradicalizing Narratives" project (EDNA, Berlin) is attempting to generate media narratives (in audio mode only) which are suited for the very purpose of being employed in off-line interventions of deradicalisation. EDNA has thus far concluded …

- that sustainable media approaches need to observe the principles of *offline* good-practice (i.e. proceed, as much as possible, in a logic of narrative, open-process, non-directional, relational, exploratory, voluntary, trust-based, and confidential intervention). This is a challenge since "counter narratives" (i.e. testimonials, videos) are generally finished and closed products and limited in their non-directionality, confidentiality etc.
- that the media narrative must always be systematically embedded in an off-line intervention process. The clients should be thoroughly prepared for the media input (e.g. by prior exchange about the video's topics or by exercises in narrative interviewing and story-telling), and clients should be enabled to personalize and reflect upon their subjective reactions after the viewing of the materials. Generally, a 20-80 principle seems recommendable, understood as 80% resources going into the off-line while 20% go into producing the narrative as such.
- that production procedures should be designed and communicated as a counselling intervention (rather than an interview/ video project). Hence, it would be designed

as face-to-face intervention of counselling, rehabilitation, or therapy that provides assistance in preventing and personally working-through violent extremism and group focused hatred. The only specificity of such media intervention would be that it also – as an aside – offers the opportunity to generate narrative self-documents/ testimonials.

- the narratives should be designed for the only purpose of being used in offline work with clients. For, multiple usage concepts (also aiming at societal awareness, stakeholder communication, lobbying etc.) are hardly feasible in practice areas as sensitive as deradicalisation.

The necessity of gender focussed work

Among the clients' topics that are raised in the open-process narrative group-work (as mentioned above, topics of biography, family, peer-group, power, victimization, etc.) gender identity issues and gender related behavior are of particular importance. The work experiences of European practitioners' throughout the RAN working group on deradicalisation and the Women in Extremism Network (by Cultures Interactive, Berlin) have taught us that …

- (i) not only men but also women play a crucial role in violent extremism as perpetrators, ideologues and supporters – which requires adopting a gender systemic perspective,
- (ii) there is hardly any violent extremist, terrorist, or hate crime offender who does not also hold sexist and homophobic attitudes, i.e. manifests highly conflictive gender issues,
- (iii) these conflictive gender issues do not only coincide with violent extremist behaviours and hate crimes but are key psychological driving forces behind them – which requires the development and employment of gender focused intervention methods.
It therefore has often proven more effective to focus on a client's concepts of manliness or femininity and explore attitudes of sexism and homophobia than engage in other, seemingly more pertinent issues of violent extremism. For example, practitioners have recurrently found that violently extremist young men compensate insecurities in their sense of male identity and manliness by acting-out in hateful ways against women, homosexuals, and generally all persons that by appearance or behaviour confuse their restrictive gender role order. Moreover, women that are active in such extremisms overwhelmingly agree to and actively reconfirm the restrictive gender role order that is in effect in their milieus. They thus share and defend the sexist and homophobic attitudes and draw motivation from them for their activities – as providers of ideological support und

internal group cohesion, as helpers in preparing attacks, and also by directly committing fierce physical hate crimes and terrorist attacks themselves.

On a different level, extremist movements take strategic advantages of the socially given gender roles in that they position their female followers in places of society that allow them to propagate extremism in tempting ways - and make it look more normal and acceptable. In Germany, for instance, rightwing extremist women enter child day care and parents' organizations, schools, family welfare and professional social work in order to infiltrate and to support the current mainstreaming of rightwing extremist attitudes into middle classes.

Hence, practitioners of prevention and deradicalisation have often concluded that the very basic life duality of female and male constitutes, in each individual's life, the earliest occasion at which thought patterns of polarization/ dissociation and behaviours of exclusion may be adopted. For this reason issues of gender identity have proven to be a key element in various different forms of violent extremism – and a unique and much underrated onset of successful intervention work.

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