

European Platform of Deradicalisation (EDNA):

Do we really need “counter narratives”? And what would that be anyway? – The narrative approach to audio-visual media tools in interventions of deradicalisation and prevention against violent extremism and hate crime.

by Harald Weilnböck



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Introduction

Everybody talks about “counter narratives” these days and about “counter-acting and campaigning in the internet” – in other words, about the need to find ways to use the worldwide web and social media as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube to prevent and avert the increasing threat of violent extremism and terrorism. Rightly so, because clearly, since long the so-called new media have played and still play a significant role in the radicalization and recruitment of young impressionable people for just about every sort of hateful radicalism that is around – most prominently with violent Jihadism and with rightwing-extremism.¹

In a sense, it is surprising that the internet has not earlier been the focus of systematic methodology development, given that the importance of the new media for subcultures in general, and for extremist political and/or religious subcultures in particular, has been evident for quite some time. Hence, it might be safe to say that nowadays successful approaches to just about every societal challenge will and should – to a certain degree and in certain ways – employ a new media strategy and develop audio-visual material.

Yet, to exactly what degree and in which ways may one use audio-visual material in deradicalization and hate crime prevent interventions? What kind of audio-visual material would that be in the first place? In other words how would a ‘deradicalizing narrative’ or ‘testimonial’ look like – i.e. how would a media product look like that may rightly be expected to exert a deradicalizing impact and thus effectively facilitate mental processes of

¹ See INACH, Jugendschutznetz.de, and most recently Der Tagesspiegel 13th April, 2013, p. 34, www.volksempfänger.de. See for example: Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism, produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/CounterNarrativesFN2011.pdf>, 2013, quoted March 2015. Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al-Shabaab’s Western Media Strategy. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2013, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ICSR-Lights-Camera-Jihad-Report_Nov2012_ForWeb-2.pdf, quoted March 2015. The Challenge of Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) 2013, quoted March 2015.

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working through violent extremism, hate crime, and group-oriented hostility with young radicalized people?

These questions are all the more important since in recent times it has become increasingly evident that the online factor within the complex process of a young person's radicalisation may have been overrated after all. Even more importantly, the somewhat unsettling observation has been made that the internet may, for intrinsic reasons, not have too much leeway and influencing force in terms of supporting processes of deradicalisation.² It might thus well be true what the EDNA project, coming from firsthand practitioners of offline prevention and deradicalisation/ rehabilitation, had stated since early 2012: "that although the Internet plays a strong role in radicalization, this does not necessarily mean that the Internet is also equally important in deradicalisation/ rehabilitation or in prevention work."³

In fact, the respected expert Soufan Group network recently reconfirmed this EDNA stance, and the observations of many field practitioners, by empirically means. The inquiry looked at the 17,676 followers of the highly radicalizing aka@ShamiWitness account (by Mehdi Masroor Biswas, meanwhile closed down) and the 19,275 followers of the U.S. State Department's counter-messaging social media program called "Think Again Turn Away" (using the Twitter account [@ThinkAgain_DOS](#)) which by all criteria is a high-end and well thought through online CVE tool. As result the analysis determined: Among these roughly 37K users "there were only five accounts in common, and all of those were journalists or academics". The analysts concluded: "The two circles of followers do not overlap. This is understandable since it is unlikely that vulnerable people feeling disaffected or disconnected from society would choose to follow an openly government-run social media account."⁴ EDNA would even go beyond this and add the assumption that even if one could expose individuals from our main client audiences to these educational and enlightening video productions, this approach would not work, i.e. these videos would not be able to make a

² c.f. "Propaganda 2.0 – Psychological Effects of Right-wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos" by Diana Rieger, Lena Frischlich and Gary Bente, http://www.bka.de/nm_233148/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Publikationen/Publikationsreihen/01PolizeiUndForschung/1_44_Propaganda2.0.html.

These stance were also a significant streak of debates and practitioners observations at the UN Conference on 'Best Practice in Communications,' organized by the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF) on 27 June 2013 in Sixty One Whitehall, London. The high-level conference was organized by the United Nation's and GCTF's Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Working Group and was co-chaired by the United Kingdom (UK) Richard Chalk, Head of Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU), Home Office, United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates. Most recently the Abdullah_x project (a coop by ISD and Google), a CVE cartoon video which is masterfully done and well immersed in youth cultural styles and factors of credibility, has not been able to meet the expectations in terms of outreach.

³ Harald Weinsböck: Report on the Presentation (of HW) to the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC, US State Department, Dec 2014)

⁴ Countering Online Extremism. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-counter-terror-extremism-online/>. The Soufan Group 2013, quoted March 2015.

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positive impact on them – for psychological reasons that will be elaborated in more depth further down in this paper.

In fact, in another Intelligence Briefing (Intelbrief) of the Soufan Group network (on the White House Summit on CVE (in Feb. 2015)⁵ the authors made a more principle remark about CVE policy making – which seems to apply to media/ internet policies in particular. The authors do not only caution any unwarranted hopes and expectations about the internet as factor of deradicalisation. They also strongly stress: “What briefs well in presentations to policy-makers likely won’t work with the actual people who need the message”, thus reflecting on the fact that doubts about online CVE tools have been around for quite some time – but don’t seem to be able to get heard by policy makers. The issue of the internet seems to be just too attractive for many stakeholders in politics, industry and the media – and openly pondering about and eventually conceding that, in fact, not much can be done in the internet seems too much against these stakeholders’ convictions and interests. Moreover, the consequential conclusion might also have difficulties “to brief well” that rather than investing more in internet and video productions more funds should be invested in human resources and practitioner experts who are experienced and skilled in direct interpersonal interventions of prevention and deradicalisation/ rehabilitation work.

These observations certainly imply that expectations about influencing young radicalised individuals through online CVE tools alone should be kept quite moderate. However, that does not mean that interviews or other audio-visual material could not be a good means to be employed in offline settings of face-to-face prevent or derad work. EDNA has found this to be the case. In this respect and in practical and methodological terms EDNA has thus pursued the question of how to identify, collect or generate media material which works well in offline, face-to-face prevent and deradicalisation settings – material which may be generated from various sorts of interviewees and/or different kinds of documentary and fictional media contents? In terms of interviewing individuals the question then was, how to facilitate a kind of personal and narrative self-expressions that may then be used as an effective tool in the intervention work, be it utterances about personally meaningful experiences in one’s biography – moments of recruiting into or distancing from extremisms and similarly significant others moments –, or be it meaningful instances of personal media

⁵ Countering Violent Extremism: Challenges and Solutions, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-violent-extremism-challenges-and-solutions/?catid=3>. The Soufan Group, February 19, 2015, quoted March 2015.

consumption (books/novels, films, videos etc.)⁶ which played a role for one's identity building and life conduct?

With regard to postproduction of such audio-visual materials the question is, how should one arrange and design these materials as – narrative – media products/ testimonials? And how to design a sophisticated enough pedagogical setting and approach for direct offline intervention work in which such media based narratives may be embedded? How to do this in a way that does not just produce pertinent media content but creates a tool and program that may effectively assist young people in leaving behind life styles of violent extremism and hatred?

In more theoretical terms, is it true and what does it mean that such material should be “narrative”, linguistically and psychologically speaking – rather than argumentative, debating, cognitive/ persuasive, ideological etc., as is often hastily assumed because of the contexts of political and religious extremism? Furthermore, how to assure that all procedures that are employed in producing deradicalizing narratives – the interviewing, selection of appropriate content, all post-production of the gathered materials, embedding into an appropriate offline interventions etc. – correspond with the principles of good-practice deradicalization interventions as they have been discussed in recent studies?⁷

These are the key questions of the action research project “European Platform of Deradicalizing Narratives” (EDNA)⁸ which is presently launched as ‘national starter measure’ of methodological development.⁹

⁶ Here established methods of “media experience interviewing” may be adopted which have been developed in qualitative culture and media research; c.f. Mila – eine Fallrekonstruktion der qualitativ-psychologischen Literatur- und Medien-Interaktionsforschung (LIR) In: Psychotherapie und Sozialwissenschaft 10(2) (2008c), S. 113-146. English translation: Mila – a reconstructive case analysis according to Literary and Media Interaction Research approach (LIR). vgl. www.weilnboeck.net.

⁷ Cf. Harald Weilnböck: Das narrative Prinzip: Good Practice-Interventionen im Kontext des Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). Published in: Rechtsextremismus in Europa Länderanalysen, Gegenstrategien und arbeitsmarktorientierte Ausstiegsarbeit. Hg. von der Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2013, p. 397-428. English translation: The Narrative Principle: Good Practice in Anti-Hate Crime Interventions, within the Radicalisation Awareness Network. Published in: Right-Wing Extremism in Europe Country analyses, counter-strategies and labor-market oriented exit-strategies. Ed. by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2013, p. 379-408.

⁸ EDNA is financed by the EC (DG Home Affairs, ISEC) and co-financed by Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency of Civic Education); it is conducted by Violence Prevention Network (VPN) and Minor-Projektkontor e.V.

⁹ In its intended second project phase the EDNA approach will be brought onto a European level. Here various collaborations with colleagues from other member states and other contexts of violent extremism and media work may be established which aim at facilitating national initiatives of creating suitable “deradicalising narratives” and intervention approaches in these countries.

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With respect to terminological definition: EDNA's base criteria for defining its subject matter – violent radicalization/ extremism – are fulfilled by any individual or organization that supports attitudes contrary to the principles of human rights, civil liberties, the constitutional order and the rule of law. Extremist organizations in this sense encourage conduct grounded on ideologies of superiority/ inequality, separation/ exclusion, and on the legitimacy of group-focused hostility, resentment, hatred and violence. Typically, such organizations aggressively recruit young people, draw them into a condition of dependence and establish an unyielding in-group out-group divide. Key impact factors of such recruitment usually are of a mostly emotional and relational nature which generally goes back to biographical issues of psycho-social deprivation in the family, violent abuse, or denigration, thus causing a desire of belonging and identity and impulses of acting-out in violence.

EDNA's main objective – to generate 'deradicalizing narratives/ media testimonials' (and build a suitable offline intervention setting around them) – pertains to an undertaking that is generally referred to as "counter-narrative" approach. Therefore, it needs to be stated explicitly at the outset what will be elaborated in more detail further down: The term "counter-narratives" is a most unfortunate misnomer which is indicative of grave misconceptions about how deradicalization works and how personal processes of working-through extremism and hatred can be facilitated – also about what can and cannot be done in deradicalization via internet and social media. Hence, the most widespread term "counter narratives" will eventually have to be replaced by a more appropriate term.

Moreover, at the outset it seems prudent to call to memory just how challenging the task is to reach out to and effectively work with violently radicalized young people and hate crime offenders – be it via audio-visual web-based tools or via any off-line, face-to-face intervention approach. In all experience, radicalized young people are quite difficult to engage with through any medium and approach – and by any sort of interventionists or educator, especially if they are statutory employees and government staff. This is because here one has to reach out to, win confidence/ trust and have formative impact on a type of young person that, due to her/his biographical experiences, has become highly distrustful, resistant, idiosyncratic, and possibly also aggressive and cynical towards any adult mainstream society initiatives, be it as on-line media user or as off-line face-to-face interlocutor – distrustful sometimes to a degree that borders a paranoid frame of mind and interaction.

On the other hand, however, every experienced practitioner will reconfirm that these at-risk young people, in spite of some of their actions and attitudes, may also be quite likeable as persons and often are positively inspired in many respects, once one manages to create a conducive setting for interacting and working with them! Not to speak of the fact that the young people often are quite capable of expressing a set of personal, social, and (geo-)political grievances/ issues that cannot easily be answered by any social work practitioner or intervention approach and that might be worthwhile for mainstream society to listen to and engage with more closely.

The challenge of creating impactful materials and a media-based approach looms ever larger if one considers how highly pessimistic many experienced first-line practitioners have gotten who worked with radicalized young people and tried to use audio-visual input, “narratives“, or “testimonials” about extremism, recruitment, terrorism and its victims. The most well-intended approaches have quite frequently failed entirely – or even backfired and eventually aggravated the situation. All too often we seem to have created interviews, testimonials and other media productions that we – middle-class, middle-age, mainstream citizens and activists of prevent and human rights work etc. – find appealing and that we would like our children and young people to consume and appreciate. And already our children, while not being the target group, may then have tended to smirk at rather than be profoundly moved by these testimonial on any ethical or moral level.

To be honest, quite a view of these media products would have to be called self-centered, maybe even selfish which is important to note since self-centeredness in its ultimate consequence is a key feature of any extremist state of mind. It will thus support polarization rather than have deradicalizing effect. For this very reason first-line practitioners describe their task of working with young radicalized individuals as being nothing other but engaging with an extreme state of self-centeredness. In some cases this preoccupation with oneself – and some key identity issues – may be so severe that almost any concept of the other and of the self-in-relation-to-the-other has been lost. This sense of the self and other needs to be re-built and “re-socialized” as a somewhat older term had put it quite rightly.

Hence, such relational work of deradicalization would have to avoid any form of self-centeredness on the part of the facilitators, and requires maximal caution even with any impetus of ethical insistence, let alone with bringing in videos with a strong moral or human touch impetus. Quite on the contrary, practitioners tend to conclude that facilitating change with young people in a state of extreme self-preoccupation requires an approach that is able to be most selfless – i.e. dialogic, open-process, non-directional, dynamic agenda etc. In a word, maximal attention is devoted to the other/ the client who is addressed in the most

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unconditional and open-minded manner possible, in order to make contact – and create relationship between the preoccupied self and a significant other. This is true for any kind of good practice deradicalization intervention, be it off- or online. But it is certainly most difficult for an online approach, since one may hardly create a testimonial or other kinds of videos – unless one focuses on one’s own product, thus on oneself and on one’s concept of it.

For these reasons, some of the most qualified firstline deradicalization and hate crime prevent practitioners – on the basis of their quite sobering experiences with media approaches – meanwhile tend to hold that “one cannot deradicalize on-line, period!” and that “any audio-visual material is quite risky to use in intervention contexts”. Even worse, in view of the present boom of – belated – attention for internet and social media strategies, some practitioners have acquired the view “that these media people and academicians just don’t know the first thing about how deradicalization works (!)”. While this may not be a very supportive nor at all professional attitude, it is possibly quite indicative of where we stand in approaching the challenging task of dealing with media and the internet in terms of deradicalization and hate crime offender rehabilitation.

What makes matters even more difficult is the fact that media project workers and internet activists seem to not liaise much with deradicalization practitioners that work on the ground in the offline – so that their experiences and expertise is not called upon very often. Consequently, many of the media/internet initiatives – and pertaining academic fields – seem to be populated by (media) specialists that do not have much knowledge about methodological key issues of firstline deradicalization interventions. Moreover, quite understandably, these colleagues are unlikely to easily recognize the fact that most of a deradicalization intervention needs to be offline for intrinsic reasons – and that any audio-visual material needs to be carefully designed to accommodate the offline intervention that it may be employed in.

Hence, considerable thought and experimentation must be invested in developing appropriate methods and procedures for (i) researching and approaching possible interviewees (and/or selecting existing materials, documentary and fictional narratives), (ii) conducting the interviews, (iii) procuring the post-production of the audio-visual material, and (iv) creating a suitable off-line intervention approach in which the audio-visual materials may then be embedded. For, despite the high attention presently devoted to internet issues, the methodology of a deradicalizing narratives approach which is sophisticated and sustainable enough to work well with our most challenging targeted group of young people is still in its very early stages.

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The EDNA context – current misconceptions and fallacies around so-called “counter narratives” and testimonials

The EDNA project of action research and tool development is designed to fill the gaps and answer the open questions about deradicalizing narratives/ testimonials – which, as stated above, are widely referred to as so-called “counter narratives” and often confused with “counter-messaging” tools. EDNA thus intends to help avoid some of the fallacies and misconceptions that inevitably arise whenever a new field of research and activity is inaugurated – and whenever the advisable interagency collaborations have not yet been fully put into place, which in this case regards the rapport between media professionals and offline practitioners of deradicalization interventions that work in various at-risk areas of society.

One of the most current misconceptions which has characterized the early days of internet and social media strategies seems pretty much overcome at this point in time. Today it almost goes without saying that, while the spotting and banning of websites that present hostile, dehumanizing, and violently extremist content still has to be considered necessary, any such restrictive measures must not be mistaken as the main or even only a very important part of a comprehensive prevent and deradicalization strategy. For in all experience it is impossible to eradicate such material. Moreover, the very idea of eradicating any form of personal expression – even the most shocking and detestable ones – is quite dubious to begin with. Rather, it is much more commonly acknowledged today that such material needs to be taken note of as a part of social reality and be worked with in appropriate intervention settings – some say needs to be “countered” – so that sustainable civic resilience may spring from it.

However, other more intricate sorts of misunderstandings still linger. Most wide-spread at this point seems a certain kind of optimism, maybe even naïvite about what it actually takes to create deradicalizing media material and/or testimonials – or to put it more precisely: what it takes to create audio-visual materials that, within a methodical intervention approach, may successfully assist individuals from various high-risk target groups in leaving life styles of hatred, extremism, and violence.

More often than not a rather carefree attitude prevails that regards it as more or less self-evident how a deradicalizing narrative/ testimonials would have to look like. It often seems to be assumed that basically any audio-visual (interview) material about issues of extremism will do, as long as it stems from a “credible source” (of one of the major stakeholder groups, as former extremists, victims, family, social work practitioners etc.) and is an “authentic” and

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“emotional” self-expression of the person – and as long as one knows the right places for it to be stuck into the world wide net and social media. This of course leaves open, among other things, the question of how to measure and implement credibility, authenticity and emotion. Clearly, the above mentioned observation of practitioners who work directly with radicalized and/or high-risk young people in the offline domain and who claim that the most well-intended testimonial might fail entirely or even backfire and aggravate the situation, has not communicated yet to those that are engaged in media production.

Another misperception which often accompanies the above and is quite frequent among professionals who work in online counter-extremism activities, is of a methodological – and epistemological – sort: It is often stated that what needs to be done first and foremost is to closely analyze how extremists’ internet sites work and how online radicalization and social media recruitment operate. The implication here generally is that such insights would then without further ado teach us how to do deradicalisation and allow us to produce so-called “counter-narratives” as tools to be employed in the internet.

For sure, it is certainly not unimportant to know what goes on in extremists’ social media and website formats, especially if one wants to create audio-visual material oneself targeted to help at-risk young people to avoid recruitment – or even to revert a process of violent radicalization. Also, those who set out to engage in “counter-messaging” or “counter-arguing” activities of course need to know what extremists websites’ messages are in order to be able to refer to it. False statements, wrong arguments and forged evidence that are put onto the internet by extremists as means of propaganda need to be exposed, rectified and refuted. In all these respects it is not at all inappropriate to pose the question: “How do extremists websites look like”.

But such analysis will not tell us anything about how to deradicalize; and the “countering” and rectifying will not produce “deradicalizing narratives”. It will just clarify what is right and wrong, as any counter-campaigning will just gather and present persuasive material in favor of diversity, democracy and human rights. Above all, such activities will only be able to address and mobilize liberal civil society where deradicalization is not an issue (at least not in any immediate respects) and thus may strengthen societal resilience at best. Moreover, all this is based on the hope that most people have enough reason and sobriety to acknowledge a convincing argument (and not just go on denying the Holocaust for instance). In contrast, producing “deradicalizing narratives” and developing a narrative intervention approach that effectively deradicalizes – on- and off-line – is a different task altogether.

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Learning from extremists? – the pitfalls of so-called counter-radicalisation through media

Hence, the assumption that the analysis of extremists' websites would in any way enable us to develop tools and approaches of deradicalization, is quite misleading indeed. In addition, when looking at these assumptions more closely one realizes that they often imply that not only should we analyze extremists' websites but we should learn from them, become able to reproduce what they do and then use this knowledge to counter-campaign against them. Here the base idea seems to be that deradicalizing media products need to be structured in exactly the same way as the extremists' products themselves, just the other way around, supporting the contrary attitudes – as it were the good-guys-convictions (of democracy, pluralism, diversity etc.). In other words, it is implied that we should copy the radicals in terms of method but then “counter-radicalize” the audience, as it were radicalize them in the opposite direction.

Tragically, any such “counter-radicalizing” approach would reconfirm what extremists have held all along about any prevention and deradicalization interventions: that “they just brainwash you”, “turn you around”, “manipulate you”, “are selfish/ self-righteous” and “take power over you”, work for “the system” and for the “enemy of truth” that “only we are the bearers of” etc.

Certainly, not very many colleagues are likely to follow through with this logic and fully subscribe to it after thinking about its implications a bit more. Yet, the quite dubious term “counter-radicalization”, also “counter-campaigning” is very widespread and generally taken as self-evident. Probably the only group of professionals that is immune to hastily buy into any such counter-radicalization logic is – once again – offline practitioners who work directly with the young people in face-to-face settings. Because they know full well that not much is gained if one manages to “turn around” a young person in this way. What is more, from their direct experience these practitioners are acutely aware of one key principle of their challenging work: that one must never do what radicalizers do – or even follow the erroneous impetus to compete with radicalizers on their own grounds, among them being “brainwashing” and “selfish ... manipulation”.

Even aside from this base principle it is quite apparent that any such “counter-radicalizing” agenda would not comply with the methodological good-practice guidelines – of open-process, non-directive, narrative etc. work – and would certainly not be selfless and dialogic in the above defined sense. Hence, focusing our attention primarily on trying to analyze – and possibly even copy and learn from – extremist on-line contents puts us at risk of getting into a methodological deadlock.

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The no-countering principle of good-practice deradicalisation interventions

The counter-radicalization fallacy leads us to a closely related and even more widespread misconception about what can and cannot be done in on-line interventions – and how deradicalization processes work to begin with. Many strategy papers and projects that are concerned with on-line approaches start from the key assumption that what is needed to be done most urgently in the face of extremist internet material, is: to “counter” it (!), i.e. to level “counter-arguments”, create “counter-narratives”, produce “counter”-testimonials and/or engage in systematic “counter-messaging” against what is put out by extremists’ websites and social media.

In other words, the underlying assumption is that the force of extremist recruitment via internet is derived mostly from “messages”, “arguments”, and (fabricated) evidence – and countering is the way to deal with it. Consequently, this would require a primarily content-oriented and rational approach which disagrees, challenges, contests, and contradicts these “messages” on a factual, intellectual, ideological, and rational level. Whenever the term “narratives” is brought up in these contexts, it is mostly used in a vague metaphoric manner, meaning “contestation”, “argument”, “back-up story”, “representation”, and “depiction” (with the specific exception of the victim testimonial projects; see beneath). This rather loose terminological usage is diametrically different from what the linguistic – and colloquial – term “narrative” really means, which is: recount personally lived-through experiences and events.

Moreover this base strategy line of “countering” is generally expressed in a quite combative and belligerent tone: To quote just one example, the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF) states on this issue with unyielding rigor that we need to “combat” extremism and to this end should produce “counter-narratives” and that these “counter-narratives” need to be able to put forth “an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative”.¹⁰

Now, from a methodological point of view one just needs to ask: What impact will it most likely have on an extremist if one attempts to “counter”, “argue”, “challenge”, “dismantles”, “combat” her/his arguments and contestations? First-line practitioners of deradicalization – in fact anyone who has ever really interacted or worked with young people that find

¹⁰ Stated by the United Nation's Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (UN-CTITF), Omar Ashour: Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy. (Perspectives On Terrorism, Vol. 8., No. 6, 2010); <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/128/html>; accessed April 19, 2013.

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themselves in a radicalized state of mind and/or have been recruited into an extremist infrastructure – would answer without hesitation: “Countering” and “arguing” will not deradicalize any of these young people. On the contrary, it will further provoke and harden them in their attitude and behaviors – and thus unintentionally support their radicalism. The more radicalized a person is, the more likely it is that s/he will be further radicalized by being “countered”. In fact, radicalized people and violent extremists feed on being “countered” and challenged, they crave to be contested and fought against so that they can all the more rightfully assume the gesture of the unjustly persecuted truth-bearers who are discriminated against by the whole world – and the “system” – which wants to take away and dismantle their truth. This is why professional recruiters actively look for situations in which they are countered. Most vulnerable and awkward they feel when they are not contested – and when they get into a situation in which a truly narrative exchange is promoted.

Therefore, the very first lesson that any social worker and firstline deradicalization practitioner throughout Europe has unfailingly learned – or else s/he has failed in her/his work – is: You must not argue with a radicalized person. You must not counter! You must not talk ideology to an extremist! The practitioner exchange and action research workshops conducted by the RAN Working Group on Deradicalisation (and by the ENoD project) has come to a quite unanimous conclusion on this point: There is a no-countering principle that applies to do good-practice deradicalisation interventions, because any approach that puts a premium on “countering”, “counter-arguing”, and/or “dismantling” the extremists’ contestations and beliefs will fail and even backfire – be it off- or on-line.¹¹

To be sure, as already indicated above, false statements and fabricated evidence must be contested and exposed. What is wrong and forged, needs to be corrected. Civic education, out-reach initiatives, community organizing, resilience building, empowerment and similar educational and preventive activities may be employed in sophisticated manners to accomplish this task. However, on-line activities aiming to have deradicalizing impact are an entirely different subject matter. They call for an altogether different approach which has not yet been sufficiently defined in detail – but should certainly follow the principles of good-practice deradicalization as they have been established for offline interventions.

To formulate this in terms of the different RAN working groups that are concerned with deradicalization and prevention: The RAN working group on Internet and Social Media rightly stresses that “the term 'counter-narrative' has come to be used in relation to a very wide range of activities” and that it is necessary to distinguish “between these different

¹¹ This is not to say that there is no place for any element of confrontation, ideological issues and arguments in good-practice intervention altogether; see Guidelines paper, footnote 7.

activities, because they require different approaches in terms of messages, messengers, tactics, partnerships ...". The authors therefore succinctly suggest to delineate a "spectrum" – which, however, they call a "counter-narrative spectrum", thus stressing the countering element very much. This spectrum consists of three strategies: (1) "alternative narratives", which "put forward a positive story about social values such as tolerance, openness, freedom, democracy", then (2) "government strategic communications" about "what government is doing, refut[ing] misinformation, and seek[ing] to forge relationships with key constituencies and audiences" and finally (3) "counter-narratives ... that directly or indirectly challenge extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour."¹²

Now, the RAN working group on Deradicalization and Exit Interventions as well as the RAN group on Prevention would certainly agree with the first two points. However, RAN Derad, coming from its workshops of knowledge exchange among first-line practitioners of face-to-face deradicalization interventions throughout Europe, would disagree with point 3 – and with the concept of a continuous "spectrum" of countering by means of "counter-narratives". For, none of the three activities leave room for a sort of intervention that could operate along the lines of the no-countering principle which has proven to be of key importance for deradicalization.

Therefore, firstly, RAN Derad would suggest to dedicate the point 3 merely to the task of correcting misinformation, challenging statements, and counter-arguing flawed arguments and to not use the term "counter-narratives" anymore in this context. Secondly it would suggest formulating a point 4 – or a second spectrum of activity altogether. This second spectrum would be reserved for deradicalization interventions proper. However, since this new and separate range of activities would need to be able to facilitate processes which are entirely different from educating, informing, and campaigning, it needs to be set apart clearly in methodological terms. Most importantly it would have to leave aside any "countering" strategies and decidedly go beyond operating with "ideology, logic, fact".

The RAN internet group seems to partly anticipate this conceptual shift when it explicitly states that "emotions are more important than evidence" and that an "appeal to human emotions" is needed – while it, however, leaves unanswered exactly how the emotional appeal would come in with an intervention strategy that goes through information, "ideology, logic, fact". Furthermore, there is a clear awareness about the limits of argumentation and persuasion: "Evidence may not achieve [much]" since it "can always be

¹² Proposed Policy Recommendations for the RAN High Level Conference in 2012, by the RAN Working Group Social Media and Internet, and the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (in cooperation with Google Ideas).

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refuted and countered” – which indeed should make us think twice about “countering” altogether.

By the same token the RAN internet group concedes that “counter-narratives are not about winning the argument or winning over the target audience”. Rather, the so-called “counter-narratives” should aim at a “gradual movement in the right direction” by which a movement of personal growth and development seems to be implied and not merely a change of opinions. Yet, it remains unclear how such “gradual movement” of personal change could be conceptualized and how “the right direction” would be defined and assessed – other than again following an argumentative, cognitive, and ideological approach. Hence, even this or gradual approach to countering would not be able to observe the no-countering principle – and profit from its great potentials to facilitate sustainable deradicalization processes.

Even more unclear is the question of how and with which methods such personal movement may be facilitated. Plus, should these more “gradual” “counter-narratives” envision a more subtle and careful mode of arguing, this might very easily come down to being just a more crafty, sneaky, and manipulative sort of argumentation – and thus be perceived as brainwashing. In case the “gradual movement” intervention should aim at bringing in some additional “appeal to human emotions”, this would then incur risks of sensationalism and of employing an undue human touch style that might easily alienate the target group – and is questionable in pedagogical respect.

Hence, in order to get to the point that online approaches, too, become able to observe – and in fact profit from – the good-practice principle of no-countering, we need to define an entirely different approach. This approach would avoid the above mentioned pitfalls of fact-oriented/ ideological/ intellectual etc. strategies and would thus not be doomed to fail our most important target group. Moreover, this approach would be totally dissimilar from any strategies of countering/arguing and from working on the level of “ideology, logic, fact”.

This, of course, is not at all an easy task. Since the no-countering principle does apply in the strict sense here. It not only means to not focus on countering the radicalizers’ key contestations but also requires avoiding the use of arguments in general when practicing deradicalization and hate crime prevent interventions – and thus steer free from intellectual, evidence oriented and debate-like modes of interaction altogether, at least for the most part. (These may come in only from time to time, as an aside, and without any insistence as to implicitly desired mind changes – and they would come in mostly in the later phases of the process).

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In fact, for prevent practitioners who come from traditions of civic education and democracy pedagogy and who have worked primarily in educational settings – or else in activism and campaigning –, this usually comes as quite a challenge. Plus, in many member states deradicalization is a new topic which is in the process of being developed. These prevent practitioners and activist are the main source of personnel for staffing deradicalization programs. For them the no-countering principle may seem almost paradoxical – or at least impracticable. They often feel: “What else could we possibly be doing if we may not be activists and educators anymore – and if we may not bring up arguments, support them by evidence, expose fabrication, correct errors, in a word employ ‘ideology, logic, fact’? ... What is left, as approach, if we refrain from differentiating right from wrong and true from false?” Activists in internet and media production might feel this way even stronger because the tradition of education and enlightenment is deeply ingrained in prevent media work. Also, generally being beyond any direct an unmediated contact with the target group, might make it more difficult for media activists to envisage what an alternative method could be.

**What is the opposite of countering? – Why would deradicalization need to be narrative?
And what is a narrative anyway?**

Now, where could we expect to get answers and assistance if we feel that the task of going beyond countering and arguments – and of doing without ideology, logic, fact – leaves us greatly helpless? A most useful source of methodological assistance lies in the empirical good-practice research that has recently been undertaken with various successful (offline) promising of deradicalization interventions throughout Europe. (This also seems much more appropriate than focusing primarily on the analysis of extremists’ internet and media campaigns, as was stated above.) After all, empirical good-practice research was the field which had thankfully alerted us that countering and leveling argumentations is largely ineffective and potentially detrimental.

Hence, one way of answering the question of what the alternative to countering/ arguing is – and how effective internet interventions may thus proceed – is to remind us of the results of this good-practice research. By way of a short abstract¹³: Successful approaches to deradicalization have been found to be open-process, relational, and exploratory interventions that work in non-directional and non-argumentative ways, are based on trust, confidentiality, voluntary involvement and commitment and may thus also engage in posing personal challenges. Moreover, these good-practice approaches focus on the development

¹³ For a full presentation of the research results see reference in footnote 7.

of personal story-telling and emotional intelligence. They unfold best within group settings and generally touch upon biographical, familial, gender-related and power issues/ experiences and combine both accepting and confrontational modes of interaction. On occasion they include youth cultural and peer education methods, touch upon political and religious issues, sometimes also work with fictional media narratives and bring in representatives of family, community and civil society as far as possible. Such interventions are delivered by skilled, specially-trained non-governmental practitioners who have license to act independently within and across statutory institutions and are proactively assisted in their interventions by the institutional staff. Finally, these good-practice approaches are accompanied by state-of-the-art quality control.

Consequently, any internet and media approach that recognized the need to avoid countering and go beyond delivering arguments could focus on these research results, almost as a methodological checklist, and attempt to fulfil the requirements in their development of online intervention concepts.

For sure, there also is a very short and simple way of conveying what is stated by this most exhaustive, yet quite dense description of good-practice methodology principles. Put in one phrase, good practice deradicalization interventions are narrative – and follow the principles of narrative interaction! Narrativity, here, is understood in the strictly non-metaphorical sense and refers to a consensual shorthand definition drawn from social sciences, linguistics and interdisciplinary narratology – including psychology.¹⁴ A narrative is thus understood to mean that a narrator/ protagonist recounts first-hand experiences and actions that s/he has personally lived-through and/or committed. Such narrative accounts usually relate occurrences and (inter-)actions whereby the narrator/ protagonist portrays other characters and their actions, depicts contexts and refers to a perceived challenge, fate or conflict. S/he will then tell how this led up to a certain initiative designed to solve the conflict or handle the challenge or fate, express certain modes of feeling about the outcome and anticipate future action.

Moreover, a narrative in this strict sense always implies co-narrativity, i.e. it is conceived of as a communicative and co-facilitated process. Engaging a co-narrative process means that the narrative unfolds and is further developed in an – interactive and/or mental – dialogue between a narrator and her/his listeners/ audiences (possibly also imagined audiences). Such co-narrative process/ dialogue is dynamic and open-ended in principle. It may thus be

¹⁴ Angus, Lynne E. / John McLeod (ed.). *The Handbook of Narrative and Psychotherapy. Practice, Theory and Research*. London: SAGE-Publications 2004.
Herman, David et al. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge 2007.

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further propelled and developed by questions from engaged listeners and audiences – especially by what has been coined narrative follow-up questions, implying a certain mode of interaction.

While narrative questioning as a technique, and as attitude, is not entirely self-evident – and might not emerge naturally in usual conversations at least within Western culture – it can be acquired as skill quite easily. To give but one hint here, narrative follow-up questions generally are how-questions. They ask how events/ actions evolved and how they were experienced personally, step by step; or else they aim at expanding the narrative corpus and, for instance, ask which similar events/ experiences the narrator could possibly remember and relate. In turn, co-narrative interaction hardly ever uses why-questions or factual detail questions (which are much used in journalistic interviews and in natural conversations). Because why-questions and factual detail questions tend to lead up to discussing and debating opinions or hypotheses about causes and effects. And such discussions and conversations lie on a more abstract level of logical reasoning and tend to fall out of touch with the person's immediate experience of lived-through events and actions.¹⁵

In summary, narratives/ co-narratives are dialogic processes that aim to explore and express personally lived-through experiences of occurrences and actions. They attempt to fathom these experiences in the greatest possible depth – and depict subjectively colored scenes and environments. It thus turns out: These dialogic narratives are exactly what we were looking for at the outset when we were asking what the opposite of “countering” might be – and what would thus lend itself to good practice deradicalization (while we learned that countering is not working at all). In fact, it is narratives that are the very opposite of “countering” and arguing! For argumentative statements, discussions and rectifications do not engage in exploring subjective experience very much, if at all.

To be sure, with any individual which is involved in a debate or discussion there will almost always be some personal experiences in background of his or her argumentations; and these experiences will function as motivational basis and trigger which prompts him/her to defend the particular argument. Yet, this little but crucial piece of personal experience most often remains largely unexplored – even unconscious – in the debate/ discussion. Moreover, argumentative forms of exchange rightly claim a general validity – beyond any individual experiences – and therefore operate by rationality, logic, evidence and persuasion rather than by narrations of individual perceptions. It might therefore not be easy to facilitate a mix

¹⁵ Since narrative questioning is generally not practiced much in natural conversations, training workshops are available in fields of qualitative social research, especially with biography studies that convey the skill of biographical-narrative interviewing (c.f. Gabriele Rosenthal, footnote 16).

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that combines arguments and logic on the one hand and narrative renditions of subjective experiences on the other.

There is yet another proof of how much narratives are indeed the opposite of argumentations, linguistically and psychologically – and how much we thus need narratives and narrativity/ co-narrative processes in order to facilitate impactful deradicalisation processes: This is the quite simple fact that one cannot argue with a narrative. Any first-hand account of a lived-through personal experience cannot – and ought not – be countered or challenged. For nobody may rightly claim that what another person expresses as her/his personal experience is wrong, incorrect, invalid etc. To argue in such ways would doubtlessly be highly inappropriate and disrespectful, even abusive.

Most of all, however, it would be totally nonsensical to argue with a narrative because personal narratives are always valid per se. One may feel sorry, frightened or delighted upon hearing about some occurrences or about how somebody has experienced certain events. Or one may have questions as to how exactly the experience/ occurrence did unfold and what then came of it. But the personal narratives as such cannot be countered nor argued against. It is for this very reason that one RAN Derad member emphatically stated in a discussion about so-called counter-narrative approaches: “There cannot be counter-narratives really! Because firstly, we are the narrative! And secondly there is no countering in the narrative domain to begin with!” – One may, however, engage in a co-narrative interaction with this narrative by way of narrative follow-up questions or by adding own experiences to it.

Of course, one thing may always happen whenever one encounters a narrative: One may disbelieve the sincerity and honesty of the narrator and thus doubt the authenticity of the presented story. In other words, certain given stories may raise questions of being partly or fully invented and contrived for particular strategic reasons (propaganda, manipulation, recruitment etc.), aiming to trigger certain reactions with the listeners/ audiences – and therefore not being proper narratives in the above defined sense.

Moreover, even beyond fabrications and inauthentic propaganda stories, one narratological truism needs to be noted here: Anyone’s narrative about a personally lived-through event may – and most likely will – involuntarily embellish or smooth over what had in fact been her/his original experience at the time of the actual events. S/he might thus miss to render important aspects of her/his experience in that very moment. Such willful or involuntary narrative arrangements – and any other kind of ‘mental postproduction’ – are considered to be a quite natural feature of human memory and story-telling. It attests to the constitutive

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vagueness of narratives, reflecting the fundamental openness and indeterminacy of human life as such. In more political terms, the openness/ indeterminacy of narratives may also be called semantic plurality and be perceived as diversity of subjective meaning(s) – and thus directly pertains to issues of (de-)radicalization. For all violent extremisms repudiate plurality and diversity – socially and psychologically – as they also repudiate any indeterminacy, relativity and ambivalence. In turn, distancing oneself from extremism basically means to learn how to acknowledge diversity and ambivalence – and thus become more pro-social and also psychologically more stable.

The constitutive vagueness and diversity of human narration has to do with the fact that every narrative about past experiences is given before the backdrop of the narrator's present situation and will unfailingly pay heed to her/his present needs in terms of identity and coping strategies. In other words, not everybody is right away able or willing to engage in the most conscientious soul-searching and give a most candid and unabashed rendition of past personal experiences. In particular this is the case if the narrated experiences are fraught with conflict or carry high identity investments, as is the case with radicalization – or if they refer to experiences that had a psycho-traumatic impact on the person.

It is because of this very vagueness/ diversity that social sciences' and psychology's concepts of narration have come to differentiate between the concepts of "experienced life-history" and "narrated life-story" as a key distinction within which human story-telling unfolds. Made operational in a methodical way these two interactive poles may fuel a dynamic process of therapeutic negotiation in mental and conversational respect – which of course may well include issues like working through hatred and radicalization. Similarly a terminological difference is drawn between "factual accuracy of a narrative" and its "narrative truth(s)", the latter of which focusing on the emblematic and symbolic significance that a narrative might possess, vis-à-vis its matter-for-fact correctness.¹⁶

To be sure, what has just been called the constitutive vagueness and semantic plurality within human narration does not at all reduce the key importance which narrativity and narrative methods have for good practice deradicalisation – and, in fact, for any approach aimed at facilitating personal change and development. On the contrary! For this is where the dynamic element of the above defined co-narrative process comes in as a particular asset and methodological tool: Any personal narrative can – and in fact needs to – be developed and enhanced through an interactive process of co-narrative exchange with and

¹⁶ Rosenthal, Gabriele. Biographical Research. In Clive Seale, Giampietro Gobo, Jaber F. Gubrium and David Silverman (eds.). *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage 2004, 48-64.

of narrative questioning by another person, i.e. by active listeners or audiences. This co-narrativity may well be put in terms of what well-known psychologist and narratologist Roy Schafer once said about psychotherapy, i.e. that “psychotherapy is nothing else but the telling of the same story all over again, except that after some time you tell the story much better than before”. In other words, the dialogic development and enhancement of the narrative is key. A narrative in this sense is no static text or monolog that is put out by means of a technical medium. Rather it is a facilitated process which is shared between a narrator and her/his audience.

Hence, be it because of propagandistic, manipulative, and deceitful intentions or as result of personal coping and identity needs, any given narrative that is considered inauthentic or else seems less than frank or exhaustive, may at any time be further developed by a co-narrative interaction process. This developmental dynamic will render the narrative “better” in Roy Schafer’s terms so that it becomes more in-depth, articulate and personally meaningful – while it freely explores and negotiates the constitutive semantic plurality that any personal narrative possesses. These processes will then ever more effectively fulfill the key function of human narration: express, mentally work-through, and cope with lived-through experience – which always also means facilitate personal change and development. Clearly, any such co-narrative dynamic of personal change would be inherently deradicalising and pro-social in its effects. For this kind of process sets out to engage with the ambivalence of narrative truth(s) and the plurality/ diversity of semantic meaning(s) – which effectively precludes extremism. Since wherever is ambivalence and semantic diversity there cannot be any extremism.

It thus is a true asset that one cannot counter nor argue with a personal narrative. Arguments and narrations are entirely different modes of communication indeed. One can only engage with the narrative and help to further develop it in a shared relational interaction process. This key feature of human story telling really stems from the fact that narratives can do what arguments cannot: Narratives are able to deradicalize, i.e. to trigger extensive and profound processes of personal change. In all experience, arguments are not able to bring about such effects – but can only be a minor element at best in this business.

Recognizing the key importance of narrativity and its underlying no-countering principle takes on an almost tragic note if one considers how focused and dependent democracy and western culture seems to be on leveling arguments, mounting evidence, debating and countering adversaries’ arguments. Bearing in mind how polarizing and in fact radicalizing any debate may easily turn out – especially if increasingly large sections of society feel alienated and do not partake in the common cultural discourse anymore – it seems that our

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democratic debate culture would need to more employ narrative forms of interaction – already as a tool of self-protection. Becoming more narrative – and relational – in education and psychosocial interventions might then also mean to safe-guard freedom and democracy. For sure, it would be most unfortunate – even fateful – if we were not able to recognize this prerequisite of good societal self-protection just because we hesitate to suspend our most cherished habits of debating and countering. Because then we would tragically overlook that we fuel violent extremism while we still think we pursue the quest for the most convincing and productive argument.

Is there such thing as an “extremist narrative” at all?

One further observation about our concept of narrative – and of co-narrative exchange – is worth mentioning here. Because it underlines how important it is to be rather precise about what narrativity really means – and not be confused by the widespread metaphoric use of the terms “narrative” (meaning “rendition”, “story”, “contestation”, “argument” in a rather vague sense). On the basis of our evidence-based definition one thing becomes quite clear: What we generally refer to as “radicalizing media narratives” (propaganda videos, recruitment materials etc.) and what then some want to put “counter-narratives” against: these so-called “extremist narratives” are not really narrative at all! On the contrary. Hardly anything is so dissimilar from sharing first-hand, personally lived-through experiences than an extremist video and/or propaganda production. Nothing could be further from engaging in a dialogic and co-narrative process which exchanges follow-up questions and answers and delves into an individual’s biographical memory in a maximally truthful and detailed manner.

In fact, extremists’ communications use quite closed and prearranged outlines of media interaction. These are sometimes charged with a certain emotional appeal or even contain isolated elements of personal experience, or simulations of it. Quite frequently these outlines also present what might look like a story/ narrative in any more loose or metaphoric sense of the term. Rudimentary story patterns may refer to symbolic events – or present a specific tale of history as such. Usually this comes down to a pattern like: “We carry the truth and the rest of the world has always been against us so that we have to fight for survival and bring the truth to the world ...” etc. – which really is more of an argumentative conclusion than anything else.

And yet, extremists' communications seem to not really be argumentative either in the strict sense of the word. They usually do not present a very coherent or sufficiently stringent chain of reasons and conclusions, sometimes seem strangely incomplete, willful or fragmented, and more often than not are struck with quite obvious inconsistencies. Rather, these communications in linguistic terms seem to represent a fairly idiosyncratic hybrid of various different genres of verbal interaction, mixing some narrative base structures ("We have the truth, all the world fights us, we have to fight back") with partly argumentative gestures. These linguistic hybrids may be best termed collective myths. They are certainly not narrative in the sense delineated here – and they are most effective with one particular audience only: the violent extremists or at-risk audiences of the particular extremist creed that they have been produced for.

Be this as it may, one thing becomes sufficiently clear when drawing from evidence-based and interdisciplinary notions of "narrative": Extremists' communications are not narratives at all. They generally do not carry any significant degrees of (co-)narrativity in a linguistic or psychological sense – but rather are the opposite of a narrative, namely arguments or incoherent linguistic hybrids. In fact, not only are extremist's communications not narrative, they actively avoid (co-)narrativity as best they can! For firstly, extremists of all sorts have always instinctively known: Narrative exchange deradicalizes which evidently is not in their interest – neither with respect to their impact on others nor with respect to the steadiness and stability of their own conviction and fervent activities. Intuitively avoiding narratives is thus both a strategic imperative and a mental defense mechanism for radicalized people – which is why they generally tend to act in profoundly anti-narrative ways.

Secondly, practice research has shown that extremists and at-risk young people generally are only little capable of engaging in (co-)narrativity if at all. They tend to lack the base social skills of participating in a dialogic process of exchanging personally lived-through experiences. Many of them have never had a chance to learn this during childhood and adolescence. Moreover, (co-)narrative interaction reflects relatively complex personal capabilities and requires a quite sensitive process of interaction with other people. This is why the target group of radicalized persons does not easily communicate on this most human level of interaction – and exchange narratives.

Out of these observations, some practitioners that were engaged in RAN and other good-practice research – especially those who follow more intense and long-term psycho-social deradicalisation approaches – agreed that what they aim for in their work, if asked to put in one phrase, can be summarized as developing the clients' ability to narrate – i.e. support

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their skills to articulate first-hand lived-through experience and empower them to actively partake in (co-)narrative exchange with others.

We should never use the term “counter narrative” again

To sum up, already the first part of the term counter narrative – “counter” – has turned out to be plain unhelpful and unsuitable for our subject matter. For we came to realize – much to the surprise of most civic education and democracy pedagogy traditions – that a no-countering and no-arguments principle is key to success in deradicalization interventions. Hence, any approach that focuses on “countering”, “counter-arguing”, and/or “dismantling” extremists’ contestations will fail and even backfire, i.e. promote radicalization rather than work it through and dissolve it. Moreover, even in more general terms any methodological emphasis on “ideology, logic, fact” and other cognitive factors will not be successful. As the ISD authors have said (here above): Arguments and evidence “may not achieve [much]” since they “can always be refuted and countered”. The only thing linguistically that cannot be refuted or countered is narratives – proper narratives that is, i.e. accounts of lived-through personal experiences.

Moreover, the second part of the term – “narrative” – has proven entirely unsuitable, too. For, here we have come to realize that violent extremists do not really use narratives in the first place – and in most cases would not even be capable to do so at all (and would need to develop narrativity proper in order to eventually work through and distance themselves from extremism and hatred). What is more, professional discourses on deradicalization, while having gotten accustomed to a metaphorical use of the term “narrative”, seem to not be aware of what a narrative really is, which methodological and institutional prerequisite need to be put in place in order to facilitate narrative exchange, and why it is that we need narrativity proper in deradicalization interventions in the first place. Quite tellingly, as a result of this profound ignorance about the nature of narratives and narrativity it is currently held that narratives could/ should be countered (by so-called “counter narratives”), which is nonsensical as such both in linguistic and psychological respects.

Hence, the term “counter narratives” is entirely fraught by errors and misconceptions – which is why we already at the outset called it a most unfortunate misnomer. The EDNA project’s approach has thus come to a quite critical – maybe even radical – terminological conclusion: We should never ever use the term “counter narrative” again! For it is wrong

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and unhelpful. Instead we should find a more appropriate term to cover what we mean by narrativity as the most important ingredient of efficient deradicalization work.

Terminological errors make for wrong methods – The countering fallacy and cognitive-behavioral approaches to deradicalisation (CBT)

In fact, not only is the term “counter narrative” unsuitable and inappropriate. Even more, it is quite confusing and misleading in methodological respects. For it suggests serious misconceptions about how deradicalisation may or may not work – and what can and cannot be done via internet and social media. Even beyond the methodological deadlock of the countering fallacy there are numerous negative effects of the current ideology of countering – and rationalizing. To give but one further example: The fact that large areas of prevent work, civic education, resilience building, and also of deradicalization are still mostly informed by strategies of logic, ideology, fact, cognition etc. and thus practice arguing, countering, rectifying, rationalizing etc. is also reflected by the widespread use of cognitive-behavioral training approaches (CBT). This especially holds true where deradicalization is practiced within statutory institutions like prisons and schools. In a way a general CBT logic still governs the whole field of prevention and intervention.

Now, if one looks at cognitive approaches to therapy, counseling, and coaching, they attempt to assist the clients to overcome personal difficulties by identifying and changing “dysfunctional thinking” and/or “maladaptive”, “distorted”, “unrealistic and unhelpful thinking”. This kind of work is done in the level of “thoughts” and patterns of “thinking”, and it is assumed that this then has profound and sustainable effects also for the clients’ behavior and emotional responses. To this end the clients are helped to develop skills of “testing beliefs” and “assumptions” and “modifying thoughts”.¹⁷

Doubtlessly strategies of this sort are bound to operate mostly on the levels of ideology, logic, fact, arguments, cognition. For sure, while the context of therapy may allow for neutralizing much of the confrontational and antagonizing dynamic of countering and arguing, the mode of communication here still remains to be one that above all employs reasoning, thinking, arguments/ counter arguments, etc. and is little informed by co-narrative exchange and relational dynamic. The emphasis on cognitive procedures also allows for using “computer-based programs [of] CBT techniques to help individuals challenge their patterns and beliefs and replace ‘errors in thinking such as over-generalizing,

¹⁷ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_therapy.

magnifying negatives, minimizing positives and catastrophizing’ with ‘more realistic and effective thoughts, thus decreasing emotional distress and self-defeating behavior’”.¹⁸ Needless to say, in contrast to this co-narrative methods are highly dependent on direct face-to-face interaction in a commonly shared space. They do not lend themselves to work with computer-based programs.

It therefore is little surprising that CBT training approaches have not had much sustainable effect in deradicalization. One just needs to consider that deradicalization interventions are even more challenging and fragile than general psychotherapy, since in psychotherapy there is a base trust and consensus between client and therapist that the intervention is necessary, useful, and promising. This base consensus is not evident at all with violent extremist or hate crime offenders in prison interventions. It first needs to be established and then maintained. However, in a CBT framework this is hardly possible with this target group. Because it simply is not evident for any extremist – or even for any mainstream person – why it should be necessary, useful, and promising to change ones political and religious mindset.

Moreover, even with cognitive-behavioral forms of psychotherapy “there is still controversy about the degree to which the traditional cognitive elements account for the effects” and whether it is not rather other “behavioral elements such as exposure” and other more relational, experience-based, and narrative elements that brought about these effects (footnote 18). This, in fact, is a general theme within debates about psychotherapy impact research. There too it seems that the positive effects that many short term cognitive, behavioral, and conversational therapy approaches have seem to be due to the on-the-side narrative and relational interaction between client and therapist rather than the cognitive core techniques that the approaches stand for.

Moreover, practitioner exchange workshops within RAN and earlier research have come to the conclusion that modularized cognitive-behavioral training programs (CBT) are much less effective than widely believed, to say the least – which is not surprising since CBT approaches are hardly compatible with the good-practice principles of open-process, relational, trust-based and narrative interactions as they have been outlined above. On the contrary, these programs are likely to unintentionally avert direct (co-)narrative exchange (between facilitators and clients and among clients in the group). Most importantly, however, they evoke obedience and compliance – and promote a Let’s-get-it-over-and-done-with attitude. Firstly CBT trainings tend to evoke such obedience in the sense of complying with the explicit – or unspoken – rules of the training exercises themselves.

¹⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_behavioural_therapy.

Secondly and more generally, they induce obedience to any prevailing institutional and situational power – which is an especially sensitive issue if the training is conducted within statutory contexts as prison, probation, schools. But most importantly, obedience and compliance in this sense is the very last thing one should aim for in any deradicalization intervention! For obedience and compliance is how extremist organisations work themselves. Plus, obedience runs counter to creating trust and personal relationship between people which, however, we need in order to promote processes of personal change.

One more recent study that emphasized the issue of obedience stated: CBT approaches “have been found to generate a ‘finishing line mentality’ with their clients” which is counter-productive for facilitating personal change. One of the interviewed deradicalization practitioner said: “Where this individual has this absolutist ideology, trying to come in with a generic toolkit (of CBT modules; H.W.), you have people that are working a finishing line mentality: ‘If I can get to the end of this, I’ll be okay’. So what happens is that they’ll sit there, take part in the exercises and put across what they think needs to be put across. What happens is that this only reinforces the absolutist mindset that ‘we’re living in the abode of war, this, what I’m taking part in is their control mechanism, I have to get through their control mechanism to get through the system’”.¹⁹

Hence, looking at the widespread use of cognitive-behavioral interventions makes it even more evident how detrimental the term “counter narrative” really is – with its implications of cognitive and logic-based forms of interaction – and how it will never save us from the fact that arguments “can always be refuted and countered” and therefore “may not achieve much”. The appeal to avoid the term “counter narrative altogether is thus not merely an exercise in terminological precision. It also means to take care that we don’t make major mistakes in devising practical approaches to deradicalisation interventions – and promote the appropriate policy making.

Therefore, our conclusion is: We should quit using the term “counter narrative” altogether! Instead we may speak about “narrative interventions” or “deradicalizing narratives” approaches, of which victim testimonial approaches may be a particular sub-group. In any event, these “narrative interventions” we would keep strictly apart from a second field of media related initiatives, the “counter messaging”, “educational” or “campaigning” activities.

¹⁹ Linda Pizani Williams, Polly Radcliffe, and Harald Weilnböck (2010): *Towards Preventing Violent Radicalisation (TPVR) – Research Report*. Internal EU-Project Document, DG Justice.

Anger management or anti-aggression trainings

There are at least three particular approaches – or strategies – of deradicalization that may claim to be narrative in a more profound sense of the word. At least they do not engage in the erroneous strategies of arguing and countering (or “dismantle[ing] and counter-argu[ing] against every dimension of the extremist narrative”; footnote 18). One of these approaches produces and employs victims’ testimonials, another one attempts to employ elements of humor/ ridicule. These we will be discussing further beneath.

The third approach is similarly widespread as the counter-arguing approach and may at first sight seem to represent the very methodological opposite of the “ideology, logic, fact, [and counter-argument]” strategy – and of cognitive behavioral training programs. Moreover this approach seems to recognize that an element of “human emotions” is necessary, as the RAN working group on Internet and Social Media rightly emphasized (see above). Anger management or anti-aggression trainings focus exclusively on an emotional issue: the handling of anger and aggression. These trainings usually contain various sorts of provocation exercises. There the clients are put into situations in which they are provoked, angered, or insulted – sometimes even touched – in order to learn to not lose control and not strike out in aggression and violence. In its most intense variant this approach is called the hot chair method because the individual clients are placed on a particular chair in the middle of the participants group where they then face the provocations.

Critics have long held that this approach is ineffective and even counter-productive – not only because it does evidently not contain any element of (co-) narrative exchange and in-depth exploration of personally lived-through experience. (However, some more recent anti-aggression trainings have begun to integrate elements of biography work especially about experiences of violence.) Counter-productive and detrimental these anger management trainings are above all because the clients only learn what they have known all along and what has never been good for them: to suppress and suffocate their aggression – until it eventually will break through anyhow, as tends to be the case with suppression strategies. Moreover, to the degree that the other members of the training group are used to be the provokers the clients learn or deepen their skills of – and taste for – provoking others. However, more or less subtle or drastic forms of provoking others has always been a key factor in the group dynamic of hate crime and extremist violence and should not be additionally trained by any intervention.

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The victim testimonial approach

The approach of victims' testimonials seems to be the only variant of what is usually called counter narratives that may without doubt claim to be narrative – at least as far as the speech genre of the interviewee is concerned. For, as opposed to “alternative narratives (positive stories about social values such as tolerance)”, “government strategic communications”, counter-interventions based on “ideology, logic, fact”, employment of humor, and anger management, victims/ survivors that are interviewed for testimonials usually recount first-hand, personally lived-through experiences. Hence the interviewees recount (inter-)actions, events, and occurrences; they portray other actors, depict the context, refer to a perceived challenge, fate or conflict, tell how this then has led up to certain actions designed to solve the conflict or handle the challenge or fate, give a personal view on the actual outcome and in anticipate future action. In victims/ survivors interviews such first-hand narratives will most likely revolve around the event of victimization. However, depending on the approach and the questioning strategy of the interviewers the created narrative may also concern lived-through experiences before and after that event.

Moreover, the assumption that victim narrative in particular can have a moderating and deradicalizing influence on people that are at-risk of or involved in violent extremism, does not seem unreasonable at all to begin with. Therefore, the RAN Working Group Voice of the Victims states that victims may “share their experience” and “show on a human level what the consequences are of acts of violent radicalization and terrorism”. The victims can thus most convincingly “create a story that people can relate to”. Hence, “testimonies of victims are useful tools” on all levels of prevention – “in an educational program for young adults, in a program for prisoners, and in the dissemination of counter narrations on internet and social media”. They may, thus is the assumption, be applied both “with a broader public” to promote resilience and awareness and with “people involved in or attracted by radical or terrorist organizations”²⁰ – i.e. in deradicalization and hate crime perpetrator rehabilitation.

In any event, to the extent that this assumption is valid and a specific victim testimonial does actually produce a deradicalizing effects with certain audiences, this then would be due to the fact that it is (co-)narrative in nature – and not countering, arguing, debating, educating etc. To be sure, even victim testimonials are not per se narrative. But they most likely turn out pretty narrative given the context and function which testimonials are usually collected and produced for. However, the degree of narrativity which any testimonial eventually acquires may vary largely – which always also coincides with the degree in which they turn

²⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-vvt/index_en.htm.

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out to be co-narrative in the above explained sense, i.e. go back to and engage in a dialogic process of interactive (and/or mental) exchange between the narrator and her/his listeners/ audiences and be responsive to follow-up questions. In fact, the degree of (co-)narrativity depends on many variables of the interview project's concept, its actual questioning method, as well as its strategies of post-production and pedagogical embedding in an offline/ off-media intervention setting. To mention but the simplest variable: A testimonial in which an interviewee is asked and/or encouraged to put forth thoughts, deliberations, theories or to debate issues of public awareness and the like, is not narrative at all; it rather is argumentative. However, in all likelihood victims tend to draw from their personal experience and create narratives. Also, testimonial approaches tend to follow biography research' and story-telling methodologies and applies techniques of narrative follow-up questioning that encourages the interviewee to recount lived-through experiences rather than discuss issues or arguments.

Yet, there is one psychological matter that renders the employment of victim testimonials in deradicalization interventions a quite difficult and maybe even ill-advised strategy: Recent research and intervention practice clearly shows that radicalized individuals most often react quite averse and defensive to victim testimonials. This is due to the simple fact that virtually all violent extremists, hate crime perpetrators, and terrorists have been substantially victimized themselves in their life-history one way or another – be it through violence, abuse, denigration, and/or deprivation/ abandonment.²¹ Plus, they are largely unaware of this and/or in strong psychological denial of their biographical victimization issues – and as a consequence instinctively act-out on these victimizations in hateful, denigrating, and victimizing manners against others. In fact, clinical research has shown that perpetrators tend to experience their violent act in a way that is quite similar to a traumatic event in clinical terms (dissociative symptoms, brain activities etc.) and may in fact coincide with the state of mind in the actual victimization experiences.²²

²¹ See: Saskia Lützing (2010). *The Other Side of the Story. A qualitative study of the biographies of extremists and terrorists.* Final project report with supplementary information on field research. German Federal Office of Criminal Police. Research Dept. http://www.bka.de/nm_194552/EN/Publications/Other/other_node.html?nnn=true.

Ferdinand Sutterlüty (2003). *Gewaltkarrieren. Jugendliche im Kreislauf von Gewalt und Missachtung.* Institut für Sozialforschung. Frankfurt/M.: Campus.

Heitmeyer, W. & Hagan, J. (Hg.) (2002). *Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung.* Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

²² Dudeck, Manuela; Spitzer, Carsten; Gillner, Michael; Freyberger, Harald J. (2007): *Dissoziative Erfahrungen während der Straftat bei forensisch-psychiatrischen Patienten - Eine Pilotstudie.* In: *Trauma und Gewalt, Heft 2 / 2007; 1. Jahrgang, S. 34 - 41:* „Studien im forensisch-psychiatrischen Kontext zeigen, dass psychisch kranke Straftäter und Gefangene die eigene Straftat traumatisch erleben können, ein hohes Ausmaß an dissoziativen Symptomen zeigen und bis zu 24 Stunden nach Delikt eine dissoziative Amnesie aufweisen.“ („Studies in the

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To be sure, the fact that extremists and hate crime perpetrators most often react quite averse to victim testimonials does not mean that issues of victimization do not or should not play a major role in deradicalization interventions. On the contrary, they are key. Looking at good-practice in deradicalization and hate-crime rehabilitation has produced the insight that these interventions will most likely bring up not only issues “of unstable family conditions, dysfunctional parenting, and chronic relational stress at home” but also uncover events and situations of serious “deprivation, denigration” and dehumanization and of “violent victimization”. While the main objective of perpetrator rehabilitation is to deal with the violent offenses and cruel deeds of the offenders, touching upon their victimization issues – as far as deemed appropriate and feasible by the clients – has proven to be an important impact factor with many of them.

Most importantly, however, in these kinds of good practice interventions the clients are not – and must not be – put through scheduled programs of screening victim testimonials. Nor is the exchange about their biographical victimization issues at all prescribed by the approach in the sense of a fixed program. Since good practice in deradicalization is open-process and nondirective in principle (as well as being relational, trust-based, narrative etc.), these issues rather come up at their own pace and may at any moment be calibrated in scale and intensity by the clients themselves, which will always be respected by facilitators and co-clients.

Yet, with any generic victim testimonial approach which is built around the production and screening of testimonials, these methodological precautions of attentiveness and calibration can hardly be procured. This then entails the serious risk that bringing in victim testimonials in a more or less scheduled or set way will alienate the clients or even aggravate their already agitated and defensive state of mind – and thus involuntarily fuels radicalization rather than softens and dissolves violent extremist impulses.

Aside of this rather fundamental methodological problem, another more general challenge needs to be mentioned that any project of media production faces: the temptation of maximum distribution and multi-direction dissemination – i.e. to aim for reaching out to many different audiences at the same time and pursue different objectives with the same materials. This usually has the effect that one underestimates how much different objectives and target groups require different approaches and how detrimental it may be to not pay

forensic and psychiatric context show that perpetrators and inmates with psychological disorders may experience their criminal act as traumatic event, show a high degree of dissociative symptoms and dissociative amnesia up to 24 hours after the offense”).

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attention to these differences. For instance, the purpose of producing testimonials as tools for facilitating deradicalization processes is a most specific and challenging one – and might be totally poles apart from various other purposes that may appear similar at first sight, as for instance the purpose to support good journalism, promote public awareness with mainstream population, to strengthen community resilience, provide materials for prevent work (at schools) have impact on stakeholders and on political decision making, i.e. do lobbying work (of victims rights, certain intervention methods etc.). Not to speak of the risk of being used for purposes of media sensationalism or of being misappropriated for by political actors for their own ends, such as to stoke populist emotions.

Humor and/or ridicule as a prevent and deradicalization strategy?

Sometimes “humor” is discussed as an additional factor of deradicalization and of so-called “counter-narrative”.²³ Under the heading “Humour entertains” the RAN Working Group on Internet and Social Media notes that “especially from credible sources, humour can be a disarming way to share the counter- narrative” and that “careful ridiculing [...] can be used to undermine the cache and coolness of extremist leaders.” This then leads to the assumption that “counter-narratives” are best defined as “directly or indirectly challeng[ing] extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour.”

Moreover, the more recent and innovative approaches to civic education have been looking for new methodological options that may lead beyond the confines of working on the cognitive, educational, and informational level. They sometimes aim at bringing in humor as a lighter, more relaxed and less cerebral way of talking about oneself, one’s life-world and about historical, political or religious issues. There, humor is intended as strategy to explore an alternative attitude that may divert from the bitter and spiteful seriousness with which radicalized people generally handle issues of identity, politics and religion. To this end, humor promotes self-consciousness, self-reflectivity, a sense of relativity and of the limits of the human condition, and above all the ability to not take oneself too seriously. In other words, humor supports laughing together about oneself/ themselves in order to alleviate tension and facilitate conflict resolution.

²³ Also see: RAN Working Group on Internet and Social Media: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm. And: J.M. Berger & Bill Strathearn: How matters online; Measuring influence, evaluating content and countering violent extremism in online social networks, http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR_Berger-and-Strathearn.pdf.

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In this understanding humor is a key component of peaceful modern civil society – in a sense, even its epitome. It thus goes without saying that employing – or using – this kind of humor is in synch with the principles of good-practice deradicalization as pointed out above. Because these principles emphasize an open-process, relational, trust-based and narrative mode of interaction which always also activates a sense of ambiguity, reflexivity, and diversity (of thought). These, in turn, are also prerequisites of developing humor and ambiguity self-irony.

Yet, when it comes to our target group, humor as a method/ tool entails great difficulties and risks, because radicalized individuals do not have much humor if at all. In fact, the state of being radicalized may well be provisionally defined as a radical absence of humor – and of the skills of dealing with ambiguity, diversity of meaning, and reflexivity. For this reason it seems hardly applicable to make humor the center piece of a methodological approach. More feasible and advisable it is to depart from a different methodological approach – as e.g. the narrative approach – and use the moments of potential humor whenever they come up, thus developing a sense of humor, reflexivity and self-irony as an aside. Then one may in fact get to moments within an intervention at which the clients and facilitators laugh together about themselves in a way that alleviates tension and facilitates conflict resolution.

However, what renders the strategies of humor not only difficult and risky but in fact invariably makes them have detrimental and destructive effects is the fact that what civic education practitioners and activists mean by humor really is mockery and ridicule. However, ridicule is a totally different thing than humor. Laughing together about oneself/ourselves in a way that alleviates tension and mediates conflict is one thing, laughing about others in a way that makes them appear silly and inapt – and thus increase tension and conflict – is an entirely other thing.

Missing out on this key difference is bound to cause major damage to any intervention approach. In fact, ridiculing a type of person that has little sense of humor if at all, tends to take everything very personal and fundamental, and is most sensitive to – and aggressive about – any challenge or potential affront, is the most ill-fated and explosive strategy one could possibly lapse into. Simply speaking, you make a joke about a violent extremist, and s/he will throw back a bomb at you. Or else more concretely speaking, you draw a caricature about Mohamed and you could be killed in return by a believer and follower of Mohamed (cf. the Theo van Gogh killing in the Netherlands in 2004).

To put this yet onto another level, since violent extremists and hate crime perpetrators seem to be using a cynical, inhuman, and even sadistic mode of ridicule themselves in order to

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spitefully insult and denigrate their victims – as the German neo-Nazi death squad Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU) did during 2001-2011 when they produced a ‘funny’ videos about the killings and the killed victims using the Pink Panther carton.

Hence, the observation that “even neo-Nazis themselves conversed online about the humour behind [a] campaign” that was successfully leveled against them and has played a perplexing trick on them, needs to be viewed with caution. It cannot simply be taken as indication of the deradicalizing effect of humor/ ridicule. Because such “conversing about the humour”, even if appreciative, does not necessary prove a stable sense of humor and self-reflexivity in the above explicated sense. The fact that somebody laughs, smiles, smirks or grins – or “converses about the humour” does not prove anything – unless the gesture can be investigated in more depth as to its subjective meaning, contextual association and biographical prehistory, and above all in its interactive implications.

In all experience, humor in that understanding is virtually inexistent with this target group – or else the individual is probably not really a violent extremist. Rather, with this kind of individuals a smirk and laugh about a mockery against oneself is more likely to signify an impulse of the above mentioned cynicism and sadistic humor, which they willingly also directe against themselves on occasion (Schadenfreude). This might also coincide with a form of sensation seeking that enjoys a moment of funny puzzlement and bewilderment in its own right – and has nothing to do with reflection, self-consciousness or cognitive opening. Moreover, be it cynicism and/or sensation seeking, the personality structure of extremists (roughly modeled around clinical concepts of malign narcissism and/or borderline syndrome) is typically organized along dissociative and incoherent modes of operation rather than associative and coherent ones – which means that any momentary impulses (of laughter or any other reaction) need to be even more carefully investigated and reconstructed within a more comprehensive qualitative context.

Now, all these observations about ridicule/ humor and extremism beg the question of how one could ever pursue such unfortunate and detrimental idea about using ridicule in deradicalization? One reason might lie, once again, in the base strategy of countering, arguing, campaigning, “dismantling”, or “undermining” (footnote 10, Omar Ashour) etc. that seems unshakably entrenched in the fields of prevent and deradicalization work. The strength of this entrenchment certainly has to be seen before the backdrop of a long civil society tradition that reaches back over centuries into the early history of political parties, partisanship, activism, public debates, electoral campaigning and political struggle. These are deeply ingrained in western democratic cultures. Part of this tradition of political partisanship always also was derision and caricature of the political adversary. Here ridicule

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was a means of political struggle – and always depended on a shared sense of humor and self-irony and on a common acceptance of humorous communications in the field of political antagonism. However, while this shared sense of political humor might not even have always been there in earlier days, it may be questioned today whether the rather antagonistic base logic of political partisanship and civic (counter) activism is still a viable answer to challenges of 21st century global post-modernity and geopolitics. To be sure, recent practice research leaves no doubt that political humor in the sense of ridicule is not likely to lend itself to good-practice deradicalization interventions.

What is more, the question of humor, ridicule, and political activism – i.e. argumentative and rhetorical ‘countering’ – is a quite burning issue in practitioner training as well, since deradicalization and prevent practitioners in many countries tend to come from political activism and social movements. Hence, these trainees usually are very much politically aware individuals that have clearly defined political positions and more often than not a history in activism and campaigning. This is especially true with prevention of rightwing extremism where one often finds leftwing activists and/or liberal civil society and human rights proponents. Practitioners from Moslem background, too, tend to adhere to a much more liberal and modern understanding of Islam than the radicalized clients that they work with. The trainees’ political and religious identity has often caused challenges and hindrances in the training and on-the-job coaching of new prevent and derad practitioner candidates. Because abstracting from ones convictions and believes and not falling into communicational routines of countering, arguing, campaigning, preaching etc. but instead forging a trust and respectful work relationship and engaging in an open and narrative process with clients that otherwise are the epitome of the political adversary, is not an easy task.

Even those proponents of humor need to be cautioned that acknowledge these risks, concede the need for a most watchful handling, speak of “careful ridiculing” (RAN Group Social Media and Internet, footnote 12) – and claim ridicule as a means only for early, up-stream prevention and resilience building, which is not directed at already radicalized young people but reaches out to those who are at the fringes of at-risk environments and groups. However, this ostensibly more moderate and less risky employment of humor/ ridicule is quite ill-advised, too. Because if one implicitly educates and trains the more moderate young people to ridicule, counter, argue with, and “undermine” their peers, one sets them up to engage in antagonistic, alienating, conflictive and potentially dangerous interactions with those around them that are already more hardened in their extremist believes. This is detrimental and irresponsible – and will certainly not deradicalize anyone but instead

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promote polarization and radicalization. Moreover, in many such cases of polarizing educational work – along the lines of countering and ridiculing – the practitioners unconsciously delegate their own impetus of political activism to their young clients and instigate them to take action in this sense. This, however, basically resembles a recruitment process and thus is the opposite of what a prevent intervention should do.

Hence, having a closer look at the psychological dynamic of humor and ridicule, makes us better understand just how problematic the current key concepts of countering and of “counter narrative” are. Viewing back from here to the approach that the RAN Working Group Internet and Social Media has taken, also explains why the – as such most problematic – term “counter-narrative” was defined as “challeng[ing] extremist narratives either through ideology, logic, fact or humour” (footnote 12). For what at first sight may have looked like a quite heterogeneous and incomplete assortment of factors – the cognitive “ideology, logic, fact” versus the somewhat different, yet hard to categorize “humour”, in the absence of any profoundly emotional, relational and narrative element – really coincides fully in that all four factors are about countering and about rhetorical and political activism. “Ideology, logic, fact” is per se designed to counter, and “humour” in the sense of ridiculing also serves as a means of countering – albeit on a more personal level which may potentially entail provocation, offense and insult. Therefore, the employment of humor/ridicule in a sense even tops the other factors in that it neglects the no-countering principle of good-practice derad interventions in an even more serious manner.

This fact – and above all, of course, the underlying recruitment dynamic of a humor/ ridicule strategy of prevention that really is an instigation to activism and antagonism – makes it, once again, abundantly clear that we have to surpass the current intervention ideologies of countering/ arguing/ struggling. This might imply to partly diverge from long standing traditions of political partisanship, campaigning, and activism. Yet, both the most targeted and intense deradicalization intervention and the more general societal resilience building seem to be much better served if personal skills of narrative exchange and open-process relationship building are practiced and enhanced – rather than the confrontational and antagonistic techniques of countering. Because these techniques – as courageous as it often is to employ them and as necessary as it is to confront in certain situations and contexts – will eventually not be able to effectively deradicalize and avert hate crime. In fact, not only will those strategies not deradicalize extremists. They also will not help to moderate and render more helpful those rather intransigent, unyielding, self-serving and counter-aggressive factions of mainstream society that haven’t yet been sufficiently conceptualized

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in any systemic view on a society and its extremisms – and that would probably have to be considered co-extremist factions in psychological terms.

Hence, be it deradicalization, prevention and/or resilience building, any such initiative should focus on capacities of moderation, open-process relationship building, and (co-)narrative interaction, as spelled out in recent good-practice research. In any event, we need to be aware: While humor may on occasion be carefully explored, namely in cases when such occasions come up naturally within an intervention, ridicule is a most explosive and ill-fated strategy which rests on fundamental misconceptions about de-/radicalization – and will have but counterproductive effects.

Now, what to do?

So far we have looked at what we had called – quite poignantly – the current fallacies and misunderstandings around the concept of “counter”-“narratives” and testimonials, which we took as inevitable misunderstandings that arise whenever a new field of work and research is approached.

In the first step here above, this came down to a provisional collection of Donts we can give here – without yet having gotten onto a more constructive level and speak about the ways and methods in which we may be successful in creating impactful “deradicalizing” narratives/ testimonials.

What, now, could be said to be the way forward? What may be defined as principles and tools of good-practice in creating “deradicalizing” narratives/ testimonials. Or at least: what are our first observations and assumptions about this important on-line aspect of hate crime prevent and deradicalization interventions?

One point seems clear at least: While the analysis of extremists websites and social media recruitments techniques cannot be the key resource which will enable us to produce deradicalizing narratives, there is another – and much more evident – resource which we may tap into: the empirical research about good-practice deradicalization interventions (which is not to be confused with research about the radicalization process). This field of research looks at the methods and approaches which on-the-ground practitioners in different EU member states’ contexts intuitively and/or systematically use when they work first-line with radicalized and at-risk young people of various sorts of difficult to engaged target groups.

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Empirical intervention research of this sort – mostly using methods from qualitative social and institutional field research – is still quite young and much ground work and further methodological pilot studies need to be done. However, there are some first results, concepts, and basic principles which may help us – vis-a-vis any current misunderstandings – in our attempt to conceptualized good-practice on-line and audio-visually based approaches. A summary of such first results has already been quoted above: It referred to “open-process, exploratory” and “participatory/ empowering” intervention approaches which are “narrative”, “relational/ inter-personal”, build on *group-dynamics* mostly, and are based on both “trust and challenge” as well as on “confidentiality and commitment”. They need to be “delivered by skilled, specially-trained non-governmental practitioners” who may act largely “independently within and across statutory institutions” and are “proactively assisted in their interventions by the institutional staff.”

Moreover, the research behind this – all too brief and abstract – summary elaborates on numerous further requirements and methodological details that have been observed as elements of successful approaches in hate crime prevent and deradicalization work.²⁴ For instance, after stressing the indispensable methodological prerequisites and conditions that need to be in place from the very beginning (“narrative”, “relational”, “open-process”, “participatory” etc.), this research also points out certain concrete topics and issues that generally come up and play a major role whenever the participants/clients begin to embark on such good-practice deradicalization interventions – and that would certainly need to be taken into account by any online approach.

Among such issues are to be found the participants “biographical and social circumstance”, here most often personal issues around “unstable family conditions, dysfunctional parenting”, and “chronic relational stress at home”, regularly encompassing “domestic violence and victimization through denigration/ deprivation”. Furthermore, “one’s own patterns of group behavior”, oppressive power relationships and denigrating others; also experiences of “friendship and loyalty” versus “dependency and subjugation”; “gender issues” in general “such as manliness, sexual attractiveness, homosexuality”; “matters of politics or religion”, however, mostly in terms of the personal side of commitments and beliefs; certain “fictional media narratives” of the participants personal liking, “most importantly, the violent act narrative, in which the client tells of having played the role of perpetrator/victimizer, committing acts of hatred, denigration, and violence against others”.

²⁴ C.f. The Narrative Principle: Good Practice in Anti-Hate Crime Interventions, within the Radicalisation Awareness Network. Published in: Right-Wing Extremism in Europe Country analyses, counter-strategies and labor-market oriented exit-strategies. Ed. by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation 2013, p. 379-408

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Now, all in all, the question for us is: How does this translate to our immediate task: to produce “deradicalizing” narratives/ testimonials? How do we manage to observe and employ the established good-practice principles in creating a testimonial intervention approach that is, to a certain degree, based on audio-visual material which can be transmitted and accessed via internet?

How to do this in a way that is “open-process, exploratory”, “participatory/ empowering”, “narrative”, “relational”, built on “group-dynamics”, based on “trust and challenge” and on “confidentiality and commitment”? Is it possible at all to do this on-line by using audio-visual material? How can one create a video clip/ testimonial in “open-process” manner if a video is by nature “closed”, since it has been completed in order to be brought out as a product? And how can any on-line material be “confidential”?

Solutions: How to create a good-practice deradicalization narratives approach

Fortunately, there are solutions or mitigations to these challenges. However, implementation is not self-evident, not the least reason for this being that interview clients have been frustrated, sometimes even traumatized by journalists or prior research projects that have acted insensitively, were not able to procure or even think about facilitating a rewarding and gratifying process with the interviewees.

As to the solutions: First of all, some of the methodological prerequisites are already taken care of once we have firmly decided to fully embark on the narrative mode of expression/ interaction (in interviewing, post-production, and pedagogical embedding) – and avoid argumentative, debate-like, descriptive modes of expression/ interaction. Here, quite fortunately the whole array of narrative methods in qualitative-empirical social research is at our disposal.

(1) Sustainable media interventions of deradicalisation need to observe the principles of offline good-practice. As stated in this paper this means: What is needed – also in media and internet activities – is, in short: open-process and relational interventions of in-depth story telling/ sharing – both on- and offline in conjunction. This approach does not primarily engage in countering arguments, but it is narrative in the above defined sense of giving first-hand accounts of personally lived-through experiences and actions. Hence these interventions proceed in non-directional, trust-based, confidential, and exploratory ways; they are maximally participatory and allow for emotional investment and the recognition

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and expression of ambivalence. This implies a dialogue process of shared co-narrativity – and is not easily compatible with pure media production approaches.

(2) When applied in an intervention, the video or audio materials should always be carefully embedded in a systematic off-line intervention process. Toward that end the media intervention must be both systematically prepared beforehand and elaborated in depth afterwards. The point is to enable viewers to develop, personalise, acknowledge, and reflect upon their subjective reactions to such testimonials, and to express them within the group process of the intervention. Here a 20-80 principle seems advisable, i.e. 80% resources go into the off-line sector of any such intervention.

(3) The procedures of producing the media narratives should be designed as counselling interventions for the different interviewee groups, i.e. they need to be maximally participative vis-à-vis those that agreed to cooperate in generating narrative material to be used in deradicalisation work. Such a project would no longer act as a ‘media project’. It would not emphasize on the main objective to collect interview material and create from it a ‘tool of on-line intervention’. Rather the project would present itself as simple – off-line – counselling or rehabilitation intervention, specifically targeted to different stakeholders around extremism and hate crime. The only specificity of it is that it also – as an aside – offers the opportunity to produce narrative self-documents/ testimonials and provides training in basic skills of narrative interviewing, video/audio editing and post-production, thus training basic media competencies.

(4) Finally, any narratives/ testimonials of this kind should be designed expressly for the purpose of deradicalisation and anti-hate-crime interventions. The production should not have further additional purposes in mind or exploit the material for use in contexts other than deradicalisation. For example, the narratives should not be used for purposes of media sensationalism, or misappropriated by political actors for their own ends, such as to stoke populist emotions. At the same time it would be unwise to use such testimonials to drive home ethical lessons within mainstream society, such as that a person should adhere to certain values and pass moral judgments on others. Finally, the testimonials should steer free from catering to the special interests of different interviewee groups (e.g. victimsrights lobbies).

By and large, the content and form of a deradicalising narratives/ testimonial should conform to the spirit of the intervention principles themselves. For example, such testimonial would deal with a variety of experiences and circumstances, including the following:

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- how the individual fell into and subsequently disengaged from violent extremism;
- the difficulties and doubts that may have accompanied the exit intervention, including whatever complications may have arisen with family members, peers, co-religionists, etc.; doubts, hesitation and even specific regrets about disengagement that may still linger in certain moments;
- candid accounts of incidents in which the individual may have been a perpetrator (and/or victim) of hate speech or hate crimes;
- possibly also cultural and media products (whether documentary or fictional) that played a role in the individual's personal evolution (cf. footnotes 4 and 8);
- the individual's erstwhile and current social or political grievances;
- allegedly non-radical, yet potentially extremist, attitudes within mainstream society;
- the personal backgrounds, experiences, and motivations of deradicalisation experts, as well as those of the family and community representatives who have been affected by their work.

Narrative interviewing and postproduction methods will aim to promote and encourage the maximum degree of narrativity and authenticity that an interviewee's testimonial can achieve. There are certain criteria that contribute to a testimonial's narrativity – and also lend believability and emotive power to it. These include the following elements:

- the degree of detail and completeness found in the account (e.g., what triggered an episode or incident, what the actor intended to accomplish, what transpired and with what results, and how the actor subjectively evaluated it);
- the extent to which incidents are successfully placed within autobiographical and wider-world contexts;
- the account's consistency, as judged by psycho-linguistic criteria;
- the personal affect and range of emotional expression displayed by the story-teller;
- the degree of introspection and self-awareness in evidence;

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- the amount of expressed reality-checking, personal ambivalence, and/or conflict;
- the field-specific credentials of the narrator;
- the interactive quality of the interview process, as evaluated according to the principles laid out above (see footnote 8, 2008).

In short, interviewing and postproduction methodologies follow the very same principles as good-practice interventions themselves.

However, over all it has become clear that good-practice internet and video interventions in deradicalisation/ rehabilitation and second and third level prevention have much less to do with video cameras, film production, and the internet as such than one might think. For what we call deradicalisation amounts to quite a degree of change in one's core personality and such change can only be achieved through direct face-to-face interventions – and through long processes and continuities of interaction. This has to do with how the human personality works and what kinds of exchange and communication is needed to accomplish sustainable change. However, firsthand narratives – in mediated forms, as in audio recordings – can play a significant role in such direct face-to-face interventions; and they can have a deradicalising function and thus be “deradicalising narratives”. Yet, the process of gathering, capturing, producing/ arranging and employing such media narratives seems better pictured in local hands-on workshop settings and among local producer-user communities – and not so much as an internet based dissemination strategy measured by click-counts and average viewing times in seconds.