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DERADICALISING NARRATIVES WITHIN THE RAN APPROACH – WHAT CAN AND WHAT CANNOT BE DONE IN MEDIA BASED INTERVENTIONS[1]

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The question of what can be done in the internet and social media in terms of preventing violent extremism and hate crime and supporting deradicalization has been discussed intensely during recent years since it had become quite evident that the internet does play an important role in the radicalization and recruitment of young people and in inciting them into committing acts of hatred and terrorism. Whenever it is acknowledged that monitoring and restrictive sanctioning against extremist and hateful websites not be enough eventually[2], one of the first and quickest answers which are given usually is: We need to launch "counter narratives". i.e. media material that counters the extremist messages and/or is otherwise helpful in dissuading and deradicalizing susceptible young people.

But to what extent can audio-visual material be helpful at all – in a domain that experienced practitioners say depends entirely on direct face-to-face interventions in the off-line domain? 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 that may rightly be expected to exert a deradicalizing impact on its audiences and thus effectively facilitate mental processes of working through violent extremism, hate crime, and group-oriented hostility with young radicalized people?

In practical and methodological terms the questions is how to identify, collect or generate such material – presumably from various groups of interviewees and/or different kinds of

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[1] This article comprises condensed versions of the two papers: Do we really need "counter narratives"? And what would that be anyway? – The narrative approach to audio-visual media in deradicalisation and prevention of violent extremism and hate crime. Part A. (HW 2013a); and: Deradicalising Narratives – base concept, definitions, methodological delineations and practice recommendations on how to generate and implement deradicalising narratives as a tool for offline interventions. Part B. (HW 2013b).
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[2] As to the important function of monitoring and sanctioning websites that commit incitement to hatred offenses, in Germany see: http://jugendschutz.net/, http://www.hass-im-netz.info/service/ueber-uns.html, also http://no- nazi.net/, internationally and in English: http://www.inach.net/.

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documentary and fictional media contents? In terms of interviewing, the question is how to facilitate the kind of personal and narrative self-expressions that is needed for this? With regard to the postproduction of the interview material, it needs to be asked how one should arrange and design these materials as – narrative – media products/ testimonials? And eventually, how to design a sophisticated enough pedagogical setting and approach for direct offline intervention work in which such media based narratives may be embedded?

These are the key questions of the action research project "European Platform of Deradicalizing Narratives" (EDNA)[3] which is presently launched as 'national starter measure' of methodological development.[4]

However, the challenge looms large. 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 but that don't work with the target group and even backfire.

Various misconception and fallacies about deradicalisation through internet and social media

The task of developing a deradicalizing narratives' approach for media based interventions is further complicate through various misconception and fallacies that characterize some of the current approaches to internet and media interventions. Firstly, sometimes a certain methodological naïvite prevails assuming that so-called counter-narratives are simple and self-evident and that basically any material would 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.), thus ignoring the complexity of facilitating sustainable deradicalisation processes. This often rests on the erroneous assumption that on-line deradicalisation must be as easily possible as radicalization itself is powerfully supported by on-line means.

Others hold that it is most important to closely analyze how extremists' internet sites, learn from them, and use this knowledge to then "counter-radicalize" our clients. This makes us forget that we must never do what radicalizers do – and, as it were, radicalize for the good cause.

Closely related to the counter-radicalization fallacy is the view that what prevention and deradicalisation first and foremost need to do is: to "counter", "contest", and "combat" and to intensely focus on "ideology, logic, fact"– which is sometimes phrased quite combatively as request to put forth so-called "counter-narratives" which give "an effective comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every

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[3] EDNA is financed by the EC (DG Home Affairs, ISEC); it is conducted by Violence Prevention Network (VPN) and Minor-Projektkontor e.V., in close liaison with the project "Women/Girls/Gender in Extremism" (WomEx/EU) by Cultures Interactive e.V., and the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) by the European Commission.

[4] In its intended second project phase the EDNA approach will be brought onto a European level.

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dimension of the extremist narrative" as is held by many, including the UNICRI experts on the matter.[5] However, first- line practitioners know that "countering", "arguing" and contesting will not deradicalize, anyone who is at-risk of or entangled in extremist or hate crime contexts. On the contrary, it will further provoke and harden them, since radicalized individuals feed on being "countered".

Hence, first -line deradicalization practitioners have come to learn: You must not counter nor argue with a radicalized person!, which, however, is a key conclusion that traditions of civic education and media work sometimes have trouble with acknowledging. Yet, empirical practice research has taught us that the only viable alternative to ill-fated strategies of countering and counter-arguing is: narrative interpersonal exchange. Narratives here mean – in a strictly non-metaphorical sense – story-telling accounts of first-hand experiences and actions that an individual has personally lived-through and/or committed. This most important practice lesson is reconfirmed by the quite obvious fact that one cannot argue with nor counter a personal narrative – or else act inappropriate and abusive. One may only engage in a co- narrative, relational interaction process and thus assist in further developing the narrative in a shared relational interaction process. Such interaction is inherently depolarizing and pacifying, and also deradicalizing.

Moreover, evidence-based narratology shows: What we generally refer to as "extremist narratives" are not really narratives at all. They do not engage a process of exchanging first- hand, personally lived-through experiences. On the contrary, recruitment videos etc. avoid any such exchange. This is why experienced practitioners emphatically state: "We are the narrative! There is no countering in the narrative domain! – and all we do is support our clients' skills to articulate a personal story."

Other media approaches aim at using humour as a tool in prevention and deradicalization – which then they confuse with ridicule and mockery. Here, humour in the sense of laughing together about oneself/ourselves is confused with laughing about others in a way that makes them appear silly and inapt and thus increase tension and conflict. This most misguided approach need to be warned against strongly.[6]

Another much more human and promising approach attempts to employ narratives of victims/ survivors of terrorism and hate crime as "useful tools ...in education, ... in programs for prisoners, in deradicalization" and in giving "counter narrations in internet and social media".[7]

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[5] 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. (Perpectives On Terrorism, Vol. 8., No. 6, 2010); http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/128/html; accessed April 19, 2013.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

[6] For more detail see: "Do we really need 'counter narratives'?..." in footnote 1.

[7] The RAN Working Group 'Voice of the Victims'; 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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Yet, what is often forgotten here is that radicalized individuals and hate crime perpetrators react quite averse to victim testimonials, because virtually all of them have been substantially victimized themselves in their life-history and are in strong psychological denial of this.

Tentative guidelines for media-based deradicalisation interventions

Notwithstanding the difficulty of the task and the misunderstandings and fallacies discussed above, the initial experiences from the EDNA project have lead up to some tentative guidelines for media-based deradicalisation interventions.

(1) First, any initiative of producing and employing mediated deradicalizing narratives should in every step of the procedure work at maximally acknowledging the established principles and guidelines of good-practice (offline) derad and prevent interventions – i.e. be "narrative" (versus argumentative and debating), "relational" (versus instructional/ content and teaching focused), "supporting emotional intelligence" (versus cognitive), "open-process" and "participative" (versus syllabus based), "trusting, confidential, and committed" (versus hierarchical/ leadership focused) etc.

Evidently, for media projects this implies the challenge to find ways of doing what at first sight might seem utterly impossible. How, for example, could a media project realize any degree of "trust, confidentiality, and commitment", "open process" procedures and "relational" dynamics, while the internet and social media hold only little possibility for confidentiality and personally identified commitment and while media production tends to be closed-shop, content based and focused on the product rather than on process – envisaging mono-directional content -viewer correspondences? It thus is not surprising that first-line practitioners have arrived at the somewhat impulsive conclusion "that these media people just don't know the first thing about how deradicalization works".

(2) In order to find solutions, some formal precaution is required: A mechanism of 'Practitioner Mainstreaming' needs to be put in place as routine procedure in any media initiative – and, in fact in just any project, initiative or policy making procedure that bears on the work in deradicalisation and prevention. For, first-line practitioners have the most profound knowledge about the issue, yet tend to not be very vocal as advocates and seem to be rarely included in the pertaining committees, forums, and conferences. Hence, just like with gender mainstreaming, practitioner mainstreaming would secure that each and every context which deals with issues of extremism, hate crime and prevention/ intervention, makes sure that a sufficient number of first-line practitioners are present and are proactively asked to share their experiences, assessments and recommendations.

(3) With regard to the intervention methodology, any input of audio-visual material into face-to- face interventions and contexts of deradicalisation should always be systematically embedded in a well-structured off-line setting of direct face-to-face (preferably group based) intervention work. For, one thing has been reconfirmed by each

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and every practitioner interviewed in and beyond RAN activities: The rash reaction on the part of many first-line practitioners that "one cannot deradicalize on-line, period!" is true in the sense that one cannot deradicalise or, in fact induce any form of lasting personal change, only by means of media tools and by delivering media content to clients.

Yet, many media interventions seem to silently imply just that. However, even the relatively more plausible belief that internet and social media may singlehandedly radicalize a person (i.e. a 'lone actor' or 'lone wolf') has been effectively disproven by two recent studies.[8] All the more questionable is the supposition that media input can deradicalize per se. For, the processes of personal development which are and need to be triggered by an impactful deradicalisation intervention (and even by secondary prevention) are as complex, intense and powerful as only processes of in-depth psychotherapy are. Just as psychotherapy cannot be done through a media product, a personal process of deradicalisation will always be entirely reliant on the face-to-face relational work which is facilitated by a personally engaged practitioner.

Given the tools and approaches that are presently put out by some academia and ethically inspired parts of the media industry, in terms of deradicalisation the suggestion seems reasonable, as a rule of thumb, to follow a 80-20 ratio for the online-offline interface of activities around internet and social media. This means acknowledging a general methodological guideline, according to which one expects to spend roughly 80% of attention and resources on issues that regard the off-line embedding of any media product / tool – and only 20% on the content and form of the media product itself. The notion of a 80-20 ratio is designed to manage risks attached to collaborations with the media and internet industry. For, there the natural tendency would always be to focus on the products and their content, structure, form and style rather than carefully devise the offline and off-medium embedding of the product. However, from practice research point of view it seems most important to both systematically prepare beforehand and work through the media experience in depth afterwards in order to enable the viewers to develop, personalize, acknowledge, and reflect upon their subjective reactions to any aspect of the product or testimonials, and to express them within the group process of the intervention.

(4) The observations above suggest that one takes a fundamentally different approach towards conceptualizing, communicating, and implementing a project on 'deradicalizing narratives for the internet'. It would need to no longer be a 'media project' in the first place and not foreground as main objective to collect interview material and create from it a 'tool of on-line intervention'. Rather the project would conceive of and present of itself as plain – off-line – intervention specifically targeted to different stakeholder groups around extremism and hate crime. Hence, such intervention is then designed as face-to-

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[8] (1) Ines Von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon (2013). Radicalisation in the digital era. ... By the RAND Corporation Europe. http://www.rand.org/randeurope/research/projects/internet-and- radicalisation.html.
(2) Diana Rieger, Lena Frischlich, Gary Bente (2013). Propaganda 2.0 – Psychological Effects of Right-Wing and Islamic Extremist Internet Videos". BKA-Publikationsreihe "Polizei + Forschung").
http://www.bka.de/nn_233148/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Presse2013/130819__BKA-StudieZurWirkungExtremistischerInternet-Propaganda.html.

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face intervention of counselling, rehabilitation, or therapy that provides assistance in preventing and personally working-through the effects of violent extremism and group focused hatred.

The only specificity of it is that it also – as an aside – offers the opportunity to generate narrative self-documents/ testimonials and provides training in basic skills of narrative interviewing, video/audio editing and post-production, thus training base media competencies. It would also invite the participants – former extremists/ perpetrators in rehabilitation, first-line practitioners, parents/ families, also victims/survivors of extremism/ hate crime, affected neighbourhoods, influential community members – to actively collaborate with the production of the media narrative. They would do so knowing that the product is for use in offline deradicalization interventions with other clients – with one's own testimonial being a key component (which will, however, then be anonymized and masque). Ideally, the awareness that the testimonial might be used for beneficial purposes of prevention will support the therapeutic process. In systemic respect it may also strengthen resilience in the person's environment and community.

Hence, approaches like EDNA will eventually produce not only interview materials and media content/ "deradicalizing narratives". Rather, EDNA will first and foremost develop the blue-print of an innovative and highly participative intervention approach for various client groups around issues of extremism and hate crime. Interestingly, while EDNA as a media project had in the beginning set out to produce means of online deradicalation, it then turned into, or in a sense turned back towards being more of an off-line deradicalization intervention – that still also incorporates, as an aside, content production and some practical training in interviewing and media editing.

(5) Finally, especially from the last two points it follows: Deradicalising narratives/ testimonials should not be designed for multiple purposes but only for the one purpose of being used in deradicalization and hate-crime prevent interventions. Not even agendas of public awareness raising or victims' rights lobbying should be allowed to have influence on concept and production of such narratives.

(6) The method of interviewing and content design that EDNA follows is (co-)narrative and open-process in nature and thus largely follows the techniques of biographical-narrative interviewing as practiced in social studies. However, since the task here is not to produce reconstructive research but to deliver a therapeutic/ social work intervention which as a by- product creates deradicalising narratives for use in similar interventions, certain methodological modifications are required.

(a) Firstly, since any impactful interview footage will need to be able to create personal interest and attention – and also a sense of trust and credibility – with a kind of young person which is a typically quite distrustful, defensive, and hard to reach, the interviewer will be significantly less self-restrained than s/he would be in a classical narrative interview. For instance, the interviewer will, in the course of questioning, refer back to other parts of the interview and rephrase key narratives of the interviewee; s/he will even

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put in little personal comments, deliberations, brief references to her/his own experiences, and ask detail questions (as a narrative interviewer would normally not do). An active and transparent interviewer of this kind will be more able to appease distrustful listeners and communicate to her/him that there is a trusting and honest relationship between interviewer and interviewee which is inspired by personal interest, even curiosity, authenticity, and a drive for self-expression and (self-) reflexivity. It will thus help to avoid what is a major risk of any such media narratives: that they are perceived as not trustworthy, manipulative and as intending some sort of brainwashing.

In order to further support the sense of credibility and trustworthiness, the interviewers and/or the project's creators themselves may be interviewed and thus provide narrative footage about the motivations of the project, prior personal experiences in the work field, and further life- history issues that relate to the interviewers work and to the media project.

(b) Secondly, in view of limits to the clients' attention span and for practical reasons, the interviewing process needs to make sure that, later on in postproduction, one will be able to extract sequences which are useful in content and applicable in size as tool in an offline interventions. Hence, these sequences should be as much to the point and as rich in narrative content and interviewee's personal investment as possible. To this effect an enriching procedure to be applied to key sequences of the interview has been developed by the EDNA approach. It uses a second or third interview and particular modes of focused questioning that allows for coming back to and further deepening and enhancing specifically targeted key issues and sequences in the person's testimonial.

As to which issues and themes these key sequences should focus on in order to create maximum deradicalising impact, some specific lines of narrative questioning (yet no fixed template of questions!) have been established for each interviewee group (e.g. parents, practitioners, ex-offenders etc.). Generally, in interviewing practitioners of deradicalisation interventions, it is recommended instead of conducting an expert interview, to facilitate story telling about the practitioners' life history and work experiences – i.e. focus on issues that portray the more personal side of the practitioner's work and persona (and which normally cannot be communicated in the actual intervention due to the professional distance and client focus).

To give but some examples: This more personal kind of story telling may include accounts about how the practitioner came to choose this kind of work, what particular path s/he took into it, which clients s/he met, what personal motivations lead her/him, what biographical experiences play a role and why s/he is still inspired to engage in it. Furthermore, the interview questions may be geared to triggering narratives about the doubts endured, challenges met and/or gratification gained in the course of case work, i.e. about how difficult, demanding, confusing, fascinating, impressing, enlivening etc. the work is technically and emotionally. The interview may also invite narratives about how the practitioner came to better understand and even respect the clients in spite of the hatred and violence they have engaged in (victims' care practitioners may express

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themselves in complementary ways).

Here, extensive reference to individual clients and case stories may be given – and produce further narratives that are able to relate to the targeted audience of at-risk young people in most immediate ways.

In particular, practitioners may be asked to give personal accounts about whether and in which ways they themselves as younger persons had engaged in attitudes and activities that may be called extremist and be perceived as comparable or analogous to what the clients have thought and committed. This may go as far as exploring what even today may make the practitioner vulnerable to expressing/ enacting resentment and exclusion, while also stressing accounts about the protective factors that kept/keeps her/him from becoming radical and aggressive/ violent and in turn inspires her/him to work for inclusiveness, human rights and offender rehabilitation.

Parent interviews, i.e. interviews with mothers and fathers of daughters/ sons who have turned extremist follow quite similar questioning strategies – all the more so since these parents have often not managed to communicate much in an narrative fashion, or even at all, about themselves, their history and their personal perspectives on things to their growing-up children. Lines of questioning may here ask about the time before the daughter/son was born – and encourage narratives about whether and how extremism/fundamentalism, group- oriented hatred, resentment, prejudice and violence had played a role in the parent's life and family history. There it should also be explored which of this has or has not been communicated to the daughter/son and for which reasons.

The interview may then explore how the parent conceives of and recounts the life-story of the child from birth to present, how and when s/he thinks violent extremism came about. It would look at moments when s/he first noticed the child's engagement and susceptibility to hate speech/crime, what kinds of thoughts/ memories, reactions and feelings this brought up with her/him as a parent at the time – and still today in the interview. Complementarily, however, the interview would also focus on moments in which the parent felt proud, appreciative and supportive of the child despite of his/her extremist engagement or even in context of extremist activities. Such narrative explorations will convey to the young listeners a sense of complexity and ambivalence in human perception and self-expression and support her/him to more readily enter into such multi-faceted and enriched, yet ambivalent perception him/herself.

Furthermore, it proved helpful in the interview to ask about instances in which the parent felt s/he had understood what was going on with their child and grasp parts of the deeper layers of motivation. This might include moments in which the parent feels that s/he has learned something important and valuable from the radicalised child. However, this would certainly also come back to moments when the parent felt shocked, confused and angry with the turned extremist son/daughter. Particularly helpful and important it has

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proven to explore the question when the father/ mother, despite of all extremism related conflicts, has been sorry for the daughter/ son and has felt for her/him. Additionally helpful it was found to ask about what the parent would hope for or expect the daughter/ son to do once s/he becomes a parent her/himself and has children – i.e. the interviewee's grandchildren.

Generally speaking, the lines of questions for parent interviews – but analogously also for other interviewee groups – would on the one hand go into personal memories, perceptions and emotional reactions about the son/daughter (or client) and on the other hand explore whether and how these perceptions and reactions have been communicated to the child (or client) at the time of the actual interaction. For these two lines of narratives are usually not easily accessible in the families of those kinds of clients who will then take part the interview-based EDNA interventions of deradicalisation. To further augment the impact of the intervention, these kinds of narratives should then also be embedded in a set of interview sequences in which the interviewee (the parent, practitioner, etc.) explores whether and in which ways s/he her/himself as younger persons had held attitudes that can be called extremist and resentful or even violent – and which protective factors may come in to moderate and neutralize such impulses. In combination, these strategies of narrative interviewing are quite capable of conveying to the young, at-risk listeners a new sense of human relationship and conflict and of narrative sharing – and induce personal change towards more pro-social behaviours with most of them (at least those that are not in need of a more intense intervention of psychiatric nature).

Hence, what in earlier media and testimonial projects used to function as an impressive but somewhat disjointed assortment of brief emotional – sometimes even sensational – video statements from various victims/ survivors and former perpetrators/ terrorists[9], would in the EDNA approach become truly narrative, co-narrative, and relational. This means that the personal self-expression is given more space, breadth, and a wider systemic context in terms of social milieu and (family) history, and it would thus assume a greater and more intense listener appeal. It is quite emblematic, for instance, that the EDNA approach's systemic and narrative enhancement strategy would include interviewing the interviewers and project creators themselves in order for them to add their personal and biographical perspectives. As a consequence, EDNA's narrative approach is able to induce a much more profound impact. For it entices and empowers the clients to engage in forms of exchange and co-narrativity which is based on trust, curiosity, self-expression and (self-) reflexivity opening up new and more comprehensive levels of narrative exploration that they had not experienced too much before – and thus supports deradicalisation processes and enables the clients to acknowledge their responsibility in a life-course perspective.

[9] See e.g. http://www.google.com/ideas/projects/network-against-violent-extremism/.