



# Participation

## A Methodology for Counter-Messaging Campaigns

Deliverable D4.6

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# Deliverable information

<b>Grant Agreement No.</b>	<b>962547</b>
<b>Project acronym</b>	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>
<b>Project title</b>	Analyzing and Preventing Extremism via Participation
<b>Project timeframe and duration</b>	1.12.2020–30.11.2023 (36 months)
<b>WP</b>	<i>WP4 CONTRASTING RADICALISATION AND EXTREMISM VIA COMMUNICATION</i>
<b>Task</b>	4.6
<b>Deliverable</b>	<i>D4.6. Design of Counter-narrative campaigns for young people</i>
<b>Status</b>	<i>Final version</i>
<b>Version number</b>	3.0
<b>Deliverable responsible</b>	EFD
<b>Dissemination level</b>	PU
<b>Due date</b>	30 August 2023
<b>Date of submission</b>	03/10/2023

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# Version history

<b>Version</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Description</b>
1.0	1 June 2023	EFD	First draft
1.1	15 June 2023	All	Integrates all partners' feedbacks
2.0	1 September 2023	EFD	Integrates external experts' feedbacks
3.0	18 September 2023	EFD	Consolidated version
3.0	03 October 2023	Roma Tre	Check and review

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# List of abbreviations

Acronym	Description
AN	Alternative narrative
CM	Counter-messaging
CN	Counter-narrative
RAN	Radicalization Awareness Network

# Executive summary

This methodology for designing counter-messaging (CM) campaigns specifically targeting/involving young people collects, summarises and analyses some of the most relevant practices and insights for practitioners and policy-makers who intend to implement interventions against radicalization and social polarization. Within the vast toolbox of methodologies dealing with CM campaigns, its main objective is to provide a complementary and integrative tool that:

- Calibrates the insights and recommendations for a specific target audience, i.e. young people, taking into account the peculiarities that characterize the radicalization processes and the psychological and social dynamics of this demographic group;
- Focuses attention on the key elements to build an effective CM campaign that have been identified in the literature, have been extracted from current and past CM campaigns, and have emerged from other tasks in PARTICIPATION project.

This work is divided in three sections.

The first section presents “collective action framing” as a valuable and hands-on theoretical framework for analysing (radicalising and polarising) narratives, including counter- and alternative narratives. It then presents the main master narratives that are currently impacting on youth, and discusses the best practices for identifying the target audience, messenger and media for a campaign. It underscores the importance to shift from a linear sender-receiver model to a multi-author model that involves the target audience in the design of the campaign.

The second section discusses and categorises protective and risk factors for youth.

The third section presents a selection of the best approaches to design a CM campaign for youth, and discusses more in depth three of them: co-creation, life stories, fictional narratives. It concludes with selected insights for engaging youth while designing/running a campaign.

# Introduction

This methodology for designing counter-messaging (CM) campaigns specifically designed for young people aims to collect and summarize some of the most relevant practices and theories for those who intend to implement interventions against radicalization and social polarization.

For those who work in these fields, several similar tools are available today. There are many manuals, guides and methodologies developed by institutions at various levels and by civil society which present, in different ways, the main tools to be managed in designing, implementing and monitoring counter-narrative (CN) and alternative narrative (AN) campaigns (see the paragraph "Key definitions" below).

This methodology fits into the "toolbox" represented by the corpus of these documents as a complementary and integrative tool, which has two fundamental objectives:

- To calibrate the insights and recommendations for a specific target audience, i.e. young people, taking into account the peculiarities that characterize the radicalization processes and the psychological and social dynamics of this demographic group;
- To focus attention on the elements considered particularly important to build an effective counter-messaging campaign.

## Who should read this methodology?

In this methodology we tried to strike a balance between practical elements (tips, insights, recommendations) and theoretical elements. The document therefore has a hybrid nature, halfway between a hypothetical essential guide to counter-messaging campaigns and a document that also takes into account the more theoretical aspects.

This choice is dictated by some considerations. First of all, the desire not to "reinvent the wheel" but to build an additional tool that focuses on some specific aspects based on the most valid materials available today. Secondly, offer a tool that can be practical and easy to consult, but at the same time informative and, possibly, can offer inspiration for further in-depth analysis.

This methodology, in fact, is designed for a varied audience of users. In the first instance it is aimed at first-line practitioners such as professionals working in educational institutions, juvenile systems, youth and social care, and individuals working with youth on a long-term basis, who need a practical tool to support the work of prevention and countering of radicalization and social polarization. However, it is also aimed at those who, among these categories of professionals or among those who deal with these issues at other levels (for example, policy-makers especially at community/city level), may also be interested in some

aspects of the theoretical frameworks that underpin these types of prevention and contrast interventions.

## Methodology

This document is the result of the work carried out in the context of task 4.6 "Projecting counter-narrative campaigns involving young people" of PARTICIPATION project.

The final objective of the task is to create a methodology for designing counter-messaging campaigns involving young people. The methodology is a practical and informative tool designed mainly for practitioners and is available on the [firstlinepractitioners.com](https://firstlinepractitioners.com) platform.

Three different types of sources were used to assemble this methodology:

- 1) The work done during PARTICIPATION project, including in other tasks and work packages. The project has a specific focus on P/CVE and young people, which made it possible to gather insights relevant for the creation of counter-messaging campaigns. In addition, PARTICIPATION carried out field work through Social Labs that directly involved young people, community stakeholders, religious leaders, and others relevant to prevent work. Their contributions is reflected in this paper.
- 2) Counter-narrative and alternative narratives campaigns. Existing counter-messaging campaigns were collected, screened, selected and analysed to extract insights relevant to the methodology.
- 3) Academic and grey literature relevant to the topics covered.

The analysis of these 3 source types was conducted on the basis of a research framework which is available as an annex at the end of this document.

A first version of this document has been submitted for review to 8 external experts, first-line practitioners, and scholars experienced in the topics covered by this methodology. Their feedbacks have been integrated into the consolidated version of this document.

## Key definitions

In this paper, we approach the topic of campaigns against polarization, hate, and radicalization into violence through the lens of counter-messaging (CM). By "counter-messaging" here, we refer to a broader concept that encompasses the notions of counter-narratives (CN) and alternative narratives (AN) within it.

In fact, in the literature and practice of these campaigns, it is quite common to encounter vague or, more often, overlapping definitions of the concepts of counter-narratives and alternative narratives. Even when these definitions become more precise, and efforts to



achieve conceptual clarity become more effective, certain aspects of the campaigns prove difficult to unequivocally attribute to one or the other.

Undoubtedly, the root cause of these overlaps lies in the shared approach to addressing polarization, hatred, and radicalization into violence, which is indeed centred on narratives. Narrative is conceived as one of the primary foundations of the pathways that lead an individual to adopt a particular worldview and/or engage in specific actions.

According to the 3N model proposed by Arie Kruglanski, Jocelyn Bélanger and Rohan Gunaratna,<sup>1</sup> an ideological narrative is propagated by a violent extremist organization, which champions the use of violence as the most suitable means for a group member to achieve significance. This specific narrative, articulated by the group, outlines their shared beliefs and core ideology. These narratives consistently advocate for group members to defend the organization against its adversaries as a means of ensuring its survival and prosperity. Consequently, violence is viewed as an essential instrument to be wielded by members and even revered. Kruglanski and his colleagues propose that narratives endorsing violence serve two significant purposes: firstly, they underscore the humiliation the group has previously endured, and secondly, they establish a critical link between violence and the attainment of significance, suggesting that participating in violence on behalf of the group enhances a member's status within the organization. In this dynamic lies the radicalising power of the narrative.

Consequently, approaches aimed at countering radicalization into violence, and to some extent those specifically designed to target polarization and hate, can be framed as approaches that all seek to influence the message conveying significance, albeit in different ways. On one hand, in the case of counter-narratives, the aim is to achieve this by *weakening* the message. On the other hand, with alternative narratives, the same objective is pursued by providing a different framework for understanding reality or certain aspects of it, one that can *withstand* the radicalizing message.

This distinction is reflected in many definitions of counter-narratives and alternative narratives. According to the Council of Europe, the difference lies in the reactive and positive dimensions: "alternative narratives are positive, pluralistic, or progressive narratives that are based on intercultural principles and respect for human rights. While counter-narratives are reactive in nature, an alternative narrative will start more positively, proactively, and independently from its own values and its own framework."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., & Gunaratna, R. (2019). *The three pillars of radicalization: Needs, narratives, and networks*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Council of Europe, Alternative narratives and inclusive communication  
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/alternative-narratives-and-inclusive-communication>.

According to a systematic review of counter-narrative interventions for the prevention of radicalization published in 2020,<sup>3</sup> unlike other forms of counter-messaging such as alternative narratives or government strategic communications, it is generally agreed that counter-narratives aim to weaken a dominant narrative by addressing its underlying logic. However, according to the review, there is little conceptual consensus beyond this point.

According to RAN (Radicalization Awareness Network),<sup>4</sup> counter-narratives "directly deconstruct, discredit, and demystify violent extremist messaging" by "challenging ideologies through emotion, theology, humour, exposure of hypocrisy, lies, and untruths." In contrast, alternative narratives "undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'" and employ "a positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom, and democracy."

Although it is possible to isolate clearly distinct characteristics, it is a fact that overlaps between CN and AN are so frequent and that in practice the boundaries between the two approaches, at least in certain aspects, tend to blur. To explain this point, the concepts of CN and AN should be seen as pertaining to a continuum. This is how Briggs and Feve put it,<sup>5</sup> by the means of a "counter-messaging spectrum", which also includes governments' strategic communication. Government strategic communications serve the purpose of portraying government policies and strategies in a favourable light, often through initiatives like public awareness campaigns. On the other hand, alternative narratives, whether initiated by the government or civil society, strive to introduce fresh narratives that diverge from extremist content, emphasizing themes such as diversity, tolerance, and societal values. Lastly, counter-narratives, most effectively deployed by civil society, directly confront extremist narratives with the intent of discrediting the messages propagated by violent extremists.

Seen against this background, the concepts of CN and AN appear as ideal types more than rigid categories that can properly describe the reality of campaigns against polarization, hate and radicalization based on narratives. To clarify, it should be noted that most often, CN tend to also vehiculate (implicit) positive messaging, blurring the borders between the two main branches of counter-messaging.

Based on the discussion so far, in this paper we define **counter-messaging** as:

*a set of activities that aim to disassemble and neutralise the communicative efforts from extremist political groups and individuals, either:*

- *by undermining extremist messages with counter-narratives (CN), or*

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<sup>3</sup> S.L. Carthy et al. (2020), Counter-narratives for the prevention of violent radicalisation: A systematic review of targeted interventions. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 16:3, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/cl2.1106>

<sup>4</sup> RAN (2015), Counter narratives and alternative narratives. RAN Issue Paper, 01 October 2015, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files\\_en?file=2020-09/issue\\_paper\\_cn\\_oct2015\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files_en?file=2020-09/issue_paper_cn_oct2015_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> R.Briggs, S.Feve (2013). Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/lbrr/archives/cn28580-eng.pdf>

- *by convincing audiences with alternative narratives (AN), or*
- *through a mix of the two, when positive messaging is embedded in counter-narratives.*

*CM is designed to resist, reframe, or disable other stories or voices either through rethorical devices (ideology, logic, facts, ...) , or through emotional devices (humour, sarcasm, shared feelings, ...).*

**Counter-narratives** are defined as:

*a reactive type of messaging that offers a cohesive and coherent account of events with the aim of directly or indirectly challenging extremist narratives after the latter have been delivered, and eliciting legal and non-violent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements which support that worldview.*

**Alternative narratives** are defined as:

*a preventive type of messaging that promotes positive messaging, values, and stories with the aim of enhancing resilience to extremist messaging.*

# 1. Narratives

This section presents the main narratives in circulation that have a radicalizing effect particularly towards young people. The aim is to unpack these narratives by highlighting their main components, and by analysing the way they capture audience attention, exercise their persuasive power, and provide motivation for mobilization. To this end, a specific tool for analysing the narratives is presented and applied below.

As explained in the methodological note above, these narratives were selected

- 1) through a review of the relevant literature for counter-messaging work;
- 2) based on the findings of other tasks of the PARTICIPATION project; and
- 3) through the analysis of a selection of counter-narrative and alternative narrative campaigns conducted mainly in the last decade and located geographically in Europe (with some exceptions).

The list of narratives has no claim to be exhaustive; it has the aim of illustrating which narratives present themselves most recurrently today and how they can be analyzed to build effective counter-narrative and alternative narrative campaigns.

## “Collective action framing” as a tool for analysing narratives

The narratives were analyzed and unpacked to show their characterizing aspects and the functioning of the mechanisms underlying them using the conceptual framework of "collective action framing" presented by Snow and Benford (1988).<sup>6</sup> It is rooted in framing theory and it is used in sociology to conceptualize the construction of meaning by social movements and organizations. This conceptual framework supports the idea that social movements – a category that could be extended to also include extremist groups and other hybrid, bottom-up, crowd-sourced forms of contemporary extremism and radicalism – can be seen as “agents of interpretation”<sup>7</sup> who provide meaning with the aim of attracting members, ensure internal

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<sup>6</sup> Snow D.A., Benford R.D. (1988). “Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization”. *International Social Movements Research*, vol.1, pp.197-217.

<sup>7</sup> D.A. Snow et al. (2019). The framing perspective on social movements: Its conceptual roots and architecture. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, H. Kriesi, & H. J. McCammon (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (2nd ed., pp. 392-410). With a view to building a counter-narrative or alternative narrative campaign, using collective action framing as a narrative analysis tool allows you to:

1) isolate the main thematic nuclei;

(ideological) cohesion, and mobilize the affiliates to advance the group's agenda. In this sense, this narrative analysis is rooted in the view that narratives as a method are mainly about the construction of reality.<sup>8</sup>

According to this framework, it is possible to distinguish between:

- **Diagnostic framing:** a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration.  
In radicalizing narratives, this frame provides consensus mobilisation through the construction of the supposed problem as an existential threat and the attribution of blame to the out-group (Us vs Them or In-group/Out-Group polarisation, Them vs Us or Victimisation).
- **Prognostic framing:** a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done.  
In radicalizing narratives, this frame also provides consensus mobilisation, through the articulation of a solution for achieving transformational change.
- **Motivational framing:** a call to arms or rationale for engaging in corrective or ameliorative action.  
In radicalizing narratives, this frame provides action mobilisation through motivations and incentives.

With a view to building a counter-narrative or alternative narrative campaign, using collective action framing as a narrative analysis tool allows you to:

- 1) isolate the main thematic focuses;
- 2) understand how the connections between the elements of the narrative are presented: in particular, how the justification for violent action or judgment on an event or a category of people is constructed, and how is built the system of leverages and incentives on which the mobilization effect rests;
- 3) identify the target points on which to act with your campaign.

## 1.1 Unpacking the narratives

### Radicalising narratives and youth

This paragraph presents the main radicalising narratives that can influence young people. Among the narratives specifically mentioned in counter-narrative campaigns targeting young

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2) understand how the connections between the elements of the narrative are presented: in particular, how the justification for violent action or judgment on an event or a category of people is constructed, and how the system of leverage and incentives on which the mobilization effect rests;

3) identify the target points on which to act with your campaign.

<sup>8</sup> J. Bruner (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

audiences, in the relevant literature, as well as in previous task in PARTICIPATION project, a selection has been made for analysis.

It should be noted that most of these narratives share several features with any other radicalising narrative, regardless of the target audience. These features include:

- *Us vs. Them Mentality*. Radicalising narratives typically create a dichotomy between "us," representing the extremist group or ideology, and "them," which refers to those perceived as the enemy or opposing forces. This division fosters a sense of collective identity, strengthens group cohesion, and justifies hostility or aggression towards the perceived adversaries.<sup>9</sup>
- *Demonisation of the Other*. Extremist narratives frequently demonise individuals or groups that are seen as threats to their ideology or goals. They dehumanise and portray the "other" as morally corrupt, evil, or dangerous, often using stereotypes, conspiracy theories, or misinformation to fuel hatred and justify their actions.<sup>10</sup>
- *Victimhood and Grievance*. Many extremist narratives depict their group as victims of oppression, discrimination, or marginalisation, often exaggerating or distorting real or perceived grievances. This victimhood narrative serves to rally support, legitimise extremist actions, and recruit individuals who may sympathise with their perceived grievances.<sup>11</sup>
- *Simplistic Solutions*. Extremist narratives often offer simplistic and radical solutions to complex societal problems. They exploit dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and disillusionment to provide a clear-cut vision and promise quick resolutions, even if they are unrealistic, or violate human rights and democratic principles.
- *Delegitimisation of Institutions*. Extremist narratives often undermine the legitimacy of mainstream institutions, such as governments, media, or educational systems. They portray these institutions as corrupt, controlled by their perceived enemies, or conspiring against the interests of the extremist group or ideology. This delegitimisation aims to erode public trust and create fertile ground for extremist beliefs.
- *Self-legitimation*. The other side of the coin of the delegitimization of institutions is self-legitimation. Radicalizing narratives have a "constructive" part that aims to identify an in-group and increase its internal cohesion. Victimization and presenting the out-group as an existential threat are processes that contribute to self-legitimization.

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<sup>9</sup> J. M. Berger (2018). *Extremism*. The MIT Press.

<sup>10</sup> Giner-Sorolla, R., Leidner, B., & Castano, E. (2012). Dehumanization, demonization, and morality shifting: Paths to moral certainty in extremist violence. In M. A. Hogg & D. L. Blaylock (Eds.), *Extremism and the psychology of uncertainty* (pp. 165–182). Wiley-Blackwell, <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-03155-010>.

<sup>11</sup> Victimhood is a driver towards radicalisation shared by all kinds of extremist ideologies. See Marinone L. et al. (2021), Far-right, far-left, separatism and religious extremism. A comparative desk research on drivers. D2.1, PARTICIPATION project, <https://participation-in.eu/media/participation-farright-farleft-separatism-religious-extremism-d2.1.pdf>

Other characteristics often present in radicalising narratives can have a significant influence on young individuals:

- *Emotional Appeal.* Extremist narratives often leverage emotional appeals to attract and influence young people. They tap into feelings such as frustration, anger, alienation, or injustice that young individuals may experience during their formative years. By offering a seemingly powerful and emotive narrative, extremists can exploit these emotions to provide a sense of purpose and belonging. It should be noted that this is not only appealing to young people, but to any vulnerable people regardless of age.<sup>12</sup>
- *Exploitation of Identity Formation.* Adolescence is a period when individuals are exploring their identities and seeking a sense of belonging. Extremist narratives provide a clear and rigid sense of identity, fostering a strong group affiliation and a distinct "us vs them" mentality. This sense of identity can be especially appealing to young people who are searching for purpose and identity formation.<sup>13</sup>
- *Circulation on Social Media and Online Platforms.* Young people are more likely to be active users of social media and online platforms, which extremists exploit to disseminate their narratives. Extremist groups strategically utilise these platforms to reach and influence a larger audience of young individuals. The interactive nature of social media also allows for the formation of echo chambers<sup>14</sup> and online communities that reinforce extremist beliefs.<sup>15</sup>
- *Countercultural Appeal.* Some extremist narratives present themselves as rebellious or countercultural alternatives to mainstream society. Young people, particularly those who feel disillusioned with societal norms or marginalised in some way, may be attracted to these narratives as a means of challenging the status quo and seeking empowerment.
- *Online Engagement and Recruitment Strategies.* Extremist groups actively employ online engagement and recruitment strategies targeting young individuals. They may use appealing and engaging content, including videos, memes, or music, to capture attention and convey their extremist ideology. Online recruitment may involve manipulation, radicalization through exposure to extremist content, and the formation of virtual communities that foster a sense of belonging.

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance Braddock, K. (2020). Terrorism is Theater: Emotion in Extremist Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda. In *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* (pp. 163-206). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108584517.009.

<sup>13</sup> Schröder, C.P., Bruns, J., Lehmann, L. et al. (2022). Radicalization in Adolescence: the Identification of Vulnerable Groups. *Eur J Crim Policy Res* 28, 177–201, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-022-09505-x>

<sup>14</sup> Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(9), e2023301118.

<sup>15</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382>

In the rest of this section, we present a selection of the main radicalizing narratives in circulation today that target young people. It is important to underline that these narratives can present themselves in slightly or significantly modified forms, they can be adapted to local contexts by presenting additional or different elements, or, again, some of their parts can be separated from the general narrative and acquire a life of their own or be integrated with narratives different. What is important to note is that the mechanisms underlying these narratives do not change significantly even in the presence of these changes. Therefore, recognizing these narratives allows us to orient ourselves in a broader panorama of radicalizing narratives.

### *a. Oppression of Muslims*

A topic that typically occurs in extreme Islamist / jihadist propaganda is the oppression and murder of Muslims around the world. Propaganda can weaponize a wide range of events to present them, through *diagnostic framing*, as an existential threat. Events that are usually exploited are wars in Islamic countries and discrimination against Muslims in EU countries.

These topics are exploited in many ways, e.g. by circulating the belief that there is such thing as the "right" Islam (in more extreme forms by denying others their being Muslim), by affirming the duty to stand by one's brothers and sisters in faith and worldwide (supporting the "Umma"), by discussing dress code in Islam (related to the issue of women's rights). Even peer pressure and one's own opinion about alleged oppression of Muslims can be weaponized or exploited.

Other interesting issues that may resonate with this narrative are togetherness and diversity vs. discrimination (being a Muslim today), issues related to identity (influence of friends, importance of religion), beauty in Islam, religion and politics (breaking the law, standing up for something), influence of social media (changing content through algorithms, peer pressure online).

The radicalising narrative of the oppression of Muslims depicts all the Muslim community worldwide as being "under attack", either directly or indirectly. Framed in this way (*prognostic framing*), fighting back is the only solution that is suggested as valid, and the action of fighting back is indicated as the sign of being a "true" Muslim (*motivational framing*).

Deconstructing this extremist narrative, DECOUNT project<sup>16</sup> underlines that:

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<sup>16</sup> Project DECOUNT (2020), Pädagogisches Begleitmaterial zum Spiel DECOUNT, p.20  
[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5db801c980904f3781b2c72c/t/5ed64a3ff9f6cd2d0014a51d/1591102020087/Begleitmaterial\\_Game\\_FINAL.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5db801c980904f3781b2c72c/t/5ed64a3ff9f6cd2d0014a51d/1591102020087/Begleitmaterial_Game_FINAL.pdf).

The goal of the EU-funded DECOUNT project is to promote democracy and combat extremism through an online counter- and alternative narratives campaign. The project designed and disseminated an online campaign that included: online resources for deradicalisation and



- one can also engage in politics in a legal way and thus fight for political or humanitarian goals; i.e, fighting back is not the only solution to achieve a political goal. In this way the extremist' diagnostic frame is not denied nor addressed directly, while the prognostic and motivational frames replaced by alternatives. This approach supports (behavioural) disengagement over (cognitive) deradicalisation.
- When discussing dress codes for women, women's rights and the right to freedom of choice may be addressed. Here, it is addressed the very foundation of the extremist diagnostic frame by putting into question that dressing differently from a certain interpretation of Islam dress code for women constitutes an attack to religion.

### *b. Great replacement (cultural version)*

This narrative states that 'Cultural identities are under threat, elites are complicit in this, and this will end in either a clash of civilisations and/or a "great replacement" of indigenous European culture'. A slightly softer version of this narrative endorsed by ethnic nationalists replaces the warring second part with support for the principle 'a nation for each and every ethnicity'. Culture and ethnicity here subtly refer to race.

Cultural-threat conspiracy theories connected to demographic-based conspiracy theories are circulated by Identitarian groups such Generation Identity, and centre around ideas of a 'Great Replacement' or 'Eurabia' whereby elites (often dubbed 'cultural Marxists') are complicit in the replacement of Christian culture by an 'Islamic Other'.

In this narrative, according to Hedayah and CARR,<sup>17</sup> the starting point is usually considerations about migrants. Migration flows from certain countries (e.g., African or South-Asian countries) are presented (*diagnostic framing*) as 'mass migration' and 'invasion' that threaten the very existence of a people (referred to as culture or ethnicity). The solution (*prognostic framing*) is to 'stop the invasion' by any means possible as it is an existential threat, including by engaging in politics through far-right grassroots movements.

The main motivation for action (*motivational framing*) is the supposed link between personal identity and national identity/culture. But it should be noted that this narrative connects to micro-level narratives related to the 'threat' of: the subjugation of women, the imposition of sharia law, the building of mosques, the presence of halal food and concerns around child sexual exploitation, and others. As such, it appears to be more easily exploited in combination with other polarising proxy issues.

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prevention; video game structured along binary decisions leading to radicalisation or maintaining resilience; video with alternative narratives.

<sup>17</sup> Allchorn W., Building A Successful Radical Right Counter-Narrative Campaign A How-To Guide, CARR-Hedayah, p.13

[https://hedayah.com/app/uploads/2021/09/2020DEC16\\_CARR\\_HowToGuide\\_FINAL-double-spread.pdf](https://hedayah.com/app/uploads/2021/09/2020DEC16_CARR_HowToGuide_FINAL-double-spread.pdf)

### The new far-right propaganda and proxy issues

Issues that are historically part of the left (and far-left) agenda, such as the protection of the environment and women rights, are increasingly exploited by the far right as well. These narratives tend to adapt to the specific context and can vary from place to place. The function of these narratives is to exploit an issue that has a wider audience, and to use it as a proxy issue for far-right long-standing propaganda themes, such as “mass migration” cast as an invasion, the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory which implies the involvement of “corrupt” governments, mainstream media, and “State-sponsored fake news”.<sup>18</sup>

As an example, the YouthRightOn project and the “Find Another Way” campaign<sup>19</sup> analysed the online environment in which young Bulgarians are exposed to violent right wing messaging, finding mostly hate speech targeted towards refugees, migrants, Roma community and LGBTQI+ community. This also connects to the “minorities” narratives analysed below.

#### c. Minorities as an existential threat

The overall narrative is that certain groups, minorities, pose an existential threat (*diagnostic framing*) to the fabric of the community. They are undesirable because they can change patterns of interaction, economic distribution and political representation. Usually, it manifests against ethnic, religious or gender minorities and applies indiscriminately. There is a us vs. them dimension as diagnostic framing.

This narrative is at the core of FĂRĂURĂ.RO, a counter-messaging campaign run in 2017-2018 by the Elie Wiesel Institute for the Study of the Holocaust in Romania. According to this project, youth is targeted by showcasing: effects on them triggered by the presence of the group in their proximity, potential isolation from society, taking away opportunities meant for them.

Users of this narrative argue (*prognostic framing*) that exclusion (by force or segregation, or, in some cases, violently) will restore the balance and protect the “majority”. This prognostic framing supports all such actions.

Youth is singled out (*motivational framing*) by insisting on the options and life possibilities taken away from them due to the presence of the target group, including possibilities to start a professional career or a family. The motivational framing is that of the “defence” of the

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<sup>18</sup> This is one of the key features of the story of Franziska, elaborated within DECOUNT project. See DECOUNT, op.cit., p.23.

<sup>19</sup> The ‘Resilient Youth against Far-Right Extremist Messaging Online’ (YouthRightOn) project aims to strengthen prevention and address underlying factors contributing to far-right radicalisation by putting forward alternative narratives and promoting critical thinking, openmindedness and civic engagement. ‘Find Another Way’ is an online strategic communications campaign, developed as the main impact tool of the project. See [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/ran-csep-briefing-resilient-youth-against-far-right-extremist-messaging-online-youthrighton-2021-06-08\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/ran-csep-briefing-resilient-youth-against-far-right-extremist-messaging-online-youthrighton-2021-06-08_en)

majority. The consensus is built around this shared goal of protecting the community. Youth is motivated by having easier access to professional options or to certain networks.

As in the case of the great replacement narrative, the minority narrative also appears to be often exploited in combination with other polarising issues. Its inherent flexibility allows for the narrative to swiftly adapt to different context and realities. As an example, the campaign in Romania identified eight distinct categories for anti-Jewish narratives (religious, racist, conspiratorial, economic, antizionist, negationist, Judeo-bolshevism and licentious) and seven distinct categories for narratives targeting Roma people (racist, crime-related, demographic, conspiratorial, negationist, socio-cultural and licentious).

### **Minorities and online hate**

Online hate is characterised as an oppressive action against minorities configured as an act-message: in other words, targeting a single individual means also targeting an entire social group (usually a minority). Frequently, this is achieved through the use of stereotypes.

This aspect is at the centre of CO.N.T.R.O. project,<sup>20</sup> which ran an offline social experiment to counter online hate. In a port in Italy, a young woman/man is waiting to embark and scrolls her/his smartphone. (S)he then asks people sitting nearby (who are not aware of the project) for help to understand a message just received on social media. The message is designed along strong hate speech messages that circulate online. These encounters and people's reactions are recorded and then put together to form an online counter-narrative campaign.

### *d. Accelerationist narratives*

Many narratives targeting society as a whole have a clear accelerationist feature. These accelerationist narratives, mostly from the right-wing end of the political spectrum, state (*diagnostic framing*) that 'the Western liberal-capitalist system is degenerate and corrupt. We must therefore engage in violent socio-political and economic conflict in order to bring about the revolution and race war that will hasten in a new "pure" & "white" system or world order' (*prognostic framing*). Left-wing accelerationist narratives share much of these thinking, but do not refer to race war nor to ethnic purity. Violence is still presented as the only viable solution, often in the form of attacks on police, institutions, and other symbols of the state.

According to Hedayah and CARR,<sup>21</sup> by presenting the Western capitalist system as the root of all problems, and one that cannot be reformed, these narrative state that violence is the only solution to achieve a brand new beginning. Accelerationist narratives are cross-cutting to

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<sup>20</sup> IRS (2020), Il contributo del progetto CO.N.T.R.O. all'analisi del fenomeno dell'odio online e alla definizione di possibili soluzioni utili a contrastarlo, Project CONTRO, [https://www.unar.it/portale/documents/20125/50788/RAPPORTO-FINALE-CONTRO\\_DEFINITIVO.pdf/41d5e8a2-8a00-a389-647b-1fd79f4c65f0?t=1619775596814](https://www.unar.it/portale/documents/20125/50788/RAPPORTO-FINALE-CONTRO_DEFINITIVO.pdf/41d5e8a2-8a00-a389-647b-1fd79f4c65f0?t=1619775596814)

<sup>21</sup> Allchorn W., op.cit., p.15.

other extremist narratives and can hasten the process of radicalisation by entangling with local contexts. The motivation for action (*motivational framing*), therefore, often rests with the specific narrative at play. It is not uncommon for accelerationist narratives to be shared by extremist groups of different ideologies.<sup>22</sup>

### *e. Anti-establishment narratives*

These narratives state that ‘Governments, the EU, NATO, the UN & multinational companies have too much power over us, their role is to ostensibly keep “the people” down, we therefore need to rise up against them.’ (*diagnostic framing*).<sup>23</sup> The label ‘anti-establishment’ includes narratives that may be better defined as anti-system, anti-government, and anti-mainstream, which have their own specificities (and may appeal to different audiences) while all sharing a fundamental opposite stance towards facets of authority in society.

While not being specific to any “traditional” kind of extremism, these narratives are widely circulating across all age groups and tactically endorsed by the far right and, in a lesser way, by the far left, in many EU countries. It also enables connections with other radicalised groups with no clear ideology, and with conspiracy believers.

These narratives do not require an ideology to work. It just points at any institution and its symbol presenting them as the negative pole of a dichotomy between good and evil, the abstract notion of “the people” being the good pole. The diagnostic, prognostic and motivational frames are operationalised in accordance with the local contexts and can change abruptly to adapt to shifting situation. A recent example is the shift in, or overlapping of, narratives from Covid-19, lockdown and vaccines to the war in Ukraine within anti-establishment online circles.

## 1.2 Audience

A key factor to consider when designing a counter-messaging campaign is identifying the target audience. It is important to note that in defining the target audience, most counter-messaging campaigns take into account a wide range of factors beyond mere demographics. Most methodologies for counter- and alternative narratives campaigns, in fact, do stress the need to *understand* the intended audience in order to increase the chances to be effective.

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<sup>22</sup> M.-A. Argentino et al. (2022), “One Struggle”: Examining Narrative Syncretism between Accelerationists and Salafi-Jihadists, ICSR, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/ICSR-Report-One-Struggle-Examining-Narrative-Syncretism-between-Accelerationists-and-Salafi%E2%80%99Jihadists.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Allchorn W., op.cit., p.15.

The following are the most recurrent features considered for determining the target audience in existing CM campaigns:

Aspect	Description
<b>Age Range</b>	Considering the specific age range of the youth. Different age groups may have distinct concerns, vulnerabilities, and preferences, so tailoring the campaign's messaging and delivery to the appropriate age range appear to be crucial.
<b>Demographics</b>	Understanding the basic demographic characteristics of the target audience, such as gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and educational level. These factors can influence the way individuals perceive and engage with messaging, as well as the specific vulnerabilities they may face.
<b>Vulnerabilities and Risk Factors</b>	Identifying the vulnerabilities and risk factors that make young people susceptible to radicalization. This may include experiences of social exclusion, identity crises, feelings of injustice or marginalization, personal grievances, or exposure to extremist influences. Targeting these vulnerabilities with appropriate messaging and support can help address them effectively.
<b>Psychological and Social Factors</b>	Considering psychological and social factors that concur to influence youth behaviour, such as the desire for belonging, significance, identity formation, and autonomy. Understanding these factors can inform the development of messaging that resonates with their needs and aspirations, promoting positive alternatives to radicalization.
<b>Preferred Channels and Ways of Communications</b>	Determining the communication channels, platforms most frequently used by the target audience, and their communication style. This could include social media platforms, online forums, community centres, schools, or local organizations.
<b>Cultural and Situational Factors</b>	Recognizing the cultural and contextual nuances that shape the target audience's worldview. This involves understanding their cultural background, religious beliefs, social norms, and so on.

## Best practices for identifying the target audience

Many campaigns adopt a **multistakeholder framework**. In these cases, the target audience is broad and the message/engagement activities diversified. While this is a very common feature in counter-messaging campaigns, it is hard to measure the real degree of effectiveness of these campaigns.

- In CONTRO campaign, the plan was developed according to a multi-stakeholder framework and involved the community as a whole, looking in particular at **civil society, the world of journalism and human rights organisations**.
- The actors addressed by TRUST project are divided in three categories: institutions (local government representatives, law enforcement agencies); civil society organisations that are part of the Muslim community (including representatives), that interface with it and/or engage in the fight against hate speech and hate crime; vulnerable groups, i.e. Muslim women. In the light of the project's objectives, the consortium aimed to reach first- and second-generation immigrant Muslim women. Just like the definition of the counter- or alternative narrative, the selection of the specific target audience can be the result of a **collaborative process**, at least to a certain extent.
- In OLTRE project,<sup>24</sup> the main aim was to run an online communication campaign at national level in Italy to tackle radicalisation among second-generation (2G) Muslim youth (18-30 y). The direct target audience is 2G young Muslims living in Italy at risk of marginalization/social exclusion. The secondary target group of the campaign is youth (18-30 years old) living in urban areas in Italy. **Both groups are 'prosumers' of the campaign**, that is, they were at the same time users and producers. The project identified a selected group of representatives from both target groups and from seven Italian cities and engaged them in **a process of co-creation of the campaign** (see also section 3.1 below). Criteria for selecting this group are territory (finding a balance between all macro-regions, including major islands) and gender (balancing young men and women in each city). Importantly, to ensure a stronger connection with the audience's interests, the co-creation process let 2G young Muslim choose the issues they deemed more relevant to address in order to prevent the radicalisation of peers. The choice was made to focus predominantly on discrimination issues, as they are perceived as part of 2G Muslim youth everyday life, and thus a convenient entry point to grab the attention of the wider target audience. In this regard, it is important to highlight that gender issues were discussed throughout the co-creation process as they emerged regularly from the main issues addressed, e.g., the veil.
- While "staying hyperlocal" is a frequently cited as a best practice for CM campaigns, it should be stressed that **defining a narrow (primary) target audience does not necessarily prevent from expanding it later (if deemed useful/possible)**, or to also design a campaign that is suited for a more general audience. For example, Abdullah X is primarily directed towards young Muslims living in the Western World. It is focused on young would-be foreign fighters in Europe, offering them insightful views related to

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<sup>24</sup> See <https://oltre.uniroma2.it/>

critical issues such as freedom of speech, faith, friendship, and loyalty<sup>25</sup>. But the campaign also includes a graphic novel introducing Abdullah X's female counterpart, Muslimah X<sup>26</sup>. While the experiences of the Abdullah X are more appealing to teenage boys, the introduction of the female character definitely broadens the target audience to address young Muslim girls. The target audience is narrow and specific which allows them to better tailor the content. Although the campaign was directed towards Muslims it also indirectly touched non-Muslims. As the author said in an anonymous interview, he hopes that his campaign would expel myths and stereotypes about Islam and change its perception.<sup>27</sup>

### Understanding Muslim youth

In Participation project, understanding who are the Muslim youth, what are their interests and habits, was a point explored specifically through the Social Labs' participatory activities with religious communities.<sup>28</sup> The key points that emerged are related to **online platforms, us-vs-them mentality, socio-economic conditions**. In response to these specific factors that lead to radicalization processes and forms of violent extremism, religious leaders seem to consider dialogue with youth and the deepening of these factors as fundamental. More precisely, an important kind of dialogue to be used is **inter-religious dialogue**, in such a way that the comparison between different cultures and religions may lead the young person to feel socially integrated in society.

Religious leaders also stressed that, by focusing on young people, it is necessary to make a generational differentiation in terms of their identity, as they are less religious than the previous younger generations or more used to searching for religious leaders in the online dimension than in the physical places, at least in the beginning. At the same time, they state that it is important to speak to youth, both in educational setting and in their communities. During Social Labs activities, they acknowledged that the contexts in which young people live their daily experience consist of an increasing polarisation and presence of opposing and irreconcilable opinions. In these settings it is still important to understand **the cultural and socio-economic background of the audience**, paying attention to the differences between a real socio-economic exclusion and a perception of social exclusion. Concerning the first one, some religious leaders stated that many extremist groups are able to influence young people by promising them a better life in material terms. For instance, this is particularly true for those Muslim young people that live in difficult economic conditions and are engaged in gaming platforms with *"the promise of a real Kalashnikov, not a fake one, food and pizza [...], and sex slaves"* (D 3.5 - paragraph 7.1, p. 76). Socio-economic issues such as the specific area of residence, access

<sup>25</sup> Abdullah X YouTube channel at: <https://www.youtube.com/@abdullahx/about>

<sup>26</sup> See the Campaign Toolkit delivered by ABDULLAH X project at: <https://www.campaigntoolkit.org/casestudies/abdullah-x/>

<sup>27</sup> Farrell J. (2014). *Abdullah-X Cartoon Aims To Deter Jihadists*, <https://news.sky.com/story/abdullah-x-cartoon-aims-to-deter-jihadists-10396918>

<sup>28</sup> See <https://participation-in.eu/resources/>



to affordable housing, good care and a reasonable standard of living, influence drivers of polarisation.

## 1.3 Messenger and media

While the choice of the messenger for the counter-messaging campaign is strictly related to the specific context in which it takes place, the intended target audience, and the media for disseminating the message, most campaigns seek messengers that share these features.

Aspect	Description
<b>Credibility and Trust</b>	Messengers are usually credible and trustworthy individuals. In some cases, messengers are (local) organizations that display these features. Campaigns tend to choose messengers that have expertise or experience related to the topic. The life story of the messenger is often played as a card to gain the trust of the audience. For organizations, track record and reputation are taken into account.
<b>Relatability</b>	Messengers chosen are relatable to the target audience and capable of easily establishing a connection. They understand the concerns, aspirations, and challenges faced by the audience. They are usually able to 'talk the same language' of the audience. Together with credibility, this point enhances authenticity and empathy.
<b>Diverse Voices</b>	Representing diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and communities within the messengers is seen as a factor that can increase the campaign's reach and effectiveness. Different voices can resonate with different audiences. This is almost unavoidable when using a multi-stakeholder framework.
<b>Former Extremists or Affected Individuals</b>	Inclusion of individuals who have personal experiences with extremism or radicalization lends authenticity to the campaign. Former extremists or individuals directly affected by extremist narratives are asked to share their stories to counter the extremist narrative effectively.
<b>Local Champions</b>	Engaging local influencers, community leaders, and respected figures helps tailor the campaign to specific regions or communities. Local champions are often more trusted by their communities.



Aspect	Description
<b>The right messenger for the right medium</b>	Most campaigns try to reach their target audience where they are, that is by disseminating the counter- or alternative narrative through the media young people use most.

## Best practices for choosing the right media & messengers

*Counter-narratives in school curricula.* A variety of online content countering extremist propaganda is available, and such counter narratives could be part of the curriculum, as input for discussion or otherwise. It is recommended that content is created and /or used that includes messengers credible to young people at risk of radicalisation, such as formers and community or religious key figures. Authorities, and even experts, are not best placed to be such messengers of counter narratives<sup>29</sup>.

*Structural inequalities.* Alternative and counter-narratives should be based on an honest assessment of the structural inequalities that persist in our world and introduce in the curricula topics related to global realities throughout the learning cycles, starting with early childhood education, to prepare youth to face the systemic and structural challenges that we as a global community are facing and to improve the way in which education to counter extremism is used<sup>30</sup>.

*Gamification.* Include gamification – in alternative or counter narrative campaigns - in order to help students, experience specific situations (e.g. to experience for themselves the making of fake news, strengthening their insights and ability to recognize it, live the life of a refugee, etc.) and to foster empathy.<sup>31</sup>

*Don't forget 'old' media.* Incorporate P/CVE-related narratives in mainstream culture, through 'older' media such as television.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Participation project, Research component, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Participation project, Research component, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> D3.4, Building Resilience and Prevention in Schools, Participation project, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Conclusion Paper, CSEP Thematic Event – looking back and moving forward 7 and 8 November 2022, Dublin, Ireland, p. 1

*Go hyper-local.* When it comes to the audience and reach of CSEP campaigns, the assessment showed that tailoring campaigns to hyper-local settings proved more impactful and effective, than either cross-border or EU level.<sup>33</sup>

*To stay local, offline is as important as online.* Offline elements tailored to local contexts should be included in future campaigning and people should be engaged offline.<sup>34</sup>

*Alternative narratives may be more effective.* When it comes to the message itself, considering the push and pull factors, responding to or countering proved to be less effective, alternative positive messages brought more clarity and cause less confusion than counter narratives. Messages fostering empathy, emotional received strong engagement among online users, such as commenting and sharing.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, alternative messages may be more effective as they tend not to re-build a cognitive or narrative dichotomy, which could be exploited in a polarizing way more easily.

*Integrated approach.* Even when focusing locally on a specific target audience, there is not a single messenger that can effectively deliver the counter or alternative narrative. Religious leaders, family, educators, teachers, political leaders, friends can be considered viable messengers.

#### **Integrating messengers and target audience**

The OLTRE project<sup>36</sup> uses several channels to disseminate its counter-narratives. With respect to the online side, the channels used are the social media Facebook and Instagram. The project has also produced a graphic novel and, above all, a webseries. On the offline side, the dissemination of the counter-narratives is an integral part of the co-creation process and therefore takes place during the project activities for the construction of CN.

Instead of focusing on the simple online dissemination of campaign posts and products and the possible online interactions generated, the OLTRE project seeks to generate reflection and change within the campaign creators themselves, through project activities. By putting themselves in the dual role of producers and users of the campaign contents, they are pushed to discuss and reach shared positions, which do not constitute a flattening (no one gives up bringing their own point of view) but a virtuous integration

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<sup>33</sup> Conclusion Paper, CSEP Thematic Event – looking back and moving forward 7 and 8 November 2022, Dublin, Ireland, p. 2

<sup>34</sup> Conclusion Paper, CSEP Thematic Event – looking back and moving forward 7 and 8 November 2022, Dublin, Ireland, p. 4-8

<sup>35</sup> Evaluation of impact and effectiveness of counter- and alternative campaigns stemming from the CSEP programme aiming at preventing radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. 2022, p. 47

<sup>36</sup> See <https://oltre.uniroma2.it/>

of different and even difficultly compatible points of view. The conflicting visions that may emerge in the creators' reflections are rendered in the contents of the campaign by maintaining the complexity of the themes dealt with and by representing instances, experiences, desires that are different but all equally worthy of consideration.

## From a linear 'sender-receiver' model to multi-author narratives

To be effective, the spread of counter-messages should not be based exclusively on a relationship between a sender (messenger, e.g. a religious leader) and a receiver (families, civil society and political and educational institutions). It should move towards a **multi-author narratives model**. It consists in a much more complex (and, arguably, effective) model, where every member of civil society can play an active role in designing and spreading counter-messages, cooperating to achieve the common goal of countering radicalisation. This shift should involve the whole design of the campaign

- In CONTRO campaign, the engagement of several media agencies (traditional media, websites, social media) to spread counter-narratives, and the inclusion of young people to create these campaigns, change the traditional "sender-receiver" model in two ways: on the one hand, they spread the message to an audience as wide as possible; on the other, the engagement itself of young people as positive side effects as they are more aware of this issue.
- COMMIT project<sup>37</sup> underlines that the very root of polarisation and radicalisation is not monolithic and related to a single issue, but most often it is the result of a complex web of views, sentiments and narratives on different topics. Based on COMMIT findings in par with existing research, individuals who hold polarized views on social media do not confine their discontent to a single topic. Instead, there is an established framework of norms and values that influences their opinions on various issues. For instance, those who express anti-EU sentiments also tend to be climate skeptics and harbor negative attitudes towards immigration, Islam, and multiculturalism in general. Similarly, they exhibit favorable views towards policies enacted by conservative leaders like US President Trump, Orban, and Bolsonaro. This framework has developed dynamically, without a specific reason why climate skeptics would also oppose abortion, but these issues have become interconnected. Occasionally, there may be themes with less disagreement, such as some extreme-right actors viewing COVID-19 as a hoax, while others see it as a serious biological attack orchestrated by China, Bill Gates, or the Deep State. Nonetheless, there remains a common ground, which is blaming local governments either for implementing excessive measures or colluding with the enemy. Therefore, a multi-thematic approach based on values, creates narratives that move away from the linear sender-receiver model towards a multi-author and multi-receiver one.

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<sup>37</sup> See <https://commitproject.eu/>

## 1.4 Role of emotions

Another key feature that should be taken into account when designing a CM campaign is the role of emotions. Indeed, radicalisation feeds on emotions. Establishing an affective bonding with young people is a key target in the recruiting efforts by extremist organisations worldwide, while radicalised youth is often caught in an affective loop.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, emotional traits and practices are found to facilitate radicalisation further.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the emotional dimension is crucial to any prevent effort.

In the previous sections, the role of emotions has already surfaced from times to times. Indeed, creating emotionally resonant content that speaks to the hopes, fears, aspirations, and sense of belonging of young individuals may enhance the effectiveness of a campaign. As it will be discussed in sections below, utilizing storytelling techniques to convey messages and values that evoke empathy, relatability, and emotional connection facilitates reaching out the target audience. Furthermore, considering the use of life stories and of former extremists as messengers, personal stories of individuals who have overcome extremist influences or the negative consequences of radicalization can be particularly powerful in evoking emotions and inspiring change.

It should be noted that extremist groups invest time, use personalized strategies and engage their targets on an emotional level, preying on their deep faith, religious ignorance, confusion about identity, or anger about injustices, these are key steps in the process towards radicalization that can lead to violence<sup>40</sup> and very important to take into consideration when designing counter-narrative campaigns. A global literature review suggests that more young people today are being radicalised through soft power – extremist ideas, ideology, narratives, propaganda, and emotional manipulation. It questions whether this can be met adequately by hard power responses (or campaigns), as these methods appeal directly to the

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<sup>38</sup> Haq H, Shaheed S, Stephan A. Radicalization Through the Lens of Situated Affectivity. *Front Psychol.* 2020 Feb 18;11:205. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00205. PMID: 32132953; PMCID: PMC7040369 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7040369/>

<sup>39</sup> N. Anastasio, A. Perliger & N. Shortland (2023) How Emotional Traits and Practices Lead to Support in Acts of Political Violence, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 46:10, 1912-1932, DOI: [10.1080/1057610X.2021.1905141](https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1905141)  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080%2F1057610X.2021.1905141>

<sup>40</sup> Education, Identity and Rising Extremism: From Preventing Violent Extremism to Promoting Peace, Resilience, Equal Rights and Pluralism (PREP), Sanam Naraghi Anderlini, ICAN 2017, p. 8, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 22.

psychological, intellectual, and emotional states of young people<sup>41</sup> – and therefore might not be as effective.

There is a need for an empirical base to understand not only why people pursue violence as a means to express their preferences, but also an understanding what specific attitudes lead to those violent behaviours. This is important because attitudes do not always translate into predictable behaviours, and, conversely, it is hard to deduce attitudes from behaviours. Just because people partake in violence does not mean that they subscribe to specific ideologies. And just because someone preach an ideology does not mean she/he will pursue violence.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps an allyway to addressing emotions that lead to radicalisation is mirroring the concern extremist groups show for these emotions, but in a constructive and engaging way that offers at least as many solutions as violent extremist groups offer. Many grievances exploited by extremists are real, including structural poverty and injustice, racial abuse, and state-sanctioned marginalization which means that there is a grain of truth in extremist narratives.

Below is a list of existing campaigns that take into account the positive role emotions can play and how they do it.

- CONTRO project notes that at the root of the virality and success of extremist campaigns is a total "genericness" and "popularity" of the issues addressed, which are correlated with critical events of great emotional and topical impact (demonstrations, economic crises, news events). This produces arguments that are fallacious, weak, preconceived, or based on racist and discriminatory stereotypes. These arguments lead to a wide resonance box in the real (offline) and virtual contexts, which live symbiotically contributing to the generation of "new" online hatred and making the same discriminatory message even more effective. On the contrary, CONTRO counter-narratives consist of short videos and advertisement spread in social media and traditional media. In order to strengthen and improve the actions in the field against online hatred, the videos made occupy online spaces with positive messages promoting human rights and as part of the awareness-raising campaign. The approach of producing counter-narrative through multimedia content, such as memes, graphics, infographics, photographs, animated GIFs and videos, takes advantage of the fact that this type of content, by being able to capture on the emotional level, can generate a higher level of engagement in users than that produced by textual content, which generally only activates the rational level.
- DECOUNT project<sup>43</sup> puts emotions at the centre of the construction of alternative narratives and the process of critical deconstruction of extremist narratives. This is done through gaming. In DECOUNT video game, the user can impersonate four

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<sup>41</sup> Education and Security: A global literature review on the role of education in countering violent religious extremism (2016), p. 5, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> WB, Role of Education in Prevention of Violent Extremism, p. 6, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Project DECOUNT (2020), op. cit.

characters and has to make choices. Some choices push the protagonist towards a progressive path of radicalisation, others do not. In most cases, the protagonist is faced with choices concerning his relationship with a peer group. Both in the initial stages, when it comes to being accepted by the group, and in the more advanced stages, when it comes to deciding whether or not to conform to the group's choices and actions, peer pressure interacts with the desire to be accepted and to be part of something bigger. In some cases, such as for Franziska's character who pursues environmentalist ideals and aspires to become an influencer, initially the group is only a vehicle to achieve these goals but, nevertheless, exerts a great influence on the way the character makes her choices.

- The Misled campaign related to the shared feeling of frustration which was shared by many young people in the region. Moreover at the time when it was launched many young people who shared the feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction were vulnerable to the jihadist messages and were joining jihadist movements. The campaign put importance to those feelings and showed alternatives to them by creating a feeling of unity. It showed that there are more people who are just the same and share similar experiences and feelings<sup>44</sup>.
- In OLTRE project,<sup>45</sup> the creation of the CN campaign contents starts from self-reflection sessions in which the young creators discuss their own life experiences and related emotions, and share them with the group. This path is supported by different techniques, for example Theatre of the Oppressed, in order to increase the inclusiveness and quality of the process itself. Indeed, these techniques require a collective action with respect to the fears, desires and emotions shared with the group and literally “put on stage” by the individual, which is aimed at showing the feasibility of an alternative behaviour, framing of a disturbing situation, or state of mind. If the effectiveness of the campaign content in creating a collective experience based on shared emotions with the users of the CN content does not seem to have manifested itself, or at least it is difficult to ascertain, on the contrary in the relationships between the young creators of the campaign this occurred precisely because of how the co-creation process was structured in the various steps.
- The Abdullah-X campaign pertains to the feeling of non-belonging in society, insecurity and confusion about the current political situation, feelings of stigmatisation, suspicion, inequality, discrimination because of religion. The campaign stresses that the Muslim youth is strong, brave and valuable and should not fall into believing they are worth less<sup>46</sup>.
- The Don't be Silent campaign deploys emotions in their video series called “Face the Truth” where interviews are conducted with migrants coming to Berlin. In those interviews they tell about their experience of hate speech, they read the hateful comments from social media and tell about how they made them feel. The interviewees also tell how they reacted to the hate speech and what every person can do to stop online hate. Through the emotional appeals and personal stories the campaign hopes to inspire its viewer to react when witnessing hate speech against

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<sup>44</sup> See the Campaign Toolkit delivered by THE MISLED project at: <https://www.campaigntoolkit.org/casestudies/the-misled/>

<sup>45</sup> See <https://oltre.uniroma2.it/>

<sup>46</sup> Abdullah X YouTube page at: <https://www.youtube.com/@abdullahx/videos>

refugees on social media. The videos attempted to foster empathy with those affected by discrimination and encourage engagement against hate speech.

# 2. Resilience

## 2.1 Protective factors

Protective factors play a crucial role in counter-narrative campaigns against extreme, divisive, and toxic narratives. Indeed, these factors are essential for building resilience, strengthening individuals' resistance to radicalization, and promoting positive development. When the target of these campaigns are young people, identity formation and relationships building are two other domains where protective factors contribute to developing resilience.

Resilience enables youth to cope with adversity, challenges, and external pressures. It helps individuals bounce back from setbacks and resist the appeal of extremist narratives. By strengthening protective factors, counter-messaging campaigns can enhance young people's ability to withstand radicalizing influences, thus effectively creating a buffer against radicalization and reducing vulnerability.

While these considerations also apply to counter-messaging campaigns in general, in the case of youth-oriented interventions protective factors are also crucial for ensuring a holistic development. Indeed, they encompass various domains, including personal, social, educational, and community factors. By addressing and promoting these factors, counter-messaging campaigns may create an enabling environment at 360 degrees for young people's growth, well-being, and positive engagement.

In detail, protective factors support the formation of positive identities among young people. Resilience provides opportunities for individuals to explore their values, cultural heritage, and personal aspirations without buying extremist narratives that seek to exploit precisely these processes of identity formation, starting with feelings of identity crisis or marginalization.

It is important to note that protective factors are not limited to the individual level, but also act at the meso (family, community) level. They are related to the presence of supportive relationships, such as family, friends, mentors, and positive role models. These (positive) relationships offer guidance, emotional

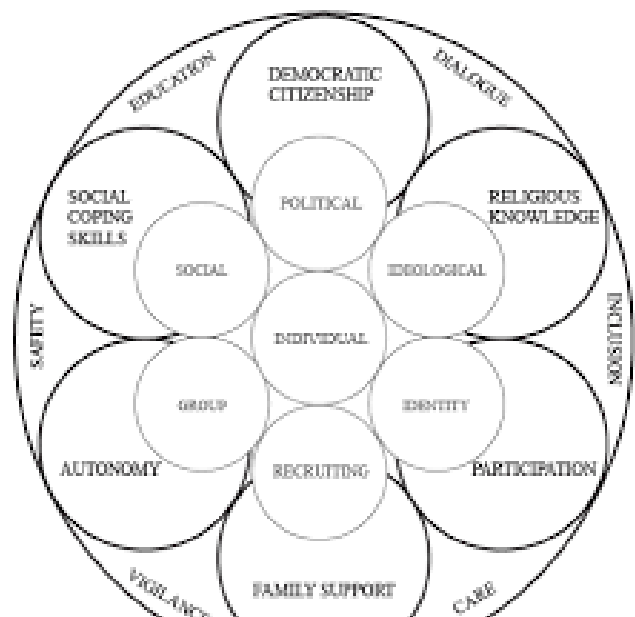


Figure 1. RAN's kaleidoscope of factors.



support, and a sense of belonging, complementing and reinforcing protective factors at the individual level. How integrated are these dimensions influences the availability and the effectiveness of protective factors.

This conceptualization of protective factors as strictly related to corresponding promotive as well as risk factors is best described by RAN's model of kaleidoscope of factors<sup>47</sup> shown in figure 1.

### Building resilience in the community

According to Don't Be Silent campaign, the main protective factor against radicalizing narratives is to be found **in the set-up of a community that is aware of prejudices and hate speeches** and trained to counterbalance their diffusion. The effectiveness of this campaign in terms of creating a community lies in the fact that it is a student-led campaign for students. Nonetheless, the campaign provides no safe physical or online space, but builds on the collective sentiment of counterbalancing hate narratives. The safe space is composed by the connections among activists, volunteers, students, refugees and other newcomers. The main challenge is to reduce the impact of pervasive radicalizing narratives using positive examples, and this is not easy when going outside the comfort zone of people-thinking-alike. One of the best practices we can retain from this experience is related to the practical activation of workshops that help creating a dialogue space and could potentially involve also not thinking alike people to further discuss the radicalization and hate speech.

Importantly, the online space needs to be taken into account when building resilience against extremism and radicalisation, especially when it comes to youth. An effective way to mix online and offline, reach out to the youth, and support the building of protective factors is the creation of online or hybrid safe spaces. In the CoE's No Hate Speech campaign, for example, it was created an online/offline community that serves as protection to face radicalizing narratives for the audience involved. To this extent, the use of social media and the pervasive aspect of the spread of CN and the reporting platform created a safe space both off and online that made people aware and comfortable in reporting on hate speech around them. The aim of the campaign was to open a space online to report on hate speech and raise awareness among the CoE youth.

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<sup>47</sup> S. Sieckelinck, A.J. Gielen (2018), Protective and promotive factors building resilience against violent radicalisation, RAN Issue Paper, [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/en?file=2020-09/ran\\_paper\\_protective\\_factors\\_042018\\_en.pdf](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/en?file=2020-09/ran_paper_protective_factors_042018_en.pdf)

### Resilience spoilers

In Participation project, the Social Lab related to municipal level and local communities (D3.3) highlighted the following resilience spoilers, i.e. factors that may slow down, disrupt, or interrupt the process of resilience building:

- Crises – regional conflicts, financial crises, pandemics, refugee/migrant crises;
- Lack of resources in education, health and other social services, low quality of life;
- Absence of strong legal framework;
- Lack and need of expertise in various levels;
- Insufficient inter-institutional cooperation;
- Intergenerational gap;
- Increased access to disinformation and hate speech in the web.

Indeed, building community resilience involves fostering social cohesion, addressing marginalization, promoting diversity and inclusion, and providing opportunities for civic engagement.

Based on the analysis of previous tasks of Participation project and recent counter-messaging campaigns targeting youth, the following protective factors are identified.

Category	Protective Factors
<i>Knowledge and Understanding</i>	Consciousness about having the appropriate understanding of faith
	Recognizing the content of radical campaigns
	Awareness and openness to alternative views
	Understanding the downsides of violence
	Knowledge on hate speech, recognizing it, and knowing how to respond
	Understanding the issue of under-reporting and under-recording of hate speech against Muslim women
<i>Personal Development</i>	Self-worth, self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-esteem
	Stress management skills
	Emotional intelligence
	Soft skills development
	Skills to resist manipulation
	Developing debating skills to defend ideas
<i>Cognitive Abilities</i>	Critical thinking

	Digital literacy
	Emotional intelligence (avoiding emotional reasoning bias)
<b><i>Social and Interpersonal Factors</i></b>	Conflict management
	Social connections and strong family ties
	Tolerance
	Acceptance (of others, and among peers)
	Positive peer influence
	Mutual respect and trust
<b><i>Civic Engagement</i></b>	Increasing civic engagement as a positive alternative to violence
	Participation in community activities and decision-making processes
<b><i>Trust in Institutions</i></b>	Accessible and reliable reporting mechanisms
	Timely response to reported incidents
	Transparency and accountability of institutions
	Inclusivity and representation in institutions

## 2.2 The Role of Context and Education

The radicalisation pathways of young people vary and are dictated by their level of education. In poverty stricken or ill-educated areas, manipulative narratives are more likely to take root, and simple monetary incentives might sway individuals. Where education levels are higher, extremists appeal to emotional and intellectual grievance narratives of inequality and injustice<sup>48</sup>. Other factors that may incentivize cognitive opening towards violent action are structural ones. Khalil and Zeuthen (2016) classify key drivers of violent extremism (VE) as structural motivators (limited economic opportunities, state repression, etc.), individual incentives (status, material incentives etc.), and enabling factors (radical mentors, online radical forums) and offer various CVE (countering of violent extremism) responses tailor made to each incentive (advocacy for institutional reform, education and vocational training, career guidance, intercommunity forums, interfaith dialogue, mentoring, online messaging initiatives, etc.)<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>48</sup> Education and Security: A global literature review on the role of education in countering violent religious extremism (2016), p. 6, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> Niemi, Pia Maria , Saija Benjamin, Arniika Kuusisto, and LiamGearon, 'How and Why Education Counters

Ideological Extremism in Finland,' Religions, 2018, p. 6, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 20.

Social factors play a fundamental role in understanding the opening and participation to VE groups. Terrorist radicalization and recruitment of youth to violent extremism and terrorism appear, in many instances, based on social bonding rather than ideological grounds. Research indicates that qualities such as motivation, perseverance, and risk-aversion are predictive of success in life, and these capacities can be built through “life-skills” training focused on topics such as teamwork and conflict resolution. Young people who have joined violent extremist groups have often expressed a desire for a sense of belonging and purpose.

Thus, an integrated youth program that addresses these psychosocial, as well as other, youth needs could address more than one condition conducive to radicalization and recruitment. Furthermore, program design should, where appropriate, take into account the different needs of young women versus young men<sup>50</sup>. Moreover, it is a fallacy to think of all extremists and terrorists as simply poor, uneducated and unemployed people. The sophisticated use of technology and media is targeting young boys and girls and highly educated individuals from all over the world. The dramatic shift from physical organisation to a virtual one to recruit young people has penetrated every corner of the world<sup>51</sup> so counter-narratives have to adapt to the plethora of social media platforms, gaming sites and trends.

A study made in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that while educational policies do not explicitly encourage radical or extremist thinking, they do decidedly facilitate the emergence of narrow-minded, ethnically exclusive groups of young citizens unequipped to operate in a heterogeneous, complex world<sup>52</sup>. The school environment is one of the most prolific recruitment sites which makes it important for counter-narrative campaigns to target those environments where young people spend a lot of their time. “While global fears of Islamist extremism dominate discussions on radicalism and terrorism, other forms of extremism (radical nationalist; white supremacy; neo-Nazi; anti-immigrant; etc.) benefit from young minds unable to effectively digest and question messages of hate and intolerance. Young people from the Balkans have gone not only to Syria and Iraq, but also to Ukraine, as part of a perceived ideological, cultural struggle<sup>53</sup>. This means conventional education is far from enough to be able to combat violent extremism. It is particularly important to incorporate

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<sup>50</sup> Ankara Memorandum on Good Practices for a Multi-Sectoral Approach to Countering Violent Extremism, p. 6, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 21.

<sup>51</sup> Education and Security: A global literature review on the role of education in countering violent religious extremism (2016), p. 33, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 22.

<sup>52</sup> Perry, V. (2015). Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform Democratic Policy Council. Policy Note New Series #10, Sarajevo. p. I, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> Perry, V. (2015). Countering the Cultivation of Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: The Case for Comprehensive Education Reform Democratic Policy Council. Policy Note New Series #10, Sarajevo. p. I, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 34.

political literacy, critical global citizenship and human rights into formal education, as well as to provide key skills to analyse the media and political or religious messages.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Education and Security: A global literature review on the role of education in countering violent religious extremism (2016), p. 35, in D5.1 Comprehensive Review, Research component, p. 36.

# 3. Approaches for CM campaigns: a toolbox

## 3.1 Mapping approaches to counter-messaging campaigns for young people

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The choice of the approach to use for a counter-messaging campaign depends on numerous factors and is a crucial step in the design phase of the intervention. There is no universally valid recipe for selecting the best approach. In general, the choice should be made by evaluating at least:

1. **Internal resources that can be mobilised:** the analysis of the reference context (at multiple levels: social, economic, political, ...) leads to identifying both the most appropriate target audience and the stakeholders to be involved.
2. **External resources that can be mobilised:** tailoring a campaign to a specific context (often with a local or hyper-local focus to maximize its effectiveness) must not lead to a consequent limitation of the resources that are thought to be mobilised. The contribution of external resources (personality, skills, ...), in fact, can influence the incisiveness of the campaign, its attractiveness in the eyes of the target audience, and the degree of participation by the reference community.
3. **The processes that you want to trigger through the campaign:** the effectiveness of the intervention can end with the intervention itself or exceed the time horizon of the single campaign. An effective campaign is able to trigger a more or less lasting change within the community. This can happen, for example, by prolonging the mobilization of the actors involved (for example, when a campaign transforms over time into an autonomous activity, perhaps carried out by some of the actors involved). In any case, shifting attention already in the design phase of the intervention from the *actions* that one wants to undertake to the virtuous *processes* that can be triggered, i.e. to the actions analyzed in relation to the pre-established objectives, allows a more accurate evaluation of the resources to be mobilized and Above all, it facilitates the choice of the approach to implement.

The table below shows the approaches that are most commonly used in counter-messaging campaigns in the European context.

Type	Description
Debunking / Countering Extremist Narratives	Challenges extremist narratives by presenting evidence, facts, and alternative perspectives that debunk their claims.
Positive Alternative Narratives	Promotes positive and inclusive narratives that offer alternative perspectives and values to counter the appeal of extremist ideologies.
Personal Testimony	Features personal testimonies and narratives from individuals who have firsthand experience with extremist ideologies, highlighting the negative impact.
Grassroots and Community-Led Initiatives	Engages local communities, religious leaders, educators, and stakeholders to design and deliver counter-narrative efforts at the grassroots level.
Digital and Social Media Campaigns	Utilizes social media, online videos, podcasts, and digital tools to disseminate counter-narratives and engage with the target audience.
Education and Critical Thinking	Focuses on providing education, fostering critical thinking skills, and promoting media literacy to empower individuals to evaluate and reject extremist narratives.
Artistic Expressions and Creativity	Harnesses artistic forms, such as music, poetry, and visual arts, to convey messages of peace, tolerance, and diversity, countering extremist ideologies.
Collaborative Partnerships	Forms partnerships with organizations, institutions, and influencers to collaborate and amplify counter-narrative efforts across various platforms and channels.
Exposing Manipulation and Propaganda	Reveals the manipulative techniques and propaganda strategies employed by extremist groups, educating the public to recognize and resist their influence.
Resilience-Building and Empowerment	Focuses on building resilience and empowering individuals through social and emotional skills, fostering a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose.
Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding	Encourages dialogue and collaboration among individuals from different faiths and backgrounds, promoting understanding, tolerance, and respect.
Youth-Led Initiatives	Empowers young people to take an active role in countering extremist narratives, providing platforms for youth-led campaigns, projects, and initiatives.
Mentoring and Role Models	Connects young people with mentors and positive role models who can provide guidance, support, and alternative perspectives to counter extremist narratives.
Community Engagement and Outreach	Engages with local communities, institutions, and grassroots organizations to raise awareness, foster dialogue, and build trust in countering extremism.

All these approaches are valid and can be particularly effective depending on the context in which they are used. They can also be used in different combinations. Although they are not the only possible approaches for counter-messaging campaigns, they are the ones most frequently used by existing campaigns and the ones most discussed in the literature.

In this context, we do not want to provide a complete list or go into detail on each of these approaches. There are many handbooks and guides that provide details on them, practical examples of their application, and tips on how to implement them.

We will, however, focus on three specific approaches which, although not widely used, have an important potential to make counter-messaging campaigns effective: co-creation; life stories; fictional narratives.

### *Co-creation approach*

The co-creation approach is a collaborative process that involves actively engaging the target audience or stakeholders in the design, development, and implementation of a campaign. It recognizes that the individuals who are directly affected by the campaign's messages and goals should have a say in shaping and influencing its content and strategies. This approach moves away from traditional top-down approaches and empowers participants to become co-creators and active contributors to the campaign.

One of the key benefits of using the co-creation approach in a counter-messaging campaign is the increased relevance and effectiveness of the campaign's messages and interventions. By involving the target audience, especially in the case of young people, the campaign can address their specific needs, concerns, and experiences. The co-creation process allows for a deeper understanding of the target audience's perspectives, values, and aspirations, ensuring that the campaign resonates with them on a personal level.

Furthermore, the co-creation approach fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among the target audience. When individuals are involved in the creation of the campaign, they feel a greater sense of responsibility and connection to its outcomes. This can lead to increased engagement, motivation, and participation in the campaign's activities and initiatives. By actively involving the target audience, the campaign becomes more inclusive, representative, and authentic, enhancing its credibility and trustworthiness. Moreover, returning autonomy to the target audience by having them actively counter extreme or polarising rhetoric themselves was found to be more effective than offering generic counter-narratives.<sup>55</sup>

The co-creation approach complements and reinforces the objectives of other approaches listed above. For example, in the positive alternative narratives approach, involving the target audience in the co-creation process allows for the identification and amplification of narratives that promote resilience, empathy, and inclusivity. In the debunking approach, the co-creation process can help refine and shape the counter-arguments and evidence used to challenge extremist narratives.

Additionally, the co-creation approach aligns with several protective factors. It fosters critical thinking by encouraging participants to reflect, analyze, and contribute their perspectives. It

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<sup>55</sup> S. L. Carthy & K. M. Sarma (2023) Countering Terrorist Narratives: Assessing the Efficacy and Mechanisms of Change in Counter-narrative Strategies, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 35:3, 569-593, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1962308, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09546553.2021.1962308>



enhances digital literacy by involving participants in the creation of digital content and utilizing digital platforms. It promotes self-worth and self-confidence by valuing participants' contributions and providing opportunities for their voices to be heard. Moreover, it interacts with emotional intelligence, the development of debating skills, acceptance, mutual respect, and trust.

Emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in countering extremist narratives targeting young people. By involving the target audience in the co-creation process, the campaign creates a space for participants to explore and express their emotions in a supportive environment. Through activities such as self-reflection, storytelling, and artistic expression, participants can develop emotional awareness, empathy, and self-regulation. This emotional intelligence enables them to critically evaluate extremist narratives, understand the emotional appeal behind them, and develop resilience against manipulative tactics.

Debating skills are essential in countering extremist narratives by providing young people with the ability to articulate and defend their ideas in the public arena and with peers. The co-creation approach can incorporate activities that enhance participants' debating skills, such as structured debates, mock trials, role-playing exercises, or other art-based forms of collaborative activities. These activities foster critical thinking, effective communication, and the ability to present persuasive arguments. By honing these skills, young people are better equipped to engage in constructive dialogue, challenge extremist narratives, and contribute to public discourse in a positive and impactful manner.

Acceptance, mutual respect, and trust are fundamental elements in building a resilient and inclusive society. The co-creation approach promotes these protective factors by fostering an environment where all participants' perspectives and contributions are respected and valued. By actively involving young people from diverse backgrounds, the campaign cultivates a sense of acceptance and appreciation for different viewpoints. Through collaborative discussions and decision-making processes, mutual respect is nurtured, creating a foundation of trust among the participants and campaign stakeholders. This trust is essential for effective cooperation, open communication, and sustained engagement in countering extremist narratives.

#### **Co-creation approach in OLTRE project<sup>56</sup>**

The OLTRE project uses an integral co-creation approach, i.e. applied to every single project activity. The most interesting aspect of this way of applying the co-creation approach is that it is used to carry out prevention work targeting the very co-creators of the counter-narrative campaign, who constitute the primary target audience (alongside the secondary audience represented by the users of the online campaign). In other words, the process of building the campaign is itself a peculiar counter-narrative campaign.

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<sup>56</sup> See <https://oltre.uniroma2.it/>

As pointed out by some researchers who worked on the project, “From an operational point of view, the project gave a “voice” to these potentially vulnerable young people, involving them in participatory processes, creating permanent and open communication spaces and co-constructing possible alternatives and positive narratives that would reduce their social vulnerability”.<sup>57</sup>

The project follows several steps:

- Interviews with potential co-creators (second generation Muslim youth), where their life stories are explored (see below for more details on the life stories approach).
- Workshop activities (using techniques that facilitate self-reflection and collective reflection, as well as working on emotions and their management); activities include sessions of Theatre of the Oppressed, photography workshops.
- Co-creation of the counter-narrative campaign, realised by the young people starting from the most sensitive, conflicting and discriminating themes that emerged during the previous activities (but not limited to them). Co-creation takes place through collective discussion in each part of the campaign: selection of the theme, conception of the content, choice of medium and messenger, graphic design, tone of the message. The discussion is aimed at composing the different points of view together, respecting their specificities. Decisions are taken unanimously.

### *Life stories approach*

The life stories approach is a powerful counter-narrative strategy that harnesses the personal narratives and experiences of individuals to challenge extremist ideologies. By sharing authentic, people-centered stories, the life stories approach aims to humanize marginalized voices and promote empathy, understanding, and dialogue. However, it may raise issues if it involves traumatised people and require extra preparation to avoid unintended consequences.

The life stories approach aligns with several types of counter-messaging campaigns. It can be integrated with the positive alternative narratives approach by showcasing the diverse life stories of individuals who have overcome adversity and embraced inclusive values. By highlighting the personal struggles and journeys of these individuals, the life stories approach presents a compelling alternative narrative that promotes resilience, empathy, and inclusivity.

Furthermore, the life stories approach complements the debunking approach by countering simplistic and misleading narratives propagated by extremists. By sharing authentic and nuanced life stories, this approach exposes the complexity of human experiences, challenging stereotypes and reducing the impact of extremist narratives.

The life stories approach also relates to protective factors such as critical thinking and emotional intelligence. By presenting personal experiences and emotions, life stories engage the audience on an emotional level, fostering empathy and understanding. This emotional connection enhances

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<sup>57</sup> Macaluso, M., Siino, M., Tumminelli, G. (2022). “Counter-Narratives against Prejudice: How Second-Generation Youth Reverse Media Representations”. *Mediascapes Journal* 19/2022, p.120, available at <https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/mediascapes/article/view/17834/17226>.

critical thinking skills by encouraging individuals to question their preconceived notions and biases, ultimately promoting a more nuanced and informed perspective.

Moreover, the life stories approach promotes acceptance, mutual respect, and trust by giving voice to silenced and marginalized individuals. By sharing their stories, these individuals become agents of change, breaking down barriers and building bridges between communities. This approach fosters a sense of acceptance and appreciation for diverse experiences, strengthening social cohesion and trust.

In terms of implementation, the life stories approach can be utilized through various mediums, including video interviews, written narratives, or oral storytelling. It offers opportunities for interdisciplinary research, combining fields such as oral history and security studies, and can be leveraged to create impactful videos that resonate with a wider audience, amplifying the societal impact of the campaign.

### *Fictional narratives*

The fictional narratives approach introduces a unique perspective to counter-messaging campaigns by utilizing fictional stories to influence audiences' attitudes and perceptions regarding extremism. While current campaigns predominantly rely on non-fictional personal stories of former extremists, the inclusion of fictional narratives is a relatively underexplored and potentially impactful strategy. Importantly, this approach does not rely on fictional, yet realistic characters, as it is the case in many counter-messaging campaigns, but it creates characters that have entirely fictional features, e.g. they're not human, or the story takes place on another planet. The distance between the story and the reality the target audience lives in allows to indirectly tackle the issues around which the campaign is based. It should be noted that in certain subjects, however, this approach could have unintended consequences and foster a detachment from reality or a state of denial.

Fictional narratives have been extensively employed in entertainment-education campaigns, which have successfully shaped audiences' perspectives on various social issues such as public health, development, and stereotypes. These campaigns often take the form of soap operas, TV shows, movies, radio plays, or theatre productions with fictional plots. The persuasive power of these fictional stories, even those set in fantastical worlds, has been well-documented. They can mould minds, influence social norms, reduce out-group stereotyping, increase empathy, and even change perceptions of violence.

The fictional narratives approach aligns with the positive alternative narratives approach by offering compelling and imaginative stories that present alternative perspectives to extremist ideologies. By engaging audiences emotionally and intellectually, these narratives have the potential to inspire critical thinking, promote empathy, and encourage the consideration of alternative viewpoints.

Additionally, the fictional narratives approach complements the debunking approach by presenting counter-narratives with fictional storytelling. By crafting believable and internally coherent narratives, these stories can challenge extremist ideologies and reshape audiences' perceptions of

political and social realities. The approach leverages the persuasive effects of fictional narratives to foster a nuanced understanding of extremism and its consequences.

Furthermore, the fictional narratives approach connects to protective factors such as emotional intelligence and critical thinking. By presenting fictional stories that evoke emotions and provoke thought, this approach engages the audience on both an intellectual and emotional level. It encourages individuals to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions, challenging them to think critically about extremist narratives and their underlying motivations.

While the use of fictional narratives in counter-narrative campaigns has been relatively rare in the field of preventing and countering violent extremism, the existing evidence on the persuasive effects of fiction in other contexts suggests its potential effectiveness. By leveraging the power of storytelling, the fictional narratives approach has the capacity to captivate audiences, foster empathy, shape social norms, and challenge extremist narratives.

As pointed out by a scholar who worked on a campaign based on fictional narratives that aims at countering conspiracy theories, “(Fictional) narratives have been found to elicit persuasive effects, because, compared to argument-based messages, narratives cause less reactance and counter-arguing in audiences. If they feel entertained, viewers tend to go along with the story, do not suspect a persuasive attempt, and hence do not display reactance, which increases the persuasive effects. Counter-arguing is reduced because arguments are implied in the plot rather than made explicit, which means that it is difficult for audiences to counter-argue”.<sup>58</sup>

## 3.2 Insights for engaging youth

Engaging youth effectively in the design and implementation of counter-messaging campaigns against extremist and radicalizing narratives targeting young people is of paramount importance. These campaigns aim to challenge and disrupt the appeal of such narratives among young individuals, ultimately fostering resilience, critical thinking, and the rejection of violent ideologies. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to comprehensively understand the unique perspectives, experiences, and needs of young people, as well as the factors that influence their beliefs and behaviours. Furthermore, this fosters the analysis of which internal/external resources may or should be mobilised.

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<sup>58</sup> See L.Schlegel (2023), Ari’s Mission: Educating Young Audiences on Conspiracy Theories Through Fictional Narratives, GNET, 1 March 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/05/01/aris-mission-educating-young-audiences-on-conspiracy-theories-through-fictional-narratives/>

## *Creating Effective and Meaningful Campaigns*

Designing effective counter-messaging campaigns requires a deep understanding of the target audience. This is particularly true when it comes to youth, who are often the primary target of extremist narratives. By actively involving young people in the campaign development process, we can ensure that the messages, strategies, and platforms employed resonate with their interests, aspirations, and concerns. This participatory approach empowers youth, giving them a sense of ownership and allowing them to shape the campaign according to their lived realities.

Engaging youth as co-creators of these campaigns not only enhances the authenticity and relevance of the messages, but also fosters a sense of belonging and active citizenship among young participants. It enables them to utilize their creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills to address the complex challenges posed by extremist narratives. By valuing their input and perspectives, we acknowledge their agency and promote their capacity to be agents of positive change within their communities.

Furthermore, understanding the diverse backgrounds and identities of young people is crucial in developing campaigns that promote inclusivity and challenge stereotypes. By incorporating diverse voices and perspectives, we ensure representation and authenticity in the campaign's content, which in turn cultivates empathy, cultural competence, and mutual respect among the target audience. This approach not only increases the campaign's reach and impact, but also contributes to the broader goal of building cohesive and inclusive societies.

Engaging youth in counter-messaging campaigns also recognizes the importance of emotional intelligence and social-emotional well-being. By providing spaces for dialogue, emotional expression, and support, campaigns acknowledge and address the social and emotional needs of young people. This creates a supportive environment that fosters resilience, critical thinking, and personal growth, while equipping youth with the skills to navigate complex emotions and empathize with others. Such campaigns go beyond simply countering extremist narratives; they empower youth to develop emotional resilience and build healthier relationships, ultimately promoting positive social change.

## *Engaging Youth in their Local Context*

An essential aspect of designing effective and impactful counter-messaging campaigns is the active involvement of youth within their local contexts. Engaging youth via multiple channels and involving the community at large allows for a more comprehensive and authentic understanding of the specific challenges and dynamics faced by young individuals in their immediate environments. This approach acknowledges the significant influence that community factors, such as social norms, cultural values, and local experiences, have on the formation of beliefs and the susceptibility to extremist narratives.

By engaging youth in their local context, counter-messaging campaigns can better align with the realities of their daily lives, making the messages and strategies more relatable and relevant. This approach recognizes that the experiences and concerns of young people vary across different regions, neighbourhoods, and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, involving youth in the campaign design process ensures that their perspectives and insights are incorporated, providing a nuanced understanding of the local dynamics and tailoring the campaign to address specific challenges and needs.

Engaging youth through multiple channels also expands the reach and impact of counter-messaging campaigns. Recognizing that young people interact with a variety of media platforms, community spaces, and social networks, campaigns should adopt a multi-faceted approach to engage youth effectively. This may include utilizing online platforms, such as social media, websites, and digital storytelling, as well as offline channels like community events, workshops, and mentorship programs. By diversifying the channels of engagement, campaigns can maximize their visibility, accessibility, and influence, reaching a broader spectrum of youth and increasing the likelihood of positive behavioural change.

Involving the community at large in counter-messaging campaigns reinforces the collective responsibility in preventing and countering extremist narratives. By engaging key stakeholders, such as parents, educators, community leaders, and local organizations, campaigns can foster a collaborative and supportive environment that amplifies their impact. The involvement of the wider community not only enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the campaign but also builds a network of support for young individuals, promoting a sense of belonging, shared responsibility, and long-term sustainability of the efforts.

### *Key areas to address when engaging youth*

The following are the key areas identified that need to be taken into account when engaging youth for creating a counter-messaging campaign.

*Meaningful participation.* Meaningful participation of youth in counter-narrative campaigns is crucial for several reasons. First, it empowers young individuals by giving them a sense of ownership and agency over the campaign. This involvement goes beyond mere token representation, allowing them to actively shape the campaign's content, messaging, and delivery methods. By involving youth in decision-making processes, their investment and commitment to the campaign are heightened, as they feel a genuine stake in its outcomes. This participatory approach also fosters a sense of civic engagement and encourages young people to take on leadership roles, promoting their personal growth and development.

*Co-creation and collaboration.* Adopting a co-creation approach, where practitioners and youth collaborate in designing the campaign, is essential for effective youth engagement. This approach recognizes that young individuals possess unique perspectives, talents, and insights that can

significantly contribute to the campaign's authenticity and relatability. By creating spaces for dialogue, brainstorming, and creative expression, youth are encouraged to actively contribute their ideas and co-construct the campaign alongside professionals. This collaborative process not only fosters a sense of shared responsibility but also ensures that the campaign resonates with the target audience. Through co-creation, young people can leverage their creativity and innovative thinking, resulting in campaigns that are more impactful and engaging.

*Utilizing digital platforms.* The utilization of digital platforms is critical for engaging youth in counter-narrative campaigns due to the significant role of the digital landscape in their lives. The majority of young individuals are active users of social media, online communities, and digital storytelling platforms. By leveraging these platforms, counter-narrative campaigns can effectively reach and connect with young audiences. The visually appealing and interactive content formats offered by digital platforms, such as videos, graphics, and interactive websites, capture and sustain the attention of youth. Moreover, the viral nature of digital content allows for the easy dissemination of campaign messages, encouraging young people to share them with their peers and networks, amplifying the campaign's impact.

*Promoting diverse voices.* The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives in counter-narrative campaigns is vital for effectively engaging youth. By featuring individuals from different backgrounds, experiences, and identities, campaigns challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Promoting diverse voices allows youth to see themselves reflected in the campaign, fostering a sense of belonging and validating their experiences. It also facilitates empathy by exposing young individuals to different perspectives, promoting understanding, and breaking down barriers between communities. By embracing diversity, campaigns expand their reach and impact, effectively engaging a wide range of youth from various cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds.

*Addressing social and emotional needs.* Recognizing the social and emotional needs of young people is essential in counter-narrative campaigns. Adolescence is a period characterized by identity formation, exploration, and emotional development. By providing spaces for dialogue, emotional expression, and support, campaigns acknowledge and address these needs. Workshops, peer support networks, and partnerships with mental health professionals can create a supportive environment where youth feel safe to express their thoughts and emotions. By addressing these needs, campaigns foster resilience, critical thinking, and personal growth in young individuals.

*Interactive and experiential learning.* Incorporating interactive and experiential learning methods is crucial for effectively engaging youth in counter-narrative campaigns. Adolescents learn best through active participation and hands-on experiences. Role-playing, simulations, and immersive activities allow youth to actively engage with the campaign's content, explore different perspectives, and develop critical thinking skills. These interactive approaches create memorable learning experiences that resonate with young individuals and encourage their active involvement. By making the learning process engaging and interactive, campaigns enhance the understanding and retention of key messages, increasing the likelihood of behaviour change among youth.

*Integrating gamification.* An effective way to incorporate interactive and experiential learning is integrating gamification in the campaigns. Gamification refers to the application of game design elements and mechanics in non-game contexts to enhance engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Incorporating gamification principles into counter-narrative campaigns targeting youth offers several advantages. Gamification elements, such as challenges, rewards, leaderboards, and levels, create an immersive and dynamic experience that captures and sustains the attention of young individuals. By making the campaign interactive and game-like, it transforms the learning process into an enjoyable and engaging activity, motivating youth to actively participate and explore the campaign content. Gamification allows for personalized learning experiences by adapting to individual progress and preferences. Moreover, gamification can foster social interaction and collaboration among youth. Multiplayer games or collaborative challenges within the campaign create opportunities for young individuals to work together, communicate, and collaborate towards a common goal.

*Positive role models.* Highlighting positive role models and success stories within counter-narrative campaigns plays a crucial role in engaging young people. Adolescents often look for aspirational figures to admire and emulate. By showcasing individuals who have successfully challenged extremist narratives, overcome adversity, and made positive contributions to their communities, campaigns provide young individuals with role models they can relate to and aspire to be like. Positive role models inspire and motivate youth by demonstrating that it is possible to reject violent ideologies and make a positive impact. By presenting these success stories, campaigns cultivate a sense of hope and empowerment among young individuals, encouraging them to take positive actions and become agents of change.

*Engaging youth through music, dance, and art-based activities.* Engaging youth through music, dance, and other art-based activities is highly effective for several reasons. First, these forms of expression resonate with youth on an emotional and creative level, tapping into their innate desire for self-expression and individuality. Music, dance, and art-based activities provide avenues for young people to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a non-threatening and engaging manner. These mediums also transcend language and cultural barriers, allowing for a universal connection and understanding. By incorporating these creative elements into counter-narrative campaigns, youth are more likely to connect with and internalize the campaign messages, as these activities tap into their personal interests and passions. Furthermore, music, dance, and art have the power to bring people together, fostering a sense of unity, collaboration, and collective action among youth, which is vital for countering extremist narratives that thrive on division and isolation.



Title	Description	Importance for Youth Work	Connection to Protective Factors
<b>Meaningful Participation</b>	Youth should be actively involved in the design and decision-making process of the counter-narrative campaign.	Recognizes unique perspectives and experiences of young people.	Enhances critical thinking, fosters a sense of ownership and belonging, promotes resilience against manipulation.
<b>Utilizing Digital Platforms</b>	Leveraging digital platforms to effectively reach and engage young people.	Acknowledges the significant role of technology in young people's lives.	Enhances digital literacy, critical evaluation of online content, and resistance to manipulation in the digital space.
<b>Promoting Positive Narratives</b>	Highlighting positive stories and alternative narratives as constructive alternatives to extremist ideologies.	Provides inspiration, motivation, and a vision for a better future.	Increases self-worth, critical thinking, resilience against manipulation, awareness of alternatives, and empathy.
<b>Cultivating Emotional Intelligence</b>	Fostering emotional intelligence to enable young people to manage their emotions effectively and empathize with others.	Helps youth navigate and understand their own emotions and the emotions of others.	Develops emotional resilience, empathy, and conflict management skills.
<b>Promoting Diverse Voices</b>	Including diverse voices and perspectives in the campaign to challenge stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and inspire empathy.	Encourages representation and authenticity in the campaign.	Enhances critical thinking, cultural competence, empathy, and promotes acceptance and mutual respect among youth.
<b>Addressing Social and Emotional Needs</b>	Providing spaces for dialogue, emotional expression, and support to meet youth's social and emotional needs.	Acknowledges the importance of addressing social and emotional well-being.	Fosters resilience, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and supports youth in coping with challenges.

<b>Interactive and Experiential Learning</b>	Using interactive and experiential learning methods to deepen youth engagement.	Enhances active participation, exploration of perspectives, and critical thinking.	Develops critical thinking, empathy, and provides opportunities for personal growth and learning.
<b>Gamification</b>	Application of game design elements and mechanics in non-game contexts to enhance engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.	Enhances youth engagement by making the campaign interactive, enjoyable, and game-like. It increases motivation, sustains attention, and provides personalized learning experiences. Gamification also promotes social interaction and collaboration among youth	Positive identity development, resilience and coping skills, social competencies
<b>Positive Role Models</b>	Highlighting positive role models and success stories within the campaign.	Inspires and motivates youth.	Increases self-worth, provides aspirational figures, and promotes positive values and behaviors among youth.
<b>Art-Based Activities</b>	Provide avenues for young people to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a non-threatening and engaging manner. These mediums also transcend language and cultural barriers.	Increases their engagement, promotes cultural understanding, and empowers youth to challenge extremist narratives through creative expression.	Resilience and coping skills, connectedness and belonging

### *Engaging youth in the education field*

Many campaigns have schools or other places of education (formal and informal) as the main setting of the intervention, or involve them directly or indirectly as important elements to reach and involve the target audience and certain stakeholders. The following list of insights, related to formal and informal education and how to engage youth in the education field, may help guide practitioners in designing effective counter-messaging campaigns.

- Always point out inappropriate comments or attitudes
- Challenge students critically and openly (never from a superior, closed position of pure authority)
- Postpone and then come back to it if there is a difficulty: individual interviews, written messages to the group, additional information for the next lesson, and collaboration with management or external experts

- Make it possible to discuss contentious issues indirectly: e.g., use art projects as a non-threatening communicative tool to approach difficult themes
- Let the pupils do their own research on controversial issues and have them write or speak about them.
- Take pupils and their views seriously. Take into account the life that pupils lead outside school and the (socio-economic) situation in which they find themselves
- Enhance empathy and interaction skills by doing things collectively
- Avoid arousal of emotions and use de-escalation techniques when dealing with emotional conflicts
- Pay attention to, and engage with, those who feel left out
- Introduce the students to a range of perspectives, even if they are dissimilar to their own, while approaching these topics in a spirit of critical inquiry
- Increase a continuous space for debate among students within the classroom, helping them to recognise the complexity of decisions and opinions
- When it comes to discussing contentious topics by using critical thinking skills or fact and logic-based interventions, pay attention to the role of emotions in shaping students' beliefs
- Involve students who may prove to be particularly successful in establishing contact with isolated or angry students.
- Use platforms and spaces which resonate with youth.
- Whole-of-education approach, participatory learning models
- Moral reframing. Many conflicts are based chiefly on differing moral preferences, and not so much on detailed political or religious issues. If that is the case, consider reframing your message so it can connect to the moral foundations of the targeted audience

# Annex. The research framework

## 1. Narratives

### 1.1 Unpacking the narratives

- a. *What are the main extremist/radicalising narratives that are influencing/are being shared by young people?*
- b. *What are the main narratives designed/employed by CN campaigns targeting young people?*

Description of each narrative follows the “collective action framing” by Snow and Benford (1988),<sup>59</sup>:

- diagnostic framing: “a diagnosis of some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration”.  
In extremist narratives, this frame provides consensus mobilisation through the construction of the supposed problem as an existential threat and the attribution of blame to the out-group (Us vs Them or In-group/Out-Group polarisation, Them vs Us or Victimisation).
- prognostic framing: “a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done”.  
This frame also provides consensus mobilisation, through the articulation of a solution for achieving transformational change.
- motivational framing: “a call to arms or rationale for engaging in corrective or ameliorative action”.  
This frame provides action mobilisation through motivations and incentives.

How these features are specifically appealing for/designed to target young people.

### 1.2 Audience

- c. *What is the intended audience of the (counter)narratives?*  
Description of the audience and whether specific narratives are designed for specific audiences.
- d. *How are these (counter)narratives connecting to young people’s daily routine, habits, interests?*

### 1.3 Messengers and media

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<sup>59</sup> Snow DA, Benford RD (1988). “Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization”. International Social Movements Research, vol.1, pp.197-217.

e. *How are these (counter)narratives spread?*

Focus on both off- and online dimensions. Why are narratives spread via these media so effective in reaching this audience?

f. *To what extent the spreading of the message moves away from a linear 'sender-receiver' model to multi-author narratives?*

g. *Who is/are the messenger/s?*

Influencers, friends, family, ...

## **1.4 Role of emotions**

h. *What are the emotions that are mobilised/leveraged by these (counter)narratives?*

What are the emotions at play for spreading the radicalising message? What are the emotions at play in the call to action?

i. *How these (counter)narratives give relevance to individual and collective experience, as well as to shared feelings, that is to the creation of 'affective publics' linking feelings and ideas?*

## **2. Resilience**

### **2.1 Protective factors**

a. *What are the main protective factors against radicalising narratives?*

- at the individual level
- at the meso level: family, peers, school, ...
- at the macro (societal) level

b. *What contributes to making these protective factors effective?*

c. *What kind of spaces (virtual, physical, emotional) can protect against radicalising narratives?*

### **2.2 Role of context**

d. *How do individuals interpret and respond to extremist narratives differently based on their background and experiences?*

### **2.3 How to respond**

e. *What are the main challenges audience and practitioners are exposed to, when it comes to the impact of radicalising narratives?*

- f. What are the best practices for practically addressing challenging situations (online and offline) for audience and practitioners?*

### **3. Best approaches to build effective CN campaigns for young people**

#### **3.1 Main approaches**

*Review of the main approaches used to build CM campaigns, including examples of actual campaigns that adopt this approach.*

For each approach, focus on extracting:

- a. Insights about how to analyse youth as a proactive target audience*
- b. Insights about how to engage with youth*
- c. Insight about how to take into account the gender dimension*
- d. Insights about how to manage group activities*
- e. Insights about how to effectively engage with community at large*
- f. Insights about effective tools for supporting engaging with youth and with community while building CN campaigns*



# Participation