

Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies

A review of the evidence

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1 March 2016



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Conflict, Crime &
Security Research

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About this report

The project was commissioned by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research (PaCCS), an initiative of the UK funding councils to deliver high quality and cutting edge research to help improve our understanding of current and future global security challenges. The project involved a placement with BBC Media Action, during which time the author was given access to internal documents and talked with many members of BBC Media Action staff regarding the project and their own expertise and experience. The author was and remains wholly independent of BBC Media Action and the BBC. The project was supervised by the PaCCS External Champion, Dr Tristram Riley-Smith, University of Cambridge. The author of the report is Dr Kate Ferguson.

About PaCCS

The Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research is an initiative of Research Councils UK. It aims to deliver high quality and cutting edge research to help improve our understanding of current and future global security challenges. The Partnership focuses on the core areas of Conflict, Cybersecurity and Transnational Organised Crime. It supports collaboration by bringing together researchers from across disciplines to work on innovative projects and creates opportunities for knowledge exchange between academia, government, industry and the not-for-profit sector.

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Executive summary

This report presents the analysis of a corpus of academic and grey literature relevant to a key challenge facing our society. How can media and communications be used to counter identity-based violence (IBV) or Violent Extremism (VE)?

Part I focuses on **“Counter-Narratives”**, looking at the evidence relating to strategic policy communication strategies and counter-propaganda techniques. This reflects literature from policymakers, think-tanks, and civil society initiatives rather than the academic literature base. Key findings include the following:

- Current literature and policy concerned with countering propaganda is dominated by the language of ‘counter-narratives’ but a common understanding of this relatively new lexicon has yet to emerge.
- There is little hard evidence that *proves* interaction with VE content leads to participation in VE activities.
- The hypothesis that VE narratives or the real life threat of VE can be countered by an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproven.

These findings challenge claims that responding to propaganda strategies by firing back with “counter-narratives” can be effective.

Part II looks at **“Alternative Approaches”** to the use of the media to counter violent extremism, drawing on insights from the “media development” and “media assistance” sectors, and research into whether mass media and new communication interventions can inhibit identity-based violence in certain crisis situations. Key findings include the following:

- The theoretical foundations for these alternative approaches are supported by a stronger and more established research base, drawn from the multi-disciplinary fields of development, peace building, and social cohesion.
- Media projects have less impact if seen to be linked to a political agenda.
- A growing evidence base suggests that radio and television drama addressing issues of identity, reconciliation and tolerance have a positive an impact on public attitudes and behaviour.
- Media assistance can ensure that local and domestic media can respond appropriately to VE narratives.
- There is an emerging evidence base regarding the potential for rapid reaction media and communication strategies in situations where there is a threat of IBV.

These findings suggest that alternative media strategies can help. But the trust and credibility of information providers is crucial.

The final section **“Reflections”** concludes that the research landscape is fragmented and disconnected. but suggests several professional/practitioner sectors and academic disciplines could shed light on potentially effective media and communication CVE strategies.

More needs to be done to draw the threads together to learn lessons and to identify and prioritise gaps in our knowledge and understanding.

Counter-narratives: Key findings

1. Current CVE literature and policy concerned with countering propaganda is dominated by the language of 'counter-narratives' but a common understanding of this relatively new lexicon has yet to emerge.
2. This survey found little hard evidence that proves interaction with VE content leads to participation in VE activities. However, the picture is mixed: while there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where IBV or VE becomes more likely, the causal relationship remains unproven.
3. The theory that the messages, myths, promises, objectives, glamour and other enticements propagated via VE narratives can be replaced with, or dismantled by, an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproven.
4. There is a rich literature on propaganda, nationalism and identity that would argue the values identified in contemporary VIE propaganda were also present in virtually every successful identity-based propaganda campaign in history.
5. The assumption that responding to each set of VIE narrative and its intended and/or potential audience with a specifically designed counter-narrative will be effective fails to address *why* the VE narrative may be appealing in the first place.
6. Counter-narrative and CVE researchers and practitioners may wish to explore why engaging with certain VE narratives online can be so appealing from a communications perspective and, therefore, consider whether there are media or communication based-solutions that can draw on these lessons.

Alternative approaches: Key findings

1. This review suggests the theoretical foundations of these alternative approaches differ significantly from the assumptions that underpin counter-narrative strategies and are supported by a stronger and more established research base, drawn from the multi-disciplinary fields of development, peace-building, and social cohesion.
2. The need for trust and credibility again is crucial, and the limits of media and communication agenda.
3. There is a growing evidence base suggesting that radio and television drama addressing issues of identity, reconciliation, and tolerance has an impact on public attitudes and behaviour.
4. Media assistance should be a core aspect of international development, as well as conflict prevention and peacebuilding, to ensure that at a time of crisis the local and domestic media are in the position to respond appropriately.
5. There is scope for research into the trust communities place in different forms of citizen journalism, whether online or offline, and particularly in comparison to their own national or international media platforms.
6. Witnessing "someone like me" share a platform with "others unlike me" can have encourage positive attitudes around tolerance and understanding of other.
7. The projects that are most successful do not seek to comprehensively reshape the status quo, but rather aim to facilitate conversation, encourage awareness, or dispel misinformation.
8. The growing empirical evidence base regarding the relationship between hate speech, prejudice, and IBV, suggests media producers and communication platforms could do more to integrate codes of conduct or community guidelines informed by the research.

9. Tackling hate speech requires a far more comprehensive strategy than simply banning or blocking content; it requires an holistic approach that addresses the root causes of tension and division within societies.

10. More research is needed into the spontaneous inter-group dialogues already taking place online.

11. There is an emerging evidence base regarding the potential for rapid reaction media and communication strategies in situations where there is a threat of identity-based violence, such as dispelling rumour or appealing for calm.

Working definitions & terminology used in this paper:

Communication - the imparting, receiving (or monitoring) or exchange of information; here will include mobile telephone communication and online technologies as well as face-to-face communication

Identity-based violence (IBV) - violence directed against an individual or group because of their identity (as perceived by the perpetrator), from isolated hate crimes to genocide.¹

Media - communication channels including traditional (print, newspapers, radio, television) and new (online; such as web-based news platforms, social media, information platforms eg Youtube)

Violent extremism (VE) - activities (beliefs, attitudes, actions, strategies) of people who support or use violence for political, religious or other identity-driven beliefs. This includes terrorism and other forms of identity-motivated violence from hate crime to genocide

Introduction

There is growing concern among media stakeholders, governments and NGOs around the world that increasingly successful communication strategies are being deployed by a variety of state and non-state actors that threaten international stability, social cohesion, and human rights. There are numerous examples of how media and communication strategies are being used to promote violence. While the relationship between media and violence has long drawn the attention of scholars and policy makers, current global challenges posed by violent Islamist extremism (VIE) has increased the need for an evidenced-based understanding of how democracies can respond to such threats.

This report is a survey of the relevant research landscape. It presents a corpus of academic and grey literature that has been identified as relevant to the real-world challenges of how media and communications may be used to counter violent extremism. The pages that follow are intended as an initial 'horizon scan' of this research landscape rather than a comprehensive reader, yet present a clear picture of what the current evidence base shows and what it does not.

This publication is the primary output of a three month research placement funded by the Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research (PaCCS) and supported by the BBC development charity, BBC Media Action. PaCCS is an initiative of the UK funding councils that delivers high quality and cutting edge research to help improve our understanding of current and future global security challenges. PaCCS promotes cross-disciplinary research and create opportunities for knowledge exchange between government, industry and the third sector; crucially, it aims to deliver impact beyond the academic community. The project was supervised by the PaCCS External Champion, Dr Tristram Riley-Smith at the University of Cambridge. The research for and writing of the report was undertaken by Dr Kate Ferguson from the University of East Anglia, who was employed by the University of Cambridge for the duration of the project.

Part of the project involved a placement with BBC Media Action, during which the author was able to meet with relevant staff and access internal materials such as data collected from the field and monitoring and evaluation documentation. This placement was integrated into the project design so as to ensure a survey of media assistance and media development research was included in the literature review. The majority of the data, secondary literature and open source intelligence used in this report was gathered independently by the author through desk research.

The materials included in the survey were drawn from academic journals, books, and reports, grey literature produced by non-academic research or practitioner organisations, works cited by policy makers, and shorter articles published in the press or online by experts or journalists that have played a role in shaping current understanding. In total more than 75 publications were reviewed. This research came from many different areas of study and practice including history, political science, psychology, media studies, and sociology. Informal interviews with academic and non-academic experts also informed the author's analysis. The works that were reviewed during this project are listed in Annex I.

This survey differs from many recent CVE publications because the literature reviewed here has been gathered and assessed using a broader definition of identity-based violence² (IBV) in addition to the narrower (and sometimes contested) concept of VE. Whether IBV is committed against one person or thousands, each victim suffers specifically because they are *perceived by the perpetrator(s) as belonging to an enemy identity group*; therefore all acts of violent extremism are also acts of identity-based violence.² IBV provides a neutral and useful catch-all that incorporates hate crime, violent extremism, as well as identity-driven mass violent crimes such as genocide and ethnic cleansing.³ By viewing CVE within the broader global challenge to prevent IBV, the importance of *identity*-of perpetrators and of

victims– in VE becomes explicit. In the discussion below, the power of identity, grievance, and trust emerge as central motivators in media and communication VE, VIE, and IBV strategies. Using IBV also gives a methodological consistency to the review as few media assistance initiatives use the language of VE, VIE, or CVE.

As a result of this methodological approach, the survey includes literature drawn from outside the usual sphere of CVE research. A major finding of this project has been to highlight the failure of different sectors, disciplines, and areas of expertise to communicate with one another, share lessons learnt, data, or examples of best practice.⁴

What follows is a breakdown of this corpus of material. The main body of the review is a two-part assessment of current and emerging initiatives and relevant research that engage with the central question of the paper.

The first section focuses on explicitly CVE and policy oriented media and communications research. Here, publicly available evidence relating to strategic policy communication strategies and counter-propaganda techniques is assessed. The evidence base relating to the potential efficacy and effectiveness of so-called 'counter-narratives' in CVE is analysed in detail. The second section takes a broader look at media and communication approaches to CVE (in contrast to explicit counter-narrative or counter-propaganda initiatives favoured by policy-makers), drawing on insights from the "media development" and "media assistance" sectors, and research into whether mass media and new communication interventions can inhibit IBV in certain crisis situations.

It should be noted that recent CVE academic and grey research emerging in the UK, US and Europe is dominated by a focus on countering Islamist extremism and VIE in domestic and foreign policy, and this bias has influenced the shape of the review. Likewise, the bias of attention towards online media in the discussion below reflects a similar bias found in the literature that was surveyed. The focus on counter-narrative strategies is a reflection of literature from policymakers, think-tanks, and civil society initiatives rather than an academic literature base. In fact, academic research around counter-narratives in CVE can be seen to be emerging in response to this trend rather than the other way around.

The paper concludes with the author's reflections upon the evidence base as a whole, project's major findings, and implications for the future. Annex I contains a bibliography of the literature that has been reviewed.

Part I

Current CVE media and communication initiatives

During times of war and of peace, state and non-state actors have sought to weld the ever evolving platforms of mass media and communication into instruments of influence or control.⁵ Today the term 'propaganda' is usually used as a pejorative; it is commonly understood as being an important component of state control in political dictatorships, and remains associated with the fascist and communist states of the twentieth century.⁶ More recently, the quality and quantity of propaganda of the so-called Islamic State (hereafter ISIS) have raised questions of how democracies should respond with their own media or communication strategies.⁷ As the world's first 'counter extremism think-tank', the Quilliam Foundation put it: "[i]t is in psychological terms, though, that IS has truly transformed the state of play. Its vast propaganda operation is unrivalled, involving devoted media teams from West Africa to Afghanistan who work relentlessly, day and night, in the production and dissemination of the 'caliphate' brand. So far, most of our attempts to meaningfully mitigate IS's ability to globally engage have been left floundering."⁸

A series of studies from the twentieth century sought to explain the success of the propaganda wars of WWII and the Cold War,⁹ but less is known about the effectiveness of counter propaganda.¹⁰ The evidence suggests the success of propaganda narratives rests upon their ability to tap into or exploit existing narratives, such as patriotism, fear, or grievance; they go to the heart of how individual and collective identities are constructed.¹¹ As John Breuille wrote, 'the self-reference quality of nationalist propaganda and the theme of restoration of a glorious past in a transformed future has a special power which is difficult for other ideological movement to match.'¹²

As psychological warfare and propaganda strategies have advanced, so too has research into their effectiveness. During the Cold War, the study of social behaviour, attitudes, and influence took on greater importance in the ideological struggle between east and west and so too did practical efforts to harness public opinion and direct public discussion.¹³ These efforts were largely funded by state departments and described as 'public diplomacy' or 'low intensity conflict'.¹⁴ Today, there is a spectrum of research being conducted by academic and non-academic institutions into the many questions around the efficacy or effectiveness of media and communication strategies in CVE. This review has found that the same close relationship persists between state departments of defence, security and foreign policy and state-funded research into CVE media and communication projects.¹⁵ As a result it is often from this select pool of research that the evidence base for policy is found. The task of this review has been to identify where other fields of relevant expertise lie.

What are counter-narratives?

This review has found that current CVE literature and policy concerned with countering propaganda is dominated by the language of 'counter-narratives' yet a common understanding of this relatively new lexicon has not emerged. This confusion obscures frank discussion of the evidence base and, as this report has found, inhibits communication between CVE and other fields.

Rachel Biggs and Sebastien Feve of the Institute of Strategic Dialogue (ISD) define counter-narratives (in the CVE context) as being intentional and direct efforts to deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging, whether through ideology, logic, fact or humour.¹⁶ This definition is a useful one. Firstly, it sets out that counter-narrative communication is *reactive*. As Bamberg and Andrews emphasise, counter-narratives 'only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering.'¹⁷ The very term identifies its positional and intentional characteristics, in

(reactive) tension with another category or set of information.¹⁸ Next, Biggs and Feve acknowledge that the intent is confrontational, not discursive; counter-narratives are therefore identifiable as being a form of strategic communication and having a fixed objective. These are important distinctions when we consider whether, for example, education-entertainment programmes should be considered as employing counter-narratives; a drama may include a storyline in order to draw attention to a particular issue and even to encourage a change in social attitudes or behaviour but that does not necessarily mean the programme is an example of a counter-narrative.

However, the distinction is not immediately clear, and academics and media producers argue about where this line falls. Therefore, for the purposes of this review, an additional attribute will be added to the definition used by Biggs and Feve to make explicit what is often an implied or assumed distinction: counter-narratives are understood as an intentional and direct communication strategy, *within a political, policy, or military context*, to discredit messaging of a violent extremist nature.

Thus the analysis that follows identifies current and emerging strategic communication strategies by state bodies and non-state organisations (though they may often be state-funded) that are reactive, intentional, and direct, with an explicit objective to counter violent extremism by replacing one narrative with another as being “counter-narratives.”

Research and initiatives discussed in the second part of this paper may possess some of these attributes but do not seek to strategically replace one idea with another, and are therefore discussed separately. It is clear that this line is blurred and discussion around where it falls is an important one. However, within the remit of this project, this delineation seems appropriate. In addition, there are significant differences in the theoretical and methodological approaches of explicitly counter-narrative initiatives, and those that have evolved in the media development sector.

Counter-narratives: What is the evidence?

While the UK was the first to adopt a counter-narrative strategy, back in 2005, interest in and support for the policy shift has now grown considerably, particularly in the global north. The research, information and communications unit (RICU) was set up in by the UK government in 2007 to counter VE narratives of Al Qaida and now ISIS.¹⁹ This approach to CVE has continued in the UK: in autumn 2015 a new Commonwealth Counter Extremism Unit was launched to “focus on strengthening ability of Commonwealth countries to counter extremist narrative” through “new approaches to countering poisonous ideologies.”²⁰ In 2011, the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) launched its Narrative Networks program, intended to improve state understanding of how narratives influence human cognition and behaviour, and then “apply those findings in international security contexts.”²¹ DARPA also runs a project on Social Media in Strategic Communication which ‘seeks to develop tools to help identify misinformation or deception campaigns and counter them with truthful information, reducing adversaries’ ability to manipulate event.’²² Similar strategies have been adopted by governments in Canada, Australia, and elsewhere.²³

Attributing the successful prevention of violence to a single factor is always difficult, which means isolating and measuring the success or impact of preventative media and communication strategies is particularly challenging. Nevertheless, the absence of methodologically robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices with regard to CVE counter-narratives is striking. As will be discussed in the second section of this paper, impact can be measured, and academics and NGOs continue to develop more rigorous impact assessments of media and communications effectiveness.

Furthermore, some research indicates that counter-narrative strategies may, in some instances, do more harm than good. Paul Bell, Director of Albany Associates, argues 'when the counter-narrative fails to get results it becomes shriller' and therefore 'makes the problem worse.' This problem, Bell suggests in reference to the European experiment with its broad-brush counter-narrative approach, 'is compounded by an insistence that European Muslims condemn terrorism – which serves only to entrench the Islamization of the problem.'²⁴

Counter-narrative initiatives are now being replicated in civil society and many of the same assumptions identified above can be found in their publications and project designs.²⁵ Today there are numerous NGOs pursuing CVE counter-narrative projects, and many are doing so without research-driven position papers, an evidence base, or even a theory of change that sets out measurable objectives. Other initiatives are aimed at providing 'alternative narratives', such as the ISD's *Extreme Dialogue* project, which seeks to dissuade potential VE recruits by sharing stories of people who have been profoundly affected by VE, and by providing a 'positive alternative.'²⁶ However, most of these civil society and NGO initiatives are still in their infancy so it difficult to monitor their impact.

Before moving on to a deeper analysis, it is worth drawing attention to certain broad trends identified in the material: It is notable, for example, that the majority of commentaries supportive of counter-narrative strategies come from the policy, think-tank and NGO spheres, and that academic research relating to counter-narratives in CVE appears to have emerged in response to this trend. Further, the more influential CVE counter-narrative non-academic literature is overshadowed by the work of a few individuals, all working in the global north, and almost exclusively address the challenges posed by Islamist extremism.²⁷ It is also striking that while counter-narratives can be propagated via any kind of communication media –from dropping leaflets out of a plane, to animations on YouTube²⁸ –much of the CVE literature reviewed here, and the majority of practical initiatives, are focused on the online sphere and almost exclusively address VIE narratives.

Challenging the assumptions

This review has identified three dominant assumptions that appear implicit in many recent CVE publications that promote counter-narrative strategies: First is the belief that consuming violent words will lead to committing violent deeds or, in other words, engaging with VE content produces a one-way trajectory that begins with consumption, leads to radicalisation, and culminates in violence. Second, the fact that propaganda appears crucial to VIE strategy has prompted a belief that counter propaganda must therefore also be crucial to CVE. This, in turn, has popularised presentations of the internet as a battleground to be lost or won, requiring the 'West' to respond in kind to the VIE propagandist armoury.²⁹ This leads to the third assumption and underlying premise for current counter-narrative efforts; that the real world VE threat can be addressed, at least in part, by disrupting VE media and communication strategies, by removing online content, and by deploying "counter-narratives."

Here, these assumptions are set against the academic evidence base or, at some points, the lack of it, in order to assess their validity. In so doing, other concerns regarding the counter-narrative project emerge. Because the counter-narrative approach to CVE is a relatively new endeavour and its results remain unclear, the theoretical foundations deserve close attention. A significant body of research relating to counter-narrative approaches in CVE informs this analysis and findings from outside this field have also been considered.

Assumption 1:

Violent words lead to violent deeds: Do they?

A persisting challenge for researchers of media and violence is the difficulty around establishing, through empirical evidence, a causal relationship between hate speech and IBV. For decades academics, media and entertainment producers, and NGOs have argued over the relationship between violence in video games, pop lyrics, or pornography, and real life violence.³⁰ The same challenge exists for those studying or working to counter violent extremist content. We know that media and communication can influence attitudes and behaviour, but it is not a simple science and no 'narrative' could ever exist in a vacuum.

While the relationship between mass media, propaganda, and violence has preoccupied democratic and non-democratic countries alike for over a century, the evidence base remains unclear.³¹ In 1927, Harold Lasswell asserted that the radio had the capacity to weld the masses into an amalgamation of 'hate, will and hope', yet this review suggests the messages themselves are powerful rather than the medium by which they are conveyed.³² Here we take a look at what we know and what we do not regarding the consumption of violent words –or hate speech– and real world IBV and VE.

This survey found little hard evidence that proves interaction with VE content leads to participation in VE activities. However, the picture is somewhat mixed: while there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where IBV or VE becomes more likely, the causal relationship remains unproven.

The most extensive academic literature on this subject comes from the field of genocide and mass atrocity studies. The explicit role played by state media (television, radio, newspapers) during campaigns of systematic identity-based (mass) violence in Yugoslavia and Rwanda in the 1990s led academics and practitioners to focus upon the significance of hate speech as causal or motivating factor.³³ The role of the domestic media in both situations was identified by many as being at least partly responsible for community participation in the violence.³⁴ However, while it was evident in both cases that the mass media contributed to creating an atmosphere of fear and division, and directly participated in the incitement to violence, academics continue to disagree over the degree to which the media can be considered a causal factor of the violence.³⁵ More recently, David Yanagizawa-Drott of Harvard provided what could be the most robust and objective dataset to illustrate a causal relationship, showing that during the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in areas where the hate radio signal strength was strongest, an increase of ten percent in community-based participation in the violence is evident.³⁶

In a more contemporary context, there is a growing dataset emerging from several online studies that associate increases in online extremist language with increases in offline extremist or identity-based crimes: A recent study of data from 2004 to 2013 showed that when online anti-Muslim hate searches spiked, so too did anti-Muslim hate crime.³⁷ This echoes findings from research into cumulative extremism in the UK, France and elsewhere, which track spikes of identity-based crimes against Muslims in the wake of VIE incidents reported in the global media.³⁸ Another study found that hate crimes against Muslim Americans had tripled since the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino in late 2015.³⁹ This relationship between violent words online and violent words offline was also identified in recent analysis by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that found online anti-Shia and anti-Sunni hate speech surge in response to violent events associated with the sectarian divide.⁴⁰

These findings could form the basis for an important dataset able to connect the use of hate speech and acts of IBV, and which may support older qualitative research outcomes from the field of genocide studies that claim hate speech is a crucial component of the processes preceding identity-based *mass* violence.⁴¹ This new data, together with Yanagizawa-Drott's recent mapping of Rwandan hate radio during the genocide, provide the strongest empirical evidence base to date able to demonstrate a *potential* causal relationship between violent words and violent deeds. Because collecting online data of this scale and nature is infinitely easier than, say, radio broadcasts or newspaper content, it is possible that as research in this field expands the relationship between VE content or hate speech and VE will, perhaps, become clearer.

However, it must be emphasised that this data is still in a relatively raw form; drawing conclusions of causality on this material alone would be a mistake. Rather, these studies indicate the potential for open source online intelligence of this nature to be recorded and assessed. Such data can only ever indicate trends and not explain individual behaviour, which is what counter-narrative strategies seek to alter. And just as research has shown massive-scale emotional contagion can be transferred by online social networks, the trends identified above might indicate a kind of viral violence rather than evidence of lasting radicalisation.⁴² Nevertheless, as this data may illuminate relevant patterns in social discourse and attitudes of what is and is not permissible, it therefore could potentially be used to track the impact of CVE counter-narrative strategies.

Furthermore, as any qualitative study of hate speech and IBV has concluded, hate media and prejudice cannot be understood in isolation but rather as a product of other structural and normative processes occurring in society, the state, and the judiciary.⁴³ While the findings may well have implications regarding hate speech regulations or community standards for media producers and online communication platforms, these will be discussed in the second section and represent a different form of response to counter-narratives.

If we try to unpack the relationship between VE content and VE actions in a more focused manner, the empirical evidence base becomes even more shaky. This review has found that research into patterns of radicalisation in a VIE context continues to show the vast majority come into contact with extremist ideology offline and usually through social interaction and may subsequently be indoctrinated online.⁴⁴ Thus, the role of real life person-to-person contact remains the most effective tool for VE recruitment, not propaganda.

In fact, Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller of DEMOS (and others) have shown that radicalisation does not necessarily lead to violence.⁴⁵ Thus, it is possible for individuals to hold, express, and consume extreme views, without transgressing to violence. Perhaps even more importantly, Bartlett and Miller demonstrated that the 'types' of radicalisation that do and do not lead to violence should be understood as distinct and distinguishable.⁴⁶ In other words, they are –or at least can be– separate processes with different trajectories. Likewise, in their field-based study in Afghanistan, USAID found that support for extremist ideologies does not inevitably lead to the participation in violent extremism; and nor are the ideologies necessarily drivers in themselves.⁴⁷ Motivations were often much more banal, and related to the personal lives of the individuals.⁴⁸ Both papers' narratives suggest VE narratives do not necessarily in and of themselves lead to radicalisation; if this is so, the assumption that CVE counter-narratives are needed in order to meet the threat and set of consequences produced by VE content is significantly undermined.

With specific relation to the internet, which provides a perpetually expanding source of VE content to consume (and to study), there are still very few case studies that support theories claiming online interaction with radical and violent individuals or forums can in itself produce a radicalising process in an individual and lead them to commit violent acts.⁴⁹ There is not yet a 'proven connection' between the consumption of VE online content and the adoption of extremist ideology and/or engagement

in VE or terrorism.⁵⁰ It is crucial that researchers, policy makers and practitioners do not become over reliant on the apparent evidence provided by these few and relatively unusual individual cases; those who have engaged in attacks, tell us little about the background of individuals drawn to violent extremism. Thus USAID argues 'most people with intent and/or motivation do not act; in part because a lot of individuals holding VE views may be unable to link up with VE organisations; and, in part, because those organisations "select for quality," and turn down many poorly prepared volunteers.'⁵¹

At best, the evidence base regarding the assumption that VE content must be responded to because it leads to real life VE appears to be confusing. On the one hand, there are empirical quantitative and qualitative studies that establish a macro connection between the presence of violent words and the occurrence of violent deeds. However, on the micro level, research into the individual motivations of VE perpetrators, whether in Rwanda in the 1990s or violent Islamist extremists today, argue propaganda is not a primary motivator or cause of their decision making. These findings are not necessarily contradictory, and in fact point to the deep rooted power of propaganda narratives employed by VE actors to create a context in which individuals are able to participate on their own, varied, terms.

Overall, there is a dearth of research related to audiences that consume let alone produce extremist information and little is known about how and why the initial transgression occurs. And from a CVE perspective, this is the moment that needs to be fully understood.

Assumption 2:

If propaganda is crucial to VE, counter-narratives are crucial to CVE: Are they?

Still keeping these findings in mind, we now come to the second assumption underpinning pro-counter-narrative arguments: VIE propaganda appears to be central to VE strategy, and therefore counter propaganda must be central to CVE. And here it is useful to switch from the language of *propaganda* to that of *narratives*. While it is the explicitly violent content and language of incitement of VE propaganda that clearly (and intentionally) contains the threat of VE to non-adherents, the apparent legitimacy of such threats –in the eyes of VE adherents– come from a wider, more complex set of world-views and emotions. Together, these are often described as being the 'narratives' seen to provide the explanations, motivations, and credibility of VE groups. Thus, the belief in counter-narratives has emerged, not only to challenge the violent strands of communication, but the whole amorphous and tangled fabric.

At the same time, the 'information war' with ISIS is increasingly being seen in military terms and is merging with pre-existing 'soft' CVE efforts led by the UK, US, Canada and Australia, which seek to prevent VE incidents by challenging the extremist 'narrative.'⁵² This is not surprising; propaganda has long been considered an integral aspect of military and political strategy. And just as the propaganda that accompanied the Second World War was as much aimed at domestic audiences as the enemy abroad, so too are aspects of current "counter-narrative" strategies variously directed towards an internal fifth column, the domestic public, or obscure global audiences.

However, the theory that the messages, myths, promises, objectives, glamour and other enticements propagated via VE narratives can be replaced with, or dismantled by, an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproved.⁵⁴ Furthermore, this review has found that questions around why certain VE narratives can be so powerful are rarely addressed in detail in contemporary grey CVE literature. Despite this paucity of evidence, the assumption that themes and narratives present in violent (and in the literature, usually Islamist) propaganda provide the key to counter-narrative and CVE strategies was found in the recent policy-oriented research and policy strategies reviewed in this survey.⁵⁵

This survey has highlighted a trend in recent grey research that argues if inconsistencies or inaccuracies in VE narratives can be exposed, the appeal of VE will be diminished. A review of research from outside this field suggests that in advocating retaliatory communications-based responses some pro-counter-narrative research may underplay the significance of identity, grievance, and trust. For example, valuable studies have been undertaken that analyse the set of values and themes contained within violent Islamist propaganda by the Centre on Religion and Geopolitics at the Tony Blair Foundation, and the Quilliam Foundation.⁵⁶ However, there is a risk that this work is taken to provide a basis for counter-narrative solutions when a broader study of the literature suggests this would be a leap of logic.

In breaking down the VIE content into value categories or aspects of Islamic doctrine, such as martyrdom, advocacy for the oppressed, or apocalyptic phraseology, the recent report 'Inside the Jihadi Mind', claimed to 'paint a picture of a system of ideas that make up Salafi-jihadi ideology' and concluded that in drawing out a number of ideological contradictions were able to present 'concrete possibilities for countering the message of jihadi groups.'⁵⁷

Here the tendency in recent CVE grey literature to apply a narrow focus to VIE propaganda is evident. There is a rich literature on propaganda, nationalism and identity that would argue the values identified in contemporary VIE propaganda were also present in virtually every successful identity-based propaganda campaign in history. It is one thing to recognise that certain narratives have impact but it is an assumption to claim that responding to ISIS and its audiences in kind will produce predictable 'mirrored' results.⁵⁸ Literature on the 1990s wars in Yugoslavia, for example, has long emphasised how themes of martyrdom, honour, advocacy for the oppressed, the struggle of good versus evil, and narratives of impending cataclysm – often couched in (Christian) religious language, values and history – saturated political and religious discourse among the perpetrating structures of violence.⁵⁹ The Yugoslav example – and it is just one of many – illustrates that analysis of current VIE narratives through the prism of the Quran will produce deterministic explanations. Applying those findings to practical CVE challenges runs the risk of focusing attention on what may be being used as a superficial tool by propagandists to legitimise and give context to powerful but generic patterns of discourse.

Some of these patterns can be seen in the six themes that Charlie Winter identified in his analysis of ISIS propaganda for Quilliam; brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism.⁶⁰ Again, these are familiar themes to scholars of nationalism and identity; myths of mercy, victimhood, and war are central to most national identities, just as collective memories of real or imagined grievance can be found among excluded communities around the world. Tony Judt argued that many of Winter's themes were crucial to the (re)construction of post-war European national identities during the latter half of the twentieth century.⁶¹ These themes are so prevalent in social and political history because they are flexible and malleable, and rather than be seen as exceptional to contemporary VIE should instead be set in context of how we as individuals, communities, and societies construct our identities.

Winter concludes that '[m]oving forward, it might be worth taking a leaf out of Islamic State's own strategy book...[the coalition against ISIS] must acknowledge that targeting 'counter-narratives' solely at those few who are on the brink of being recruited to Islamic State is far too restrictive an approach.'⁶² Jared Cohen, of Google Ideas, put forward a similar call in his widely shared article in *Foreign Policy* late last year.⁶³ However, this review has found no evidence that suggests the multi-layered, inherently contradictory components of identity can be so easily swayed.

The assumption that responding to each set of VIE narrative and its intended and/or potential audience with a specifically designed counter-narrative will be effective fails to address why the VE narrative may be appealing in the first place. One reason we know VE narratives are successful is because they tap into and seemingly confirm *existing* beliefs of anxieties. ISD has shown how this

in itself can act as 'powerful sparks' with the *potential* to 'accelerate and intensify radicalisation.'⁶⁴ In this way, VE narratives also succeed in identifying and exploiting perceived and real grievances. This process has been recorded by researchers of nationalism and identity-based conflicts, resource conflicts, extremist movements, and main stream politics around the world.⁶⁵ Thus Philipp Holtmann argues that 'the claim "Islam is under attack" successfully integrates multiple Muslim grievances into one meta-narrative. It has found credibility beyond an extremist fringe of Muslim societies and has been far more successful and attractive than any counter-narrative that has been devised so far by Western counter-terrorist strategists.'⁶⁶

Research into the psychological processes that *can* occur during online communication with VE communities appear to reinforce these findings. Research into the online behaviour of far-right extremists has shown how online extremist communities, especially via social media, can act as a surrogate offline social network.⁶⁷ This is supported by psychological studies of online communication more broadly that have also found online networks can act as a replacement for offline relationships.⁶⁸ The Nominet Trust has shown that beneficial effects around identity, particularly self-esteem, come from participating in online communication 'associated with positive responses to profiles and a sense of mastery and control over blogs and homepages.'⁶⁹

Thus VE narratives and engagement with VE communications appear to be so powerful because of the sense of belonging and therefore self esteem that can be gained. The perception that this is a new or more urgent trend is perhaps not surprising; there is substantial evidence that opinion reinforcement is more readily accessible via the internet, given the plethora of online communication, media, and information platforms.⁷⁰ Furthermore, these findings underline recent CVE research by ISD and other that emphasise exiting online extremist communities can be incredibly difficult.⁷¹

Therefore, counter-narrative and CVE researchers and practitioners may wish to explore why engaging with certain VE narratives online can be so appealing from a communications perspective and, therefore, consider whether there are media or communication based-solutions that can draw on these lessons.

Finally, the importance of credibility is emphasised throughout CVE grey and academic literature.⁷² Richard Barrett, the former Coordinator of the UN Al Qaeda /Taliban Monitoring Team, stated 'credibility, legitimacy and relevance are...key ingredients of [successful] narratives.'⁷³ This relates to the trust audiences have in where they source their information but also the information itself. Here the relationship between words and deeds emerges once again; narratives cannot exist in a vacuum, they can only be successful when their audiences or consumers are able to identify with or recognise aspects that apply to their own lives. While propaganda narratives are artificial constructions they also take on spontaneous qualities as genuine adherents contribute to the discourse; it becomes, however repugnant its content, a societal and psychological process (as we will see below).

Thus, in reference to community-based counter-narrative projects, Alex P. Schmid (who does set the counter-narrative challenge in historical and practical context) concludes '*[d]oing the right thing* rather than *saying the right thing* produces, ideally, the stronger narrative and in that sense the interaction patterns between host community and vulnerable youth constitute a non-verbal message that might better manage to prevent extremists gaining more ground in a community.'⁷⁴

It is clear that VE propaganda is important to VE strategy; that much is uncontested. What remains unclear is what the response should be. However, the evidence presented here suggests that until counter-narratives are able to become spontaneous and flexible enough to accommodate a wide spectrum of identities (and therefore cease to be counter-narratives), and offer the same diverse set of online and offline options for validation, belonging, and legitimacy, it is difficult to anticipate how CVE counter-narratives can ever be successful.

Assumption 3:

The real world VE threat can be addressed, in part, by deploying counter-narratives: Can it?

The fundamental question, however, remains whether the real world threat of VE can be, in part, prevented by counter-narrative strategies. The assumption that they can, and are doing so, is implicit throughout the pro-counter-narrative publications reviewed for this project. This review found no evidence to suggest that current or past counter-narrative strategies have been effective at reducing the VE threat. Moreover, publicly available evidence, beyond isolated case studies, is at present unable to sufficiently demonstrate if and how counter-narratives are having a positive impact on their desired audiences.

These findings are supported by several academic reviews of counter-narrative policy in the US and UK, which have also identified no positive tangible outcomes.⁷⁵ In his 2014 assessment of US and UK responses to the Al Qaeda narrative, Schmid concluded '[t]o this day, no credible, positive counter-narrative has been found to endear the US and some of its closest allies to Muslims in the Middle East.' Despite this, much grey literature continues to presume that counter-narratives will be effective, even after acknowledging that they not been so far.

It is clear that much like the printing press and the radio before it, the internet is changing the way people around the world consume and produce information.⁷⁶ In the VE sphere, this change has been profound. VE propaganda online has expanded in the face of CVE takedowns and counter-narrative strategies. Virtually every violent and non violent extremist group has its own website and, in many instances, 'maintain multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences.'⁷⁷ The Wiesenthal Center first began monitoring hate pages in 1995 when the first extremist website went online; in 2008 they put the number at 8,000.⁷⁸ In 2014, Danielle Keats Citron estimated there were over 11,000.⁷⁹ We know that jihadist insurgents in Syria and Iraq 'use all manner of social media apps and file-sharing platforms, most prominently Ask.fm, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, PalTalk, kik, viper, JustPaste.it, and Tumblr.'⁸⁰ There is no evidence to suggest this trend will not continue.

As independent academic research catches up with the CVE sector, it is possible that efforts to quantify the impact and effect of counter-narratives will become both more common and more robust. Interest in and commitment to counter-narrative initiatives to be growing, therefore the current narrow focus may benefit from a more diverse and innovative debate as tech-communication companies, NGOs, academics, and former extremists join the conversation. The picture that emerges of the current evidence base for counter-narratives in CVE is fragmented. It is hoped that by presenting the research landscape in this way, this section of the literature has drawn attention to what is known and what is not yet known.

The challenge is real enough. While ISIS may be the first violent extremist organisation to utilise the online communications as well as conventional media in such a professional and extensive way, it will certainly not be the last.⁸¹ However, as Phil Edwards of Manchester Metropolitan University argues, 'key questions risk going unasked: whether there is a distinct experience of 'radicalisation'; if so, how strong an association there is between radicalisation and subsequent terrorist involvement; and, if such an association exists, whether a concerted programme of state-driven de-radicalisation measures is likely to be viable and productive.'⁸²

Key findings

1. Current CVE literature and policy concerned with countering propaganda is dominated by the language of 'counter-narratives' but a common understanding of this relatively new lexicon has yet to emerge

2. This survey found little hard evidence that proves interaction with VE content leads to participation in VE activities. However, the picture is somewhat mixed: while there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where IBV or VE becomes more likely, the causal relationship remains unproven.

3. The theory that the messages, myths, promises, objectives, glamour and other enticements propagated via VE narratives can be replaced with, or dismantled by, an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproven

4. There is a rich literature on propaganda, nationalism and identity that would argue the values identified in contemporary VIE propaganda were also present in virtually every successful identity-based propaganda campaign in history.

6. The assumption that responding to each set of VIE narrative and its intended and/or potential audience with a specifically designed counter narrative will be effective fails to address why the VE narrative may be appealing in the first place

7. Counter-narrative and CVE researchers and practitioners may wish to explore why engaging with certain VE narratives online can be so appealing from a communications perspective and, therefore, consider whether there are media or communication based-solutions that can draw on these lessons.

Part II

What's the alternative?

A broader look at media and communication approaches to CVE

This review has shown at present there is insufficient evidence able to demonstrate the efficacy and effectiveness of counter-narrative strategies in CVE. However, a wider reading of research and practical initiatives drawn from outside the counter-narrative debate suggests alternative media and communication approaches could contribute to efforts tackling root causes of division, prejudice and IBV. This section of the paper considers the available evidence base for some of these options and draws attention to possible areas of interest where the evidence is still emerging.

The scope for media and communication strategies, practical initiatives, and technological developments to engage with the themes and processes associated with VE is, of course, vast. A comprehensive review of the full spectrum of efforts across time and geography would far exceed the limits of this modest paper. Instead, this review has identified four approaches that stand in contrast to the counter-narrative project. These approaches can be simply defined as using media to promote development (where media programming is designed to encourage behavioural or attitude change); media assistance (working to develop independent media); targeting hate speech; and rapid responses to spontaneous identity-based rumour or violence.

The research reviewed in the following pages suggests that the success of media and communication strategies within CVE may rest upon best practices and lessons learnt from across the media development sector. Research and expertise from years of health and education programming or new technologies designed to respond to spontaneous warning signs of IBV address many of the challenges identified in the previous pages. Nevertheless, certain difficulties emerge from this literature too, largely because much of the data still comes from the practitioner organisations themselves or academic studies that do not directly address the prevention of violence. The evidence base has so far emerged on an ad hoc basis and remains dominated by case studies.⁸³ Moreover, the same inherent difficulty involved in assessing or measuring media and communication impacts discussed in reference to counter-narratives are present here too.

The structure of this paper may unintentionally convey a black and white picture of media and communication efforts in relation to CVE, where counter-narratives lie clearly and distinctly on one side and broad development oriented projects on the other. This is not the case. As the earlier discussion around the challenges of defining 'counter-narratives' set out, where this line falls is blurred. Many of the initiatives discussed below operate within a specific political context and are designed to influence behaviour and attitudes. In addition, almost all of the initiatives assessed below receive state funding of some kind, and at least in part because they are considered by governments to address certain political or military priorities.

This line was blurred still further (in the UK context) when the UK government committed late last year to using its 'formidable' development budget and soft power 'to promote British values and to tackle the causes of the security threats we face.'⁸⁴ This included the promise to "expand our world-leading soft power and our global reach to promote our values and interests, using our diplomats and development assistance, and through institutions such as the BBC World Service and the British Council."⁸⁵ The government thereby identified the BBC World Service and the entire international development enterprise as tools of soft power and influence, and the promotion of "British values" as a primary objective in the pursuit of global peace and security. What is of concern is not so much how the government defines soft power, but rather that promoting British values in this way (or at all) appears to rest upon similar assumptions to the counter-narrative project. The Strategic Defence and Security Review therefore indicates that counter-narrative approaches could be mainstreamed into future international development strategies.

Whether we could (or should) consider some or all of the projects assessed in this section as examples of 'soft power' remains a matter for debate but will not be addressed here. This report does not address the ethical questions that arise from the debate of what is and what is not strategic communication (or propaganda). Therefore, the analysis here bypasses the various (and often starkly contradictory) viewpoints that exist among individuals and organisations researching in this broad field. Instead, this paper presents what the current evidence base supports and what it does not.

Alternative CVE media and communication strategies: What is the evidence?

There is a substantial and growing literature around the role media producers can play in promoting social cohesion, encouraging more inclusive participation in public discussion, and increasing knowledge. This is supported by an established corpus of research into the capacity for mass media to influence behaviour around public health issues in both the developed and developing world.⁸⁶ The fields of (international) development communication and media as a tool for development have evolved from strategies predicated on the assumption that communities 'in need of social change' would follow instructions imposed upon them by external stakeholders, to a diverse and innovative (though small) sector.⁸⁷ Within this bracket, techniques include information dissemination and education, behaviour change communication, social marketing, social mobilisation, communication for social change and community participation, and creating platforms for dialogue and debate.⁸⁸

Looked at from this angle, there is already an evidence base that supports calls for media and communications to play a role in CVE outside of counter-narrative strategies: media programming and assistance has been used in development strategies, albeit in an inconsistent manner, for decades. While it appears that in developed states such as the US and in Europe, individuals who commit well publicised acts of terrorism represent a considerable diversity of backgrounds,⁸⁹ the demographics of low level hate crime and of extremist groups in these countries suggest perpetrators are likely to be young, male, and with limited opportunity.⁹⁰ In poorer, less developed countries recruits to VE groups also tend to be young, unemployed men with few prospects, supporting theories of irregular combatant demography –although this is not a steadfast rule. Therefore, solutions to the numerous policy challenges posed by VE (and other forms of IBV) are intimately bound to development goals, whether in domestic or international policy. This was emphasised recently at the United Nations when the General Assembly adopted two resolutions calling for concerted global efforts to advance culture of peace, non-violence, and tolerance with an objective of tackling the root causes of extremism and terrorism.⁹¹

1. Media with development goals

There are numerous media producers that design and broadcast programmes, usually via the radio or television, in order to influence behaviour or attitudes within a development framework.⁹² Here, three such organisations are discussed because of their specific focus on issues of identity, conflict, and reconciliation; Radio La Benovolencija, Search for Common Ground, and BBC Media Action.

Drawing directly from lessons learned during the Bosnian War (1992-1995), Radio La Benovolencija, a Netherlands based NGO, broadcasts radio soaps, discussions and educational programmes, in combination with grass roots activities that provide citizens in vulnerable societies with 'knowledge on how to recognise and resist manipulation to violence and how to heal trauma, encouraging them to be active bystanders against incitement and violence.'⁹³ Radio La Benovolencija follows a methodology rooted in academic research developed by an academic team under Ervin Staub, professor in Psychology at the University of Massachusetts. The story-lines are all structured and sequenced around 32 messages that contain both Staub's "Continuum" as well as Pearlman's RICH

Community Trauma assistance methodology, supplemented with information programmes.⁹⁴ The organisation launched a Rwandan-language soap in Rwanda ten years after the genocide to address issues of reconciliation and 'inoculate' against hate speech. Independent evaluation found while the soap appeared to lead to improvement in communal disagreements, it did not impact attitudes and behaviour relating to other groups.⁹⁵ The evaluation argued that the programme had failed to realise its stated objective of making Rwandans 'immune' to hate speech.⁹⁶ The case study illustrates the over-ambition of the original project design and difficulty of demonstrating impact through mass media, highlighting the limitations of media development strategies but also the need for realistic and measurable objectives.

Further studies show that there is a strong evidence base demonstrating the power of drama or soap opera to affect social change.⁹⁷ A soap opera created by the international development charity Search for Common Ground (SFCG) in Burundi in 1995 in the wake of the genocidal violence, about the daily lives of two neighbouring families (one Tutsi, another Hutu) was rated by 82% of respondents as having helped reconciliation.⁹⁸ A television drama for children created by SFCG in Macedonia increased invitations by children of a child of another ethnicity into their homes from 30% to about 60%.⁹⁹ The BBC's *New Home, New Life*, is a radio soap opera designed and produced for broadcast in Afghanistan, first aired in April 1994 and continues today. The series has been credited with stimulating discussions in Afghanistan about the roles of women in society and other family issues; it is known for tackling a range of culturally sensitive or controversial subjects within a village context and is hugely popular.¹⁰⁰ In 1997, 83 percent of survey respondents said they tuned in.¹⁰¹ In 2013, 48 percent of the population still listened every week.¹⁰² The programme, which is now overseen by the BBC development Charity, BBC Media Action, is often held up as an early example of 'how the media can use drama and entertainment to advance the cause of peace and development.'¹⁰³

BBC Media Action have recently finished their first series of a radio drama called the *Tea Cup Diaries* in Myanmar/Burma, in which current issues that are difficult to discuss such as identity, religion, and social cohesion are addressed in a gentle and indirect way; an evaluation among listeners found that the inclusion of Christian characters was particularly interesting to the primarily Buddhist audience and that "exposure to the programme has helped close the gap of 'us and them'" but views amongst audiences on religious difference remain entrenched, particularly towards inter-religious marriage and towards Muslims. After one series, *Tea Cup Diaries* improved some audience's knowledge of people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Discussions within Tea Cup Diaries Listener Groups appear to have created a space where audiences could explore the themes of identity, ethnicity, religion and tolerance present in the drama.¹⁰⁴

The potential for drama to impact public attitudes and behaviour is not new; the BBC has a history of commissioning entertainment-education programmes but also integrating education or public interest narratives into its long-running soap *EastEnders*.¹⁰⁵ Researchers have credited soap operas in the UK and US with normalising attitudes to AIDS and to increases in public sexual health screenings.¹⁰⁶

The reach and capacity of media development programming is substantial. In 2014, BBC Media Action's governance programmes, designed to promote 'more accountable, inclusive and peaceful states and societies', reached more than 104 million people across nine countries, which two-thirds of this audience (67.2 million) regularly watching or listening.¹⁰⁷ Here, BBC Media Action use debate-style programmes to 'engage people in debate and discussion' and 'encourage communication across political, ethnic, religious and other social divides'.¹⁰⁸ According to data collected by BBC Media Action, 82.5 % of their governance programme audience members reported "improved knowledge" of key governance issues and 29.4% strongly agreed that BBC Media Action's factual governance programmes are playing a role in holding government to account.¹⁰⁹ In the same year, Media Action's governance programming in Nigeria reached more than half of the adult population, with 82.6% reporting that programmes that "increased their knowledge "a bit" or "a lot".¹¹⁰

However, there are limits to these kinds of ‘in-house’ surveys and they can rarely be held up to definitively prove “impact.” Here, Development Media International (DMI) and the London of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine have set something of a gold standard by developing a methodologically robust randomised trial of radio broadcast adverts in Burkina Faso aimed at improving child mortality rates; early indications of their collected data suggests a substantial adjusted difference in behaviours in the ‘intervention zones’¹¹¹. The researchers, perhaps rightly, claim that this is the ‘first randomised controlled trial to demonstrate that mass media can cause behaviour change.’¹¹²

In specific reference to VE, in 2012 Aldrich analysed the data of 1,000 survey respondents from Mali, Chad and Niger where USAID runs peace and tolerance radio programming in an attempt to measure the initiative’s impact in specific relation to CVE: he found that the data indicated ‘residents of communities where the United States has run educational, vocational, and capacity-building projects, such as Timbuktu in Mali, are more likely to listen to higher levels of peace and tolerance programming than similar, nearby communities such as Diré.’¹¹³ Furthermore, his analysis appeared to show that higher levels of listening ‘altered the norms and behaviours of listeners in ways that will connect them more firmly to the governance structures of their communities and make them more favourable to pursuing alliances with the West against terrorist groups.’¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that audiences in Timbuktu were exposed to programming for up to five years, indicating that even these modest findings required substantial time and investment. As a result, Aldrich concludes ‘the low-cost nature of radios and their broad reach should make them an attractive mechanism for Western governments seeking to carry out norm messaging in Africa.’¹¹⁵

However, Aldrich does not take into account the significance of how media platforms, whether on the radio or elsewhere, are perceived by their audiences. The issue of trust does not feature in his analysis. In addition, Aldrich concedes his results are, like similar data collected elsewhere, mixed and radio programming must not be seen as silver bullet solution.

More research is needed to establish whether and in what capacity media development projects such as those of BBC Media Action, Radio La Benovolencija, and SFCG, or development agencies, are able to influence conflict related attitudes, community relationships, and contribute to building inclusive identities. However, these provisional datasets demonstrate that media groups have the potential to influence substantial audiences in numerous ways, which will impact societal attitudes and potentially contribute to behaviour change. Unlike calls for counter-narrative strategies in CVE policy, calls for longer-term media strategies to play a greater role in CVE, peace-building and development are supported by an empirical evidence base.

It is therefore unsurprising that outside of the media development sector, the role for media programming in CVE is being increasingly recognised. A recent ‘agenda for action’ on countering violence extremism and promoting community resilience in the Greater Horn of Africa, funded by the Turkish and Norwegian governments, highlighted the potential for victims and survivors of violent extremism and former extremists to facilitate dialogue via the media: it was recommended that ‘[t]hrough their testimonies and targeted community and media outreach, victims can challenge and deglamorize violent extremist narratives and, importantly, disseminate a message of peace. Some initiatives have even included engagement between victims and former violent extremists, forming a powerful team of credible messengers for forgiveness and peace.’¹¹⁶ The same report emphasised the importance of ‘credible, community-based actors that represent the diversity of the sub-region are empowered—or, when necessary, established—to mitigate sociopolitical marginalization and relative deprivation of marginalised groups, and strengthen community cohesion and resistance to the lure of violent extremism.’¹¹⁷ This supports the analysis of BBC Media Action who identify the issue of trust as central to the success or failure of media development programming.¹¹⁸

At present there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of direct interventions to prevent VE, hate speech or identity-based violence.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, research by the US Institute for Peace found that as often and as intensively as possible, 'media interventions should be accompanied by face-to-face community outreach activities that provide...an opportunity to put into practice ideas and options that the media have brought to their attention.'¹²⁰ It is interesting that Twitter does the same, reaching out to communities not only to teach them about Twitter as a communication tool but also as a way of facilitating real life interaction and discussion.¹²¹ Just as media efforts to address HIV/AIDS were accompanied by medical provisions, practical strategies, community engagement, and often legislative or political support, media CVE agendas can only fulfill an aspect of a strategy.

Overall, there is a lack of rigorous impact evaluations in this area, and those that do exist tend inevitably to focus on individual case studies where localised factors necessarily play a part. There is a valuable corpus of grey literature produced from the NGO sector that already integrate media and communication strategies in their work around conflict, identity-based violence, peace building and CVE. While all organisations carry out evaluations, these NGOs should consider integrating independent academic monitoring and evaluations in their project design, not only to improve their own products but in order to harness and share evidence and lessons to be learnt.

2. Media assistance

Media assistance can be understood as CVE measure only in the long term, and from the perspective that an independent, inclusive and responsible media is conducive to a society that rejects VE, prejudice and division. This has led to the creation of organisations such as the Media Diversity Institute, which works internationally to encourage and facilitate responsible media coverage of diversity by developing and assisting local media producers.¹²²

Many of the projects discussed above could also be described as providing media assistance, integrating education-entertainment programming into existing media structures while building capacity and skills with the domestic sector.¹²³ NGOs also use media development programmes to increase inclusivity, representation and debate, and theoretically work to alter In Pakistan, SFCG seek to 'provide safe spaces for local, provincial and national dialogues on impact of conflict and peace on youth and children through community mobilisation and media outreach.'¹²⁴

The decision by USAID to invest large amounts in the construction of an extensive radio network across Afghanistan can be seen a more strategic example of such a project. Here, there were (and remain) two objectives; first, to counteract insurgent communications and 'win the hearts and minds' of the Afghan people, and second to help create a strong and independent media.¹²⁵ A 2010 report by the US Institute for Peace found that 'strategic communications policies have neither diminished nor adequately countered the presence of extremist voices in Afghanistan' and advised that media assistance should work formally with the Afghan media sector to enhance its credibility.¹²⁶ The need for trust and credibility again appears central, and the limits of media and communication projects seem evident when they are seen as beholden to or the mouthpiece of a political agenda.¹²⁷ Practical considerations too, explain the limited success of the USAID and Internews Afghan venture, and while the project failed to live up to its considerable objectives some positive impacts were recorded.¹²⁸

These efforts are supported by research of the USIP, which argues maximum media impact on conflict prevention and peacebuilding will occur when the following five strategies are employed:

1. Conflict-sensitive and peace journalism
2. Peace-promoting citizen media
3. Peace-promoting entertainment media
4. Advertising or social marketing for conflict prevention and peacebuilding
5. Media regulation to prevent incitement of violence¹²⁹

Therefore, according to the research and model of USIP, media assistance should be a core aspect of international development, as well as conflict prevention and peacebuilding, to ensure that at a time of crisis the local and domestic media are in the position to respond appropriately.

Another aspect of the media assistance approach is so-called citizen journalism, led by individuals are seen to be living at 'the coalface' of the threat or conflict, or otherwise associated with the affected communities. Grassroots initiatives in the former Yugoslav republics that emerged in the wake of the wars of the 1990s and in response to the stranglehold of the state over media platforms have played an important part in reshaping civil society by providing alternative sources of information.¹³⁰ In time, these initiatives became supported by western funds and have contributed to the substantial post-war changes in Balkan media.¹³¹ Organisations such as IWPR –the Institute for War and Peace Reporting– have built networks of journalists around the world, particularly in conflict affected regions.¹³² They do this by supporting local reporters, citizen journalists and civil society activists, and thereby strengthening the ability of media and civil society to speak out. This is supported by more traditional media assistance development, providing training, mentoring and platforms for professional and citizen reporters; building up the institutional capacity of media and civic groups; and working with independent and official partners to remove barriers to free expression, robust public debate and citizen engagement.¹³³

In contrast, spontaneous citizen journalist efforts emerge (and disappear) in response to direct threats, without the support of external funds. In Iraq and Syria citizen journalists remain an important source of information from ISIS and Assad controlled territories for NGOs, human rights organisations, states, and the displaced populations. The Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently initiative is rejecting the ISIS regime without any external assistance and provoking brutal responses from ISIS command, but it remains unclear how the presence of media platforms dedicated to exposing VE brutality to local and international audiences impacts VE recruitment or support during a time of violence.¹³⁴ Certainly there is scope for research into the trust communities place in different forms of citizen journalism, whether online or offline, and particularly in comparison to their own national or international media platforms. It is relevant, for example, that evidence increasingly suggests popular consumption of media does not necessarily reflect levels of public trust but rather habit and cultural tradition.¹³⁵ And while some research has been carried out into how citizen journalism is altering the media landscape, its capacity to influence attitudes or behaviour relating specifically to identity-based violence or CVE has not been studied.¹³⁶

This emerging research base in support of media with development goals and media assistance does not necessarily challenge more traditional concerns posed by media scholars that plurality in fragile or conflict affected states can contribute to instability.¹³⁷ BBC Media Action, for example, often focus on providing inclusive platforms via the media, and are collecting quantitative and qualitative data that suggests simply witnessing "someone like me" share a platform with "others unlike me" can encourage positive attitudes around tolerance and understanding of other.¹³⁸ There is an even greater and growing evidence base around the capacity of drama to address difficult and culturally or politically sensitive issues such as identity, women's rights, inter-cultural and post-conflict relationships.¹³⁹ This evidence-base is building on the already established literature of the instrumental role of media and communication in shifting public health attitudes, and in humanitarian crises such as the ebola epidemic or natural disasters.

3. Targeting hate speech

In law, hate speech is usually described as any speech, gesture, writing, or display that may incite violence or prejudicial action against or by a protected individual or group, or because it disparages or intimidates a protected individual or group. Efforts to prevent media stakeholders from intentionally or unintentionally spreading prejudice, intolerance and hatred which can lead to social tensions, disputes and violent conflict, occurs in numerous ways. In the UK and elsewhere, anti-racism movements have successfully pushed certain words to the very margins of society, and most countries have adopted some form of legislation that prohibits incitement to violence and hate speech.¹⁴⁰

As was discussed earlier in the paper, there is an emerging evidence base that supports much older qualitative research showing how the unrestrained use of hate speech towards a certain group can affect the social parameters of what is and is not acceptable, and thereby lead to acts of violence being committed against the targeted group. Professor Gregory Stanton, stalwart of the genocide prevention sector, identifies several patterns of communication in his 10 stages of genocide that can be seen in the propaganda outputs of many contemporary VE groups from Britain First to ISIS.¹⁴¹ These include symbolisation (whether through the use of hate symbols such as the Swastika to incite fear, or symbols that classify the 'other,' for example the Yellow Star for Jews under Nazi rule or the blue scarf or people from the Eastern Zone in Cambodia) dehumanisation (where the targeted group is identified as 'without humanity' either as animals or vermin, or in ISIS communication as being non-believers or infidels), polarisation (drives groups apart and psychologically separates communities), and preparation (where plans for IBV are discussed explicitly).¹⁴²

In response to the growing body of evidence and research into hate speech as an early warning sign of identity based mass violence, particularly genocide, the Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect at the United Nations released a set of policy recommendations with the aim of assisting State and the international community in preventing the incitement of atrocity violence and the conditions that can lead to violence: The list of 41 policy options sets forth a comprehensive framework for states, media producers and other stakeholders that places an awareness of central issues such as identity, division, hate speech and incitement to violence at its heart.¹⁴³ The recommendations were the outcome of a series of events organised by The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OCHR) held throughout 2011-12, involving 45 experts from different backgrounds and where more than 200 observers participated in debates.¹⁴⁴

The recommendations highlight the responsibilities of media producers and the state to challenge hate speech, through regulation and legislation but also by promoting media pluralism to ensure no communities are excluded. While the recommendations are framed by the state responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocity crimes they apply equally to CVE because the processes identified in the document also lead to VE or other forms of IBV.¹⁴⁵

The set of recommendations should be seen as a culmination of research and debate into the relationship between hate speech and identity-based violence. While not all recommendations are likely to be popular with all stakeholders, they should serve as evidence-based guidance for all researchers, media stakeholders and policy makers engaged with current CVE. It is worth noting too that the OSCE also has a series of useful publications and guidelines for their member states on preventing hate crimes, including strategies for combatting hate speech.¹⁴⁶ The growing empirical evidence base regarding the relationship between hate speech, prejudice, and IBV, suggests media producers and communication platforms could do more to integrate codes of conduct or community guidelines informed by the research.¹⁴⁷

As the examples above suggest, tackling hate speech requires a far more comprehensive strategy than simply banning or blocking content.¹⁴⁸ Rather, it requires an holistic approach that addresses the root causes of tension and division within societies, and demonstrates a commitment from the state down to avoid casual stereotyping, dehumanising 'others', and not tolerating even small acts of hatred.

4. Media and communications as a rapid response

There is consensus that as opportunities to share information spontaneously continues to increase, so too do the opportunities to share incorrect or 'alternative' outputs. The World Economic Forum identified the spread of misinformation as one of its top ten trends for 2014.¹⁴⁹ Looking beyond individual acts of terrorism to incidents of IBV or VE that have involved community participation, online or telephony communications have been identified as being a possible tool of prevention, as well as simultaneously having the potential to perpetuate, or even instigate violent crisis.¹⁵⁰

The London riots in summer 2011 were in part organised via telephony instant messenger communication. At the same time, new communication technology facilitated the spread of misinformation through rumour among those monitoring the story; for example it was initially reported that rioters had set fire to a children's hospital. However, users on the same online information and communication platform (Twitter) swiftly debunked the rumour, well ahead of official confirmation from the hospital and media.¹⁵¹ A study of how social media was used during the parades and protests that took place in Northern Ireland in July 2014 showed how the medium was used to 'spread false information and rumours' and, crucially, that this is resulted 'in an increase in both inter-communal tensions and fear within communities.'¹⁵² However, just as during the London riots, social media in Northern Ireland is also recognised as providing an opportunity for the policy force and others to provide accurate information and dispel rumour.¹⁵³

While the case of the London riots does not concern issues of extremism, the episode is valuable not only as a marker of how new technology can mobilise, but its capacity to spontaneously create a temporary community whose collective identity is marked by a suspension of normal moral standard –or a different shared understanding of what is now (and is nor usually) permissible. The case of the Kenya elections in 2010, provides a similar case study and one that was more clearly identity-based; Claims that SMS messaging were used to inflame tensions and coordinate individuals that wished to participate in the violence resulted in a wave of technology-orientated projects using the same technology to counter rumour and incitement.¹⁵⁴ The trend also prompted SFCG to implement a seven month project in Central African Republic where messages of peace, reconciliation and social cohesion were sent via SMS in such as a way as to discourage community-level violence.¹⁵⁵ 93% of respondents considered SMS to be an effective way of communicating messages of peace, and the vast majority because it was a way of reaching a large number of people.¹⁵⁶

In the Kenya's Tana Delta, the Sentinel Project's Una Hakika has been mapping and countering misinformation that contributes to violence in the region. Una Hakika is an information service which provides subscribers with neutral, accurate information in response to rumours that arise in the Tana Delta.¹⁵⁷ Most of the communication for Una Hakika takes place through SMS but also allows for voice calls and the engagement of volunteer community ambassadors, again emphasising the consensus among those on the ground that technological strategies alone is insufficient in countering the threat of conflict or division. Evidence collected by the Sentinel Project identifies seven categories of rumour that were reported to Una Hakika in 2014; however, rather than use these themes to inform counter-narrative responses, the rumours have been deconstructed with reference to the wider context of the communities involved and researchers have been able to identify the distinct motivations, audiences and impacts of the separate strands of rumour.¹⁵⁸

Media and communication focused development strategies in peace-building or post-conflict situations could benefit from this body of literature. For example, the radio remains the primary source of information for many around the world and it would be interesting to investigate whether lessons drawn from recent studies of emergency radio broadcasting during natural disasters or public health crises, together with the findings discussed above relating to identity-based rumour, could provide a research road map for the role of radio in violent or potentially violent contexts.

Every-day public efforts to counter everyday extremism appear to be growing online but the impact of these interactions remains unclear. Facebook has publicly stated that it considers what it calls “counter-speech” –and the tools that their platform provides to help promote it– play a critical role in standing up to hate speech and other extremist content: Facebook suggests that this is not only an effective way to tackle the problem but, crucially, argue it is also more likely to succeed in the long run than other alternatives.¹⁵⁹ These claims are somewhat supported by a recent DEMOS report of right-wing extremist behaviour online, which found ‘on counter-speech [Facebook] pages, “constructive counter-speech” and “constructive discussion” were the most popular and successful types of comment, but that constructive comments only made up 6 percent of the total.¹⁶⁰ These findings could illustrate that a large volume of contributions that simply refute VE narratives have a measurably lesser impact than constructive conversation.

Finally, more research is needed into the spontaneous inter-group dialogues already taking place online. In Northern Ireland, social media has become a ‘central feature of the community engagement strategy’ of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), and is increasing the transparency of the policing of both parades and protests in NI in that and requires the PSNI to be answerable on accessible platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.¹⁶¹ Similarly, analysis of anti-Sunni, anti-Shia and counter-sectarian Twitter messages suggests that users do not communicate in ideologically homogenous communities (or echo chambers) but use the platform to communicate with and respond to each other, suggesting the platform is providing a space for Shia-Sunni dialogue.¹⁶²

Key findings

1. This review suggests the theoretical foundations of these alternative approaches differ significantly from the assumptions that underpin counter-narrative strategies and are supported by a stronger and more established research base, drawn from the multi-disciplinary fields of development, peace-building, and social cohesion.
2. The need for trust and credibility again is crucial, and the limits of media and communication projects seem evident when they are seen as beholden to or the mouthpiece of a political agenda
3. There is a growing evidence base suggesting that radio and television drama addressing issues of identity, reconciliation, and tolerance has an impact on public attitudes and behaviour
4. Media assistance should be a core aspect of international development, as well as conflict prevention and peacebuilding, to ensure that at a time of crisis the local and domestic media are in the position to respond appropriately
5. There is scope for research into the trust communities place in different forms of citizen journalism, whether online or offline, and particularly in comparison to their own national or international media platforms.
6. Witnessing “someone like me” share a platform with “others unlike me” can have encourage positive attitudes around tolerance and understanding of other.
7. The projects that are most successful do not seek to comprehensively reshape the status quo, but rather aim to facilitate conversation, encourage awareness, or dispel misinformation.

8. The growing empirical evidence base regarding the relationship between hate speech, prejudice, and IBV, suggests media producers and communication platforms could do more to integrate codes of conduct or community guidelines informed by the research.
9. Tackling hate speech requires a far more comprehensive strategy than simply banning or blocking content; it requires an holistic approach that addresses the root causes of tension and division within societies
10. More research is needed into the spontaneous inter-group dialogues already taking place online.
11. There is an emerging evidence base regarding the potential for rapid reaction media and communication strategies in situations where there is a threat of identity-based violence, such as dispelling rumour or appealing for calm.

Reflections

This survey presents what is a fairly fragmented research landscape relating to the efficacy or effectiveness of media and communication strategies in contemporary CVE efforts. The potential for mass media to influence communities, societies and individuals is clear yet precisely how this capacity can be employed by democracies and NGOs in pursuit of peace and security remains largely unknown. Some of the literature reviewed here suggests this may be changing. Many academics and NGOs are building an evidence base that demonstrates the impacts media can have around the world by contributing to, or inhibiting, social cohesion development, good governance, and post-conflict dialogue and reconciliation. However, this review has also illuminated where many of the gaps in knowledge and of evidence lie.

The exercise has revealed the failure of different disciplines and sectors to communicate their knowledge and expertise. With over one hundred years of academic study and decades of practical initiatives, the corpus of information relevant to the relationship between media, violence and identity is vast. Research rich areas such as the study of identity, media consumption habits, or the capacity for mass media to influence social norms should provide useful resources for all those studying CVE and media. The overwhelming focus upon contemporary VIE throughout the academic and non-academic material is striking. Academic research from five or ten years ago into far right extremism online appears rarely in current thinking regarding the threat of VIE online.¹⁶³ Similarly, the canon of research and practical experience relating to Northern Ireland, former Yugoslavia, the Great Lakes, and other identity-based crises are seldom acknowledged in current CVE policy and policy oriented research.¹⁶⁴ Addressing VE or IBV as a whole as well as focussing group specifics could not only discourage stigmatisation of Muslims and Muslim communities but also promote a more diverse CVE research culture that would be able to draw upon a more substantial literature base as well as many relevant lessons learnt across time, geography, and context.¹⁶⁵

The need for academics, policy makers, practitioners, and think-tanks to come together more frequently and communicate their findings or work collaboratively is a common challenge. Interdisciplinary research grants and conferences would open what is currently a narrow field to a more diverse intellectual conversation, especially if these promoted networking between sectors.

As the internet continues to expand and as usage and access increases, the online environment will almost certainly become, as Jared Cohen described, a virtual battleground.¹⁶⁶ Information has always been part of the warfighter's arsenal.¹⁶⁷ The capabilities of the internet, unlike other communication platforms, far outstretch its capacity as the world's greatest information resource or as the most diverse facilitator of communication; via the internet, it is possible to obtain personal details, hack into the communication platforms of others, and disable entire infrastructures.¹⁶⁸ However, there is no evidence to suggest that the fundamental battle for hearts and minds has changed so substantially. Democracies continue to face the same challenge they always have; to balance security and protection, with freedoms and values.

What has changed is the rapid increase in opportunities for individuals around the globe to participate in VE debate or CVE debate. Education, whether through media and communication strategies or the classroom, will play an important part of how societies adjust to this change, but so too will the decisions democracies take of how to respond.

We know that media producers and media platforms have enormous capacity to influence opinion and shape decision making but the internet is also enabling spontaneous and temporary social movements to direct attention.¹⁶⁹ This was demonstrated during summer 2015 when the image of three-year old Aylan Kurdi lying dead on a Turkish beach was seen on 20 million screens in twelve

hours, and led directly to the shift in political debate in the UK around the refugee crisis in Europe: researchers from Sheffield University have shown how initial postings by a handful of journalists soon went viral with 53,000 tweets per hour – a social media storm which saw a transformation of the language around what was happening in Europe, with use of the word “refugee” outstripping “migrant.”¹⁷⁰

The research and many practical initiatives surveyed for this project suggests that interest in the relationship between media and violence is undergoing something of a revival.¹⁷¹ As Putin’s disinformation campaigns threaten to revive Cold War practices of information wars between the east and the west, it is important to remember the necessary limits of a democratic media.¹⁷² No media strategy has ever been able to influence everybody. It is therefore difficult to conceive of a counter-narrative strategy that can ever be fully successful; rather than reaching out to the masses, the efficacy of counter-narratives rest upon the successful targeting of a minority, or individuals. As counter-terrorism expert Brian Jenkins wrote for RAND in 2010, recruitment will continue, prevention will not always work and there will, occasionally, be bloodshed.¹⁷³

However, the responsibility rests upon researchers, and those who commission research, to expand our knowledge base, and to provide the evidence for decision-making in CVE policy, media, and technology industries.

End-notes

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ANNEX I

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