

Short Notice: Counter narratives don't work – it is proven

The expert network Soufan Group recently reconfirmed by way of empirical investigation what numerous field practitioners (mostly from the RAN network) have observed: that counter narratives in the internet do not reach the target groups which they have expressly been designed for. The Soufan Group's inquiry on this question looked at the 17,676 followers of the highly radicalizing aka@ShamiWitness account (by Mehdi Masroor Biswas, an account which has meanwhile been closed down) and the 19,275 followers of the U.S. State Department's counter-messaging social media program called "Think Again Turn Away" (using the Twitter account @ThinkAgain_DOS) which by many criteria is a high-end and well thought through online counter narrative tool. As result the inquiry had determined: Among these roughly 37K users "there were only five accounts in common, and all of those were journalists or academics". The analysts concluded: "The two circles of followers do not overlap. This is understandable since it is unlikely that vulnerable people feeling disaffected or disconnected from society would choose to follow an openly government-run social media account."¹

The field practitioners from RAN Derad/ Prevent and similar fora would go beyond this conclusion and add the assumption that even if one could expose individuals from the main client audiences to these educational and informational video productions, this approach would not work regardless of who is figuring as producer. Hence, videos of this kind, or indeed any internet based videos, would not be able to have a positive impact on them – for psychological reasons that are elaborated in more depth in *Do we really need "counter narratives"? And what would that be anyway?* (<http://cultures-interactive.de/publikationen-en.html>).

In another Intelligence Briefing (Intelbrief) of the Soufan Group network (on the White House Summit on CVE, in Feb. 2015)² the authors made a more principle remark about CVE policy making – which however seems to apply to media/ internet policies in particular. The authors do not only caution any unwarranted hopes and expectations about the internet as factor of deradicalisation. They also state in a more general perspective on current CVE discourses: "What briefs well in presentations to policy-makers likely won't work with the actual people who need the message". This seems to indicate a general impression that doubts not only about online tools and the countering ideology but also about other, yet unspecified issues of responding to violent extremism have been around for quite some time among field embedded professionals – but don't seem to be able the get heard by policy makers.

Hence, the idea of counter narrative internet platforms seems to be just too attractive for many stakeholders in politics, the media and policy consulting – and openly pondering that, in fact, not

1 Countering Online Extremism. <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-countering-extremism-online/>. The Soufan Group 2014, quoted March 2015.

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

much can be done in the internet anyway, seems too much against these stakeholders' convictions and interests. Moreover, the consequential conclusion of such insight might also have difficulties "to brief well": that rather than investing more in internet and video productions more funds should be invested in human resource and practitioner experts who are experienced and skilled in direct interpersonal interventions of prevention and disengagement (deradicalisation)/ rehabilitation work.

This leads us to what may be the most interesting aspect of this inquiry which, however, is easily overlooked, namely the point in time when it was conducted: December 2014. Apparently there wasn't any interest in checking this fairly simple question at any time before December 2014 while quite substantial lobbying of counter narrative initiatives has been going on for quite some years. Moreover, the Soufan Group, not having engaged in media campaigns at all, may certainly not count among those organization which should have felt obliged to check on the counter narrative ideology's base assumptions by way of empirical investigation. This reconfirms the earlier assumption that, at this point in time, specific interests seem to be more prevalent than developing evidence based and quality assured solutions.