

**Thoughts about limits and possibilities a focus video
for media-based interventions of preventing violent extremism
in Germany –
Synergies/ differences between the Counter Narrative Project (CNP
London) and the European Deradicalising Narratives Project (EDNA, Berlin)**

Internal working paper – Harald Weilnböck, Jan. 2015

Reflecting on the first project meeting of the Counter Narrative Project (CNP) in London, Oct 2014, some ideas and suggestions came to mind on how the focus video for a media-based intervention of preventing violent extremism could probably look like when created for German audiences.

It was very inspirational for us to view the Canadian video (Daniel); and I was impressed by its overall narrative approach. It also helped us to understand which particular potentials exist and which cultural differences/ sensitivities we need to take into account when producing a focus video in Germany. Consequently I tried to put together some corner stone of a tentative concept for a German video – see beneath.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KumZuvQfack&list=UUkAC0rDIgJgIXW6wrS1gy9Q>;
<http://prezi.com/bvylfkzd1wnu/daniel-ed-res-v1/>)

As to the differences/sensitivities and potentials; in this respect the following points came to mind (and I feel I should check with others in Germany, teachers/ educators how their reaction and thinking is):

- (1) One of the greatest potentials of the CN project might be a very simple one: **its European dimension**, brining products from different MS and cultural areas together. Once the partner countries develop their very national videos which answer to national circumstances and their historically given situation it might be a simple and great asset to just translate the various products, exchange them with the other MS's, encourage each of them to engage in a process of discussion and/or evaluation on the videos, capture this process in some way and then also share it cross-nationally. (My apologies if this is already foreseen in the project proposal).

- (2) One great advantage of how the Canadian product is cast is its strictly **narrative modus** – in the sense of sharing and conveying personally lived through experiences. I am a big proponent of narrative approaches (and have written about this at some occasions; if you want to read into this ... <http://www.cultures-interactive.de/publikationen-en.html>, http://www.weilnboeck.net/pages_en/essays.html).

There is something inherently therapeutic in establishing an extended narrative space which of course takes a longer duration in time and isn't very easily captured in short videos. But even short videos can be more or less narrative and we should strive for having a **high degree of narrativity**, I think. It is maybe no coincidence that already in the Canada project much narrative material seems to have been collected on audio. I have many hours of audios with some of my interlocutors and think they will be a valuable asset for the project work.

In fact I would always feel the need to prepare any potential interview partner by some state of the art **narrative biographical interviewing** beforehand – which might be similar to what is intuitively done by the film team in preparatory talks with the interviewee (it might be a methodologically somewhat more rigorous procedure though).

Also I am aware of a **project in the US** which currently switches from counter messaging to more narrative media formats of preventive media products. I will ask these colleagues whether and at what point in time they want to exchange.

- (3) One interviewee group that has not yet been considered but might have quite some potential is: **practitioners of prevent and derad work**. These people cannot only speak about what extremism is but how to go about it in terms of practical interventions. This might be the most important issue if one also aims for build resilient societies and support sustainable awareness work. A society that has no clue and is ill-informed about what it takes to do effective rehabilitation work cannot be resilient.
- (4) One significant difference between the Germany and the **Anglo-Saxon** cultural sphere might be that there doesn't seem to be the same discourse on **confession and redemption** – which is a key element in the mise-en-scene of the Daniel video. This cultural discourse seems to be more prevalent in Anglo-Saxon countries, less so in Germany and possibly in

other continental MSs. Also, not only is this discourse and its narrative patterns lesser familiar in Germany. As far as they are known and practiced in Germany they do not enjoy the same credibility and appreciation as in Anglo-Saxon countries. Rather they tend to be looked at with some degree of suspicion by quite a few groups of people across various societal sectors.

Hence, to my estimation there is a high risk that videos like the Daniel video are viewed idiosyncratically as **Hollywood style production** which is then often associated with a lack of credibility and integrity. And this attitude may be found on various levels of practitioners (not to speak of young people, if they are only remotely near to our target groups) as well as of policy makers – maybe somewhat dependent on their party political affiliation.

To be as frank and precise as possible on this point: **The risk** is that the video production is shrugged off and derided, even more cause a polemic which suggests that the German makers were buying into (and “selling out to”) a Hollywood style marketing of their subject matter which plays up to Google, Youtube etc. corporate image strategies. The assumption or rather **the reproach would be** that this German producer’s/ partner’s main interest is to attract money and power. The critique would be that this organization gives away its independence, prolongs current misunderstandings on VE and make political compromises in the methodology of its work – and succumb to buying into the US American views of the world and of counter terrorism in particular. As unfair as this would be in view of the truly impressive product from Canada this would most likely happen to any similar project coming out of Germany.

In fact, for some reasons, these idiosyncrasies might be least impairing on conservative policy makers and population which has little or no firsthand experience or contact with the subject matter. This might bring up the question of the **target group**. One colleague that I discussed the Daniel video commented that in some sense the subconscious targeted group of this video seems to be upper range policy makers and politicians. Maybe it makes sense for the project team to have a reflection on target group. There might be other implicit target groups of our projects that we are not sufficiently aware of. Even if we stick only to what is defined as formal and informal education (schools, community) already this definition of target group/ areas of application spans a wide array of quite different young people.

One practical implication of this (and some other specifically German context markers) it might be even harder in Germany than in other countries to win an ex-perpetrator to be seen and talk openly about his past in a video.

Suggestion:

- I would suggest to check with other colleagues in Germany (teachers/educators) both in schools and social work, also both inner city and rural areas how their reaction and further ideas on all this is showing them the video.

Question:

- The Daniel video hasn't been tested yet has it? It was mentioned in the meeting that it seems highly unlikely, even impossible, that it is rolled out within Canadian school structures. Why is that and is there maybe ways in community work structures where one could test/ role out? Overall we probably don't know enough about how the Daniel video would work with various target groups. It would be quite worthwhile to examine this with different audiences.

(5) Another difference – or characteristic – of the German context is that class rooms and community social work spheres seem to be more politicized areas, or **contested areas** – in terms of political affinity, activism and personal experience of having been victimization by rightwing or other violent extremism or having been on the perpetrator or bystander side of this. Hence, different perspectives and agendas on how VE should be addressed in a video, who should address it and in which ways this should be done will exist side by side in one class room.

Therefore, concentrating on **the human face of a long time ago ex-perpetrator** is likely to meet quite some hesitation and resistance by prevent facilitators and audiences who feel that the actual face of violent extremism should be more graspable as opposed to the more historic perspective on a repentant ex-offender. It might also be resisted by people who feel to be **on the victim side** of current VE and/or pursue an agenda of political struggle against it, while also feeling that state authorities – including schools – have in many ways involuntarily and consciously sided with the “more orderly and neat” neoNazis (as opposed to the leftist

counter-culture individuals which seem less orderly to the mainstream bourgeois perspective).

- (6) One issue – and no-go – in particular needs to be stressed when working in a contemporary German context: Never ever mention rightwing and **leftwing extremism** in one sentence as if the topographical symmetry would compel us to do so. Never suggest, in Germany (and actually most other countries) that leftwing extremism might be an issue which deserves to be compared and dealt with in the same context than rightwing neo-Nazi movements and activities. For, briefly speaking, (a) there is no leftwing extremism in Germany, and there hasn't been any in the last twenty years, (b) however, German center rightwing politicians have systematically evoked a danger of leftwing extremism thus equating leftwing activism (of which small fractions sometimes and in quite controlled ways also embark on physical fight against state forces, but do not support any group-orientated hatred or anti-democratic agenda) with murderous neo-Nazi groups, (c) leftwing and/or counter culture activists have in many cases and areas been engaged in monitoring extremism and providing victim aid when and where state authorities were, for various reasons, incapable of effectively doing so.

The politics on this has been quite intense and **traumatic during recent year**; extremism issues have been abused politically in drastic manners, some bitter lessons have been learned, others still not dealt with, some political damage left over (which does not need to be repeated in other MS). This is why the misperception that there is leftwing extremism (in Germany) which by any measure deserved to be compared with rightwing violent extremism, should by all means be avoided. Making a mistake with regard to the discourse on leftwing extremism in Germany would mean to mess up things big time – causing added damage rather than added value.

This might be hard to grasp for non-Germans; if you want to read more on this I have written on this in Engl.; see on

http://www.weilnboeck.net/pages_en/essays.html

“The invention of “left-wing violent extremism” a discourse deflecting from neo-Nazi extremism? – an earlier version on this plus an extended summary attached.

As a possible short cut, you may want to go for the keyword “extremism clause”.

(7) In Germany in particular it would seem risky and potentially counter-productive to strive for a **politically neutral/ apolitical** or beyond-politics approach (which has probably become clear already in the above issues). Historically, as to apolitical or beyond-politics approaches, there were some hard lessons learned which go back as far the 1990s (at least) when Angela Merkel, then still family/ youth minister, commissioned a strictly apolitical anti-aggression/ anti-violence strategy for prevent and intervention work (when after reunification neo-Nazim was on a dramatic rise). The whole program (Agag) failed in some crucial respects and caused lasting conflicts and distrust within then professional community and also in relation to media and policy making (comparable to but different in nature from UK's Prevent 1 program).

Tentative conclusions:

To conclude, there are great potentials to create an intrinsically narrative video and implementation tool in Germany because there isn't anything in place yet. Moreover, the didactic civic educational videos which exist reveal an embarrassing naivety about what radicalization really is and how it really works.

There are, however, some particular risks and possible pitfalls for any such work in a German context which would endanger the success of the project.

Three main risks stand out:

- to copy the Anglo-Saxon discourse pattern on confession and redemption and to focus on one single ex-perpetrator individual
- to produce a maximally apolitical narrative that tries to steer free from all issues of national politics and policy making and from all grievances that might play a role in the areas and communities that are most truck by VE – but also import on the national media discourse on VE and CVE
- to not address the most controversial, divisive and traumatic political issue around German anti-extremism discourses – the issue of so-called leftwing extremism

As to possible solutions:

In light of the above assumptions, the following measures seem recommendable:

- to have more than one single individual in the video. So the question would be how many individuals can one have in such video and still be narrative?
- to have more than one interviewee *group* (formers preferably both genders, family, facilitators, etc.) thus underlining the systemic, societal and multi-agency perspective of the issue
- as far as formers are concerned, have at least on former's voice/ face that is blurred/ anonymized in order to communicate the implications of speaking out about this issue in public
- in particular, also include practitioners of derad (but rather portray from a personal and biographical angle); they can speak about how intervention work functions (not only about what VE is).
- to include grievances and political issues that pertain to CVE in the country while at the same time avoiding politicizing, arguing or getting into a partisan kind of discourse. To this end one could try to find and win an interlocutor who is a practitioner and can testify to the political issues while the main focus is on methodology.

Rather, integrating into the video some explicit voices from a leftwing background person commenting on and clarifying relevant issue seems paramount for any video in Germany. However, to avoid any sort of political partisanship these voice need to be non-political human voices, the message narrative and not argumentative. This seems feasible when finding leftwing or counter culture victims of rightwing extremism; also facilitators of prevent and derad intervention work who sometimes are also victims/survivors would be good. This seems worthwhile the extra efforts to find such individuals which is, of course, not always easy.