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Sommario

I.

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

MARCO LOMBARDI - BARBARA LUCINI - MARCO MAIOLINO
Beyond counter- and alternative narratives to tackle extremism:
the new Format model..... 7

BARBARA LUCINI
Soft skills for governing new threats: training methods for LEAs
in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalisation 45

II.

A FOCUS ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM

DANIELE MARIA BARONE
The institutional symmetry of an asymmetric conflict.
A State - State rivalry throughout Daesh's Soft-Power 69

TOMMASO LONGO
Misoginia online: le nuove forme di radicalizzazione all'interno
del terrorismo Incel 85

III.

INSIGHTS ON SECURITY, INTELLIGENCE & CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

DANIELE PLEBANI
Dalla Business continuity verso la Social continuity: società,
criminali e terroristi alla prova di COVID-19..... 103

CARMINE DE VITO
Crisi Istituzionale in Bolivia. Il Modello Geopolitico delle Partite
Internazionali. Introduzione al Concetto di Intelligence di Posizione 115

MARCO LUCCHIN
Cultural Diplomacy in Russia: identità e cultura
come evoluzione del Paese..... 139

GIACOMO BUONCOMPAGNI
Cyber-risk, cyber-migration. For a new human geography
and security 157

Beyond counter- and alternative narratives to tackle extremism: the new Format model¹

MARCO LOMBARDI - BARBARA LUCINI - MARCO MAIOLINO

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¹ This article presents some outcomes of the research work developed by the authors within the EU funded Terrorism prevention Via radicalisation counter-Narrative – TRIVALENT project, <https://trivalent-project.eu>.

Abstract

Il concetto di Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) è stato introdotto in Europa nel 2004-2005, a seguito dei devastanti attacchi terroristici di Madrid e Londra; dal momento della sua introduzione tale concetto è apparso all'interno di una miriade di contributi e, sebbene scaturito dalla minaccia emanata dall'estremismo religioso, è trasversale alle diverse tipologie di estremismo.

Continua a mancare una definizione internazionalmente condivisa di terrorismo e di estremismo violento, così come non vi è consenso né su cosa il CVE precisamente costituisca né sulle forme che lo contraddistinguono; il CVE è interpretato come comprensivo di svariate attività intraprese a diversi livelli, facendo emergere un'importante questione di coordinamento.

Nel quadro del CVE e non senza controversie, il contrasto alla comunicazione estremista ha avuto un ruolo di rilievo sin dal principio e, oltre alla sua mera distruzione, contro-narrative e narrative alternative hanno trovato ampio spazio di sviluppo ed applicazione, mostrando potenziale e limiti significativi.

All'interno di questo articolo, le contro-narrative e narrative alternative nel CVE sono oggetto di un'analisi Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) che, nelle pagine seguenti, è presentata nella metodologia e realizzata.

L'analisi SWOT evidenzia il bisogno di innovare lo sforzo di comunicazione strategica in maniera da svilupparne la capacità di adattarsi ad un contesto in continua e rapida evoluzione, nonché da incrementarne l'efficacia nel contrasto all'estremismo violento. Con tali finalità viene presentato il modello format.

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) as a concept was introduced in Europe in 2004-2005, following the devastating terrorist attacks against the Cercanías commuter train system of Madrid and the metropolitan infrastructure of London, and since then has appeared in innumerable strategic documents².

The introduction of CVE was sparked by the threat of religious extremism, although it is a framework that could also be easily extended to other types of extremism (political, single-issue, etc.).

In view of the fact that no internationally accepted definitions currently exist for either "terrorism" or "violent extremism", just as there is a lack of consensus over the precise meaning of CVE and what forms it should take.

As reported in the website of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), CVE tends to comprise the *"use of non-coercive means to dissuade individuals or groups from mobilizing towards violence and to mitigate recruitment, support, facilitation or engagement in ideologically motivated terrorism by non-state actors in furtherance of political objectives (Khan, 2015)"*³. Moreover, CVE is understood to cover a wide range of activities which are undertaken at many different levels by, for instance, States, supranational entities, international organisations, academia, the private sector and civil society, revealing a significant issue of coordination to exist. Within the framework of Countering Violent Extremism, and although controversial, combating extremist communication with the potential to incite violence has had an important

² O. Frazer, C. Nunlist, *The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism*, ETH Zurich, CSS Analyses in Security Policies, N0. 183, December 2015 <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse183-EN.pdf>.

³ UNODC website <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/terrorism/module-2/key-issues/preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html> in H. Khan, *Why Countering Extremism Fails: Washington's Top-Down Approach to Prevention Is Flawed*, Foreign Affairs, 18 February. 2015.

role to play since the beginning and, apart from merely disrupting it, counter- and alternative narratives have been widely developed and implemented, showing some potential as well as significant limitations.

In this paper, counter- and alternative narratives in CVE are the subject of a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis which is presented methodologically and developed in the following pages.

The analysis underlines the need to renew the strategic communication effort, to increase its ability to adapt to the evolving scenario and its effectiveness in countering extremist communication. The format model is proposed in view of these purposes.

Keywords

Violent extremism, communication, swot analysis, format model

1. SWOT analysis of counter- and alternative narratives in CVE

1.1 Methodology

The European Commission's knowledge sharing platform for development cooperation Capacity4dev⁴ enlists the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis in its evaluation methodological approach by saying that it "*belongs to the group of tools studying the relevance and possible coherence of specific programmes or entire strategies*"⁵.

Within this contribution, the SWOT analysis has been selected not only because of its acknowledged relevance, but also for its straightforwardness and adequacy to support decision-making.

It is an analytical tool attributed to the American business and management consultant Albert S. Humphrey⁶ and was first applied in the business arena. It represents a valuable instrument for the analysis of strategies, organisations and specific programmes, supporting their assessment and improvement, and is suitable for broad-spectrum use, namely *ex ante*, intermediary and *ex post* analysis.

Furthermore, the SWOT analysis represents a flexible tool which can be adapted and respond to specific needs, while maintaining an unchanged objective⁷.

⁴ Capacity4dev website available at <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/about-us>.

⁵ Capacity4dev.eu, Evaluation methodological approach, https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/evaluation_guidelines/minisite/en-methodological-bases-and-approach/evaluation-tools/swot-strengths-weakness-opportuniti-0.

⁶ A. Humphrey, *Analysis for Management Consulting*, SRI Alumni Newsletter, SRI International, United States, 2005.

⁷ For this reason it may translate into a multitude of acronyms such as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Limitations (SWOL), Successes, Weaknesses, Potentials, Obstacles (SWPO),

In terms of practical operation, the SWOT analysis consists of a matrix (Figure 1) that, with the support of selected resources⁸, takes into account the factors that comprise and affect the strategy, organisation or program that is being analysed, and highlights positive and negative aspects which help or hinder, respectively the achievement of the objective with a view to maximizing the former and minimizing the latter.

Figure 1 - Sample of a SWOT matrix



Source: www.Business-Docs.co.uk

In particular, the factors that make up the strategy, organisation or programme that is the subject of analysis are divided into internal and external factors, where:

- *internal factors* are those that are typical of the strategy, organisation or program that is being analysed;
- *external factors* are those typical of the context within which the strategy, organisation or program operates.

While their positive (P) and negative (N) aspects are categorised into:

- *Strengths* (P) and *Weaknesses* (N) that characterise the strategy, organisation or program;
- *Opportunities* (P) and *Threats* (N) substantiated by the context.

Successes, Weaknesses, Aims, Problems (SWAP), Successes, Opportunities, Failures, Threats (SOFT).

⁸ As much as the tool, these resources are flexible. They may be of a different nature (internal, external, primary, secondary, etc.), used alone as well as in combination https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/evaluation_guidelines/minisite/en-methodological-bases-and-approach/evaluation-tools/swot-strengths-weakness-opportunities-0.

In accordance to the methodology presented above, this paper develops an ex post SWOT analysis, based on selected resources and focused on programmes, namely the counter- and alternative narratives applied to counter violent extremism to date.

1.2 Internal factors

The identification and analysis are supported by resources that are considered to be comprehensive in terms of spectrum and up to date (at least) at the EU level, if not necessarily the most directly relevant in the field. That is:

- The report “*Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices*” of the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN)⁹;
- The study “*Countering Terrorist Narratives*” of the Directorate General for Internal policies of the Union¹⁰.

Together, these sources funnel the point of view of many experts and consider about 40 initiatives of counter- and alternative narratives undertaken mainly in the European context, also containing some important examples applied beyond EU borders.

Starting from this premise, the internal factors of the counter- and alternative narratives have been identified in the:

- (i) Levels to which the strategic communication effort has been applied;
- (ii) Methods by which the strategic communication effort has been applied.

In recent years counter- and alternative narratives have found ample application internationally, and it is important to note that they have translated into communication efforts that have occasionally benefited from cooperation between different actors. However, two main levels of communication to which counter- and alternative narratives have been applied may be pinpointed:

- *Institutional*: through the support, facilitation and direct action of institutions; for example, religious institutions, international organisations, supranational actors, and States¹¹;

⁹ Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Collection of Approaches and Practices, RAN, 2019 edition https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-best-practices/docs/ran_collection-approaches_and_practices_en.pdf.

¹⁰ A. Reed, H.J. Ingram, J. Whittaker, *Countering Terrorist Narratives*, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for citizens ‘rights and constitutional affairs, Study for the LIBE Committee, European Parliament, November 2017, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU\(2017\)596829_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/596829/IPOL_STU(2017)596829_EN.pdf).

¹¹ See for instance “Counter-Extremism Project,” Centre for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, 2013, <https://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/404/center-for-stra->

- *Civil society*: broadly considered through initiatives by no-profit organisations, for-profit organisations, the media, former extremists and victims, among others.

Furthermore, going through the selected resources and the initiatives considered, it is possible to identify three leading methods of communication by which counter- and alternative narratives have been applied to date¹²:

- The pure *facilitation, design and implementation of counter- and alternative narratives campaigns*. This is the method most adopted and, depending on the approach, the communication effort may seek to either demolish the extremist narrative entirely, or provide a competitive alternative to it¹³;
- The *redirection* of the public in search of extremist material toward different contents (counter- and alternative in nature)¹⁴;
- The *union* of message and action. In essence, an effort to reconcile words and deeds in an attempt to overcome the so-called “say-do gap” and to gain credibility in the eyes of the audience¹⁵.

1.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

Figure 2 - Sample of a SWOT matrix modified by the author

	HELPFUL (for your objective)	HARMFUL (for your objective)
INTERNAL	Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fruitfulness • Flexibility & versatility • _____ • _____ • _____ 	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion • Counter narratives may backfire • Target audience • Cooperation & Coordination • Credibility & Evaluation

Source: www.Business-Docs.co.uk

tegic-counterterrorismcommunications-csc; UK Action to Combat Daesh,” UK Government, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/daesh/about>.

¹² A. Reed, H.J. Ingram, J. Whittaker, *Countering Terrorist Narratives*, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, Study for the LIBE Committee, European Parliament, November 2017.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The analysis of the internal factors, of the selected resources and of the initiatives they involve, makes it possible to highlight a number of strong points and weak points that characterise the counter- and alternative narratives applied to date.

In relation to the strong points, the communication effort has undoubtedly proved fruitful in comparison to mere inertia, enabling the extremist narrative to be tackled and the overall action to combat violent extremism to be reinforced.

Indeed, the extensive activity in relation to counter- and alternative narratives to date has facilitated building up knowledge on levels and methods of communication, target audience, messages, channels, messengers and evaluation, and working on these in order to fine-tune the endeavour and improve its effectiveness.

In addition, although there is a clear need to look beyond the horizon line, the communication means of the counter- and alternative narratives have proved to be discretely flexible in terms of levels and methods of communication, as well as versatile in adapting to different types of extremism as well as hate speech.

Despite these strengths, counter- and alternative narratives unquestionably have a long way to go and reveal several weak points that still hamper their effectiveness¹⁶.

Upstream, although the exposure to extremist communication appears to play an important role in radicalisation processes¹⁷, the effect of counter- and alternative narratives in terms of de-radicalisation is still questioned. Besides, being exposed to the narrative of extremism does not always and necessarily lead to violence¹⁸; for these reasons further research into counter- and alternative narratives is called for.

Downstream, counter- and alternative narratives applied to date appear to have been rather confusing. Often, they have targeted – in an uncoordinated and “in bulk” way – an undefined and little-known audience, with unbound-

¹⁶ Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices, Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) Collection of Approaches and Practices, RAN, 2018; in A.Reed, H.J.Ingram, J. Whittaker, Countering Terrorist Narratives, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, Study for the LIBE Committee, European Parliament, November 2017.

¹⁷ K.E.Brown, A.Silke, *Radicalization: The Transformation of Modern Understanding of Terrorist Origins, Psychology and Motivation*, in S. Jayakumar, State, Society, and National Security: Challenges and Opportunities in the 21st Century, 2016.

¹⁸ K.Ferguson, *Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies*, Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research, 2016 <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>.

ed communication from below and from above, and with a myriad of diverse and disconnected messages and formats.

However, there appears to be room for increasing the coherence of the communication effort, from the macro level (levels and methods of communication) down to the micro level (target audience selection, messenger, message, format, channel and evaluation).

In relation specifically to the methods of communication, counter narratives may backfire¹⁹. They are onerous in that they require in-depth knowledge and competence in order to be properly realised, they can be exploited and attacked by extremists²⁰, and ideological fragmentation could hinder their effectiveness.

Generally, alternative narratives are considered to be a pathway offering good potential. For instance, they prove to be more proactive than reactive and one interesting prospect is that they hold out the possibility of moving from the “contrast” to the “reframe” communicative paradigm²¹.

With specific reference to the message, moreover, evidence-based narratives – which are founded on mere logical and cognitive appeal as counter-narratives use to be – do not appear to be adequate. Beyond the cognitive realm, the heart and soul would also need to be stirred and, therefore, feelings, emotions and affects influenced.

The Ran report cites: *“The key to designing a successful campaign is correct identification and understanding of the chosen target audience and where they are situated on the radicalisation spectrum”*²².

In most cases, counter- and alternative narratives have targeted a too generalised and little understood audience. On the contrary, many experts advocate that a more solid base of knowledge on the audience should be built up, taking into consideration both the intended audience and the unintended one; the selection of target audience is considered a key step which enables the most effective messengers, messages and channels to be identified²³.

¹⁹ Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices, Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) Collection of Approaches and Practices, RAN, 2018.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ A.Reed, H.J.Ingram, J. Whittaker, *Countering Terrorist Narratives*, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, Study for the LIBE Committee, European Parliament, November 2017.

²² Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices, Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) Collection of Approaches and Practices, RAN, 2018.

²³ S.Tatham, *Understanding Strategic Communication: Toward a Definition, Strategic Communication for Combating Terrorism*, COE-DAT, Ankara, 2009; in S.Tatham, *Target Audience Analysis*, The Three Swords Magazine, 28, 2015 <http://www.jwc.nato.int/images/stories/threeswords/TAA.pdf>.

As already noted, counter- and alternative narrative initiatives have occasionally benefited from intra- and inter-level cooperation. Increasing this – and even more so coordinating it – is pinpointed as essential to boost the effectiveness of the communication effort, resulting in many strategic and operational benefits²⁴.

Another emerging weak point is represented by the issue of credibility, which may be discussed from two interconnected perspectives: the discrepancy between communication and action, and the credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger in the eyes of the audience.

In relation to the former, even though initiatives such as the reported Global Engagement Center (GEC)²⁵ have at least tried to address the problem²⁶, transforming words into deeds remains a difficult enterprise and continues to represent a flaw of the counter- and alternative narratives applied to date.

As for the latter, the Ran report identifies 5 types of messenger²⁷. Besides, in order to enhance credibility and support cooperation and coordination, it suggests “working under the radar”²⁸ and having “people like me” sharing platforms with “people not like me”²⁹.

In addition, experts seem to accept the argument that the credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger may depend considerably on the target audience³⁰.

Within this framework, it is relevant to add that communication undertaken at the grassroots level and involving peers – such as the one promoted by Peer to Peer (P2P): Challenging Extremism and Facebook Global Digital Challenge programmes³¹ – may represent valuable options.

Evaluation (as appropriate).

²⁴ See the RAN and the European Parliament reports, see also S. Weine, M.D. and H. Ellis, R. Haddad, A. Miller, R. Lowenhaupt, C. Polutnik, *Reframing CVE as a Multidisciplinary Approach to Promoting Community Safety*, College Park, MD, 2015 https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_CVEtoPromotingCommunitySafety_ResearchBrief_June2015.pdf.

²⁵ The Global Engagement Centre <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center>.

²⁶ A. Reed, H. J. Ingram, J. Whittaker, *Countering Terrorist Narratives*, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department for citizens’ rights and constitutional affairs, Study for the LIBE Committee, European Parliament, November 2017.

²⁷ Namely Government, Civil society and the media, Religious leaders, institutions and communities, Formers, Victims.

²⁸ Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism Approaches and Practices, Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) Collection of Approaches and Practices, RAN, 2018.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibid., see also S. Tatham, *Understanding Strategic Communication: Toward a Definition*, Strategic Communication for Combating Terrorism, COE-DAT, Ankara, 2009, and S. Tatham, Target Audience Analysis, 2015.

³¹ Peer to Peer (P2P): Challenging Extremism and Facebook Global Digital Challenge <https://www.edventurepartners.com/peer-to-peer-facebook-global-digital-challenge>.

Based upon all of the resources and initiatives considered, counter- and alternative narratives appear to share a negative commonality in that they lack a comprehensive evaluation.

In quantitative terms, communication efforts appear to have been subject to robust evaluation and assessment, and indeed data related to their participants, costs, geographic and public reach, channels used, number of shared contents and even audience engagement – as in the “Click through Rate” instance³² – are widely available, but it is on the qualitative side of the coin where the concern lies: namely, the impact of those efforts, which is difficult to gauge. Change is dynamic in nature and we do not yet have a method of evaluation that, in addition to quantitative metrics, can measure the impact of counter- and alternative narratives – namely their influence on behaviours, attitudes, opinions and beliefs – on the target audience.

1.4 External factors

It is of paramount importance to firmly keep in mind that the operational context is all but static and it is active in determining the impact of communication. Within this SWOT analysis of the counter- and alternative narratives applied to date, the following external factors have been identified:

- The phenomenon that counter- and alternative narratives are meant to counter, namely violent extremism and in particular its communication;
- The communicative context within which counter- and alternative narratives operate;
- The social context within which counter- and alternative narratives operate.

1.4.1 Violent Extremism and its communication

In order to be better understood, the evolving phenomenon of violent extremism and its communication need to be inserted into the wider frame of reference of a conflict whose paradigms are subject to change.

Conflicts transformation is the focus of heated debate³³; conflicts appear to have been changing in many fundamental ways³⁴ in the direction of unconventionality.

A number of ad-hoc coined terms have been proposed over time in order to define the change, such as “asymmetric warfare”, “low intensity conflicts”,

³² It has been applied by The Redirect Method <https://redirectmethod.org>.

³³ A.Beccaro, *Contemporary irregular conflicts: new and old ideas*, Sicurezza Terrorismo e Società, International Journal, Issue 8, 2018 <http://www.sicurezzaeterrorismosocieta.it/fascicolo-8-2018>.

³⁴ Ibidem.

“open source warfare” and “hybrid warfare”. In the last two decades, the latter term has been given credence in academia and the defence community primarily as a description of Russia’s operations in Crimea and elsewhere³⁵ and also to describe the combat strategy of certain non-State actors (e.g. Hezbollah), a designation that is in common use but that remains problematic.

Although contested, the term “hybrid” helpfully connotes the transformation and describes the complexity of conflicts which appear to be multifaceted and to have many players, revealing the following characteristics³⁶:

- (i) *Pervasive*, for they pervade various dimensions of social reality;
- (ii) *De-localised* and *Diffused*, for they blur not only geographical boundaries, but also temporal and sociocultural ones;
- (iii) *Interconnected*. Globalisation has transformed the world into a complex system of interdependencies³⁷ capable of generating the so-called Global Systemic Risk³⁸;
- (iv) *Fought by conventional and unconventional players* (e.g. State and non-State actors) *using conventional and unconventional weapons* (e.g. hard power as well as soft power means).

In view of its underlined usefulness, the term “hybrid” was employed first by NATO³⁹ and then by the EU⁴⁰ to define emerging threats, with an emphasis on two important features: adaptability and opportunism.

Violent extremist groups fight in a battlefield of changing conflicts and, in accordance to the definitions mentioned above, these may be properly understood as hybrid threats.

One can state that violent extremism not just involves but *is* communication in the sense that communication represents an existential precondition for it to persist and develop; violent extremist groups are complex organisations and it is communication that gives coherence to them and to the threat that emanates from them⁴¹.

³⁵ See for instance O.Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

³⁶ See M.Lombardi, *Il Terrorismo del Nuovo Millennio*, Le Nuove Bussole, Vita e Pensiero, 2016; for further insights <https://www.itstime.it/w>.

³⁷ A. Iriye, *Global interdependence: the world after 1945*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014.

³⁸ M.A. Centeno, M.Nag, T.S. Patterson, A. Shaver, A.J. Windawi, *The Emergence of Global Systemic Risk*, Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 41:65-85, April 2015.

³⁹ NATO, Bi-strategic Command Capstone Concept, August 2010 https://www.act.nato.int/images/stories/events/2010/20100826_bi-sc_cht.pdf.

⁴⁰ EU External Action Service (EEAS), *A Europe that protects: countering hybrid threats*, Factsheet, June 2018 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/hybrid_threats_en_final.pdf.

⁴¹ On the role of communication in complex organisation please see A.M. Kleinbaum, T.E. Stuart, M.L. Tushman, *Communication (and Coordination?) in a Modern, Complex*

In 2005 Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Al-Qaeda, stated “*More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma*”⁴², and in fact the communications of Islamist violent extremist groups, and of Daesh in particular, are an eloquent example and basis upon which to analyse the evolution of the strategic communications of violent extremism as a broader phenomenon.

With Daesh, for the very first time, we have been witnessing a competent use of communications, not just some vague technological skills, which has served as a flywheel of a much more complex political and military strategic scheme⁴³. Through the double orientation of its communication, Daesh has demonstrated its ability to proactively coordinate communications addressed by its agencies to the target audience, and to reactively coordinate the enemy’s communication – redefining the public agenda – as well as the spontaneous communication of its supporters and sympathisers⁴⁴.

Violent extremist groups virally disseminate a narrative that is directed to achieving specific strategic objectives such as e.g. State construction (in the case of Daesh), recruitment, fundraising, coordination, self-presentation, campaigning, identity building and mobilisation.

Through messages characterised by different themes, the narrative clearly identifies a common enemy and inflames insecurity, prejudice, rejection and conflict, also propagandising a sense of urgency with the aim of compressing the audience’s perception of time and promoting a state of crisis that fosters social tension and heightens the risk of conflict⁴⁵.

This is also evident in the communication of right-wing extremist groups that have exploited to their advantage the current socio-political context of

Organisation, HBS Working Paper, Number 09-004, July 2008 <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Publication%20Files/09-004.pdf>.

⁴² Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, GlobalSecurity.org, July 9, 2005. This document was released by the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence in October 2005.

⁴³ See M.Lombardi, *IS 2.0 and Beyond: The Caliphate’s Communication Project*, in M.Maggioni, P.Magri, *Twitter and Jihad: the Communication Strategy of ISIS*, Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), 2015 https://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/twitter_and_jihad_en_0.pdf.

⁴⁴ For further insights see itstime.it.

⁴⁵ B.Lucini, M.Maiolino, *Social tension and Extremism: nexus and challenges*, in *Radicalisation – Understanding a highly dynamic and multi-causal phenomenon*, Annual EENeT Conference 2019 in ATHENS / GREECE, EENeT Working Paper Series – 005, October 2019 <https://www.european-enet.org/EENeT/EN/JournalEWPS/EWPS005.html?nn=55478>; see also D.Plebani, *Azione al centro. Un’analisi del rischio trasversale nelle retoriche jihadiste, identitarie ed ecologiste*, Itstime, 12 May 2019, <https://www.itstime.it/w/azione-al-centro-unanalisi-del-rischio-trasversale-nelle-retoriche-jihadiste-identitarie-ed-ecologiste-by-daniele-plebani>.

instability in Europe, marked by immigration, stagnation, cultural, social, political and economic challenges, as well as terrorism⁴⁶.

These groups counterpose strong and radical (strictly defined) identities against accelerating insecurity and fear, and the extremist message cleverly upholds the easier and more attractive path of rejection against the harder and unknown path of transformation, thanks to a modernised ideology and the pivotal role played by idealisation.

Furthermore, extremist narratives do not only rely on logical and cognitive appeals, they exploit feelings, emotions and affects, responding to certain basic human needs⁴⁷.

In this respect, possible root causes of radicalisation such as the sense of belonging, the quest for significance, perceived deprivation, the quest for excitement, and camaraderie are exploited by extremist communication. For example, the “nous sommes” catchphrase tirelessly repeated in the presentation video of Génération identitaire on its website is emblematic⁴⁸.

In order to enhance the narrative’s effectiveness, and depending on the target audience as well as the operational context, the messages propagandised by violent extremist groups have presented themselves in different forms, ranging from leaflets, statements, infographics, newsletters, magazines, books, songs, radio broadcastings and gadgets, to videos, videogames, posts, hashtags, chats, and others.

In terms of communication channels, Daesh has relied upon an extraordinarily complex and pervasive communicative architecture (Figure 3) composed of news agencies, official media structures, non-official media branches, local media departments, radio stations, and a broadly spread presence in the internet through websites, instant messaging platforms, social media, forums, sharing spaces and the dark web⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ See J.Grierson, *Far right swooping on towns to exploit tensions, report says*, The Guardian, 7 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/07/far-right-swooping-on-towns-to-exploit-tensions-report-says>, in S.Khan, *Challenging Hateful Extremism*, Commission for Countering Extremism, United Kingdom, October 2019 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/836540/Challenging_Hateful_Extremism_-_summary_report.pdf.

⁴⁷ See for instance *Affect And Emotion In Extremist Discourse*, Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST), <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/affect-and-emotion-in-extremist-discourse>.

⁴⁸ Génération identitaire, website <https://generationidentitaire.org>.

⁴⁹ C. Clarke, C. Winter, *The Islamic State may be falling, but its strategic communication legacy is here to stay*, War on the Rocks, August 2017 <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/the-islamic-state-may-be-failing-but-its-strategic-communications-legacy-is-here-to-stay>.

Diffusion is also a significant factor, according to the Global Digital Report 2019 of We are Social and Hootsuite: out of a global population of 7.676 billion people, 57% use the internet, 45% actively use social media and these shares are growing at about 9% per year⁵¹. Facebook and You Tube represent the most used social media in terms of active users, while WhatsApp and Facebook messenger are the most utilised instant messaging platforms⁵².

The potential of the internet and social media appears to be all but fully realised, in fact internet and social media penetration indexed by world regions hits peaks of 95% and 70% respectively in North America, or 95% and 67% in Northern Europe, while the rest of the world lags behind at around 57% and 42% on average, with the lowest shares of 12% and 7% in Central Africa⁵³.

As well as being used and exploited by violent extremist groups as a strategic channel of communication, new information and communication technologies have provided the breeding ground for the development of a virtual ecosystem of individual supporters and sympathisers of extremist ideologies and organisations that appear to be willing and capable of getting in touch, organising and coordinating their activities independently. This is evidenced by the religious and political milieus of extremism on-line, and the aforementioned virtual ecosystem seems to be exploited by extremist groups through dynamics of delegation and reward⁵⁴ as well as of virtual leadership⁵⁵.

Eventually, the development of information and communication technologies is leading towards even greater anonymity, autonomy and inter-relationship, into a deregulated – or at best poorly regulated – space.

In fact, although the on-line communication channels discussed above (social media and messaging apps) still appear to be the most used, extremist groups – out of necessity – are looking with interest to new opportunities such as cryptocurrencies, and more generally to the decentralised web and its platforms⁵⁶, for the considerable advantages they represent:

⁵¹ We Are Social and Hootsuite, *Digital 2019 Essential insights into how people around the world use the internet, mobile devices, social media, and e-commerce*, 2019 <https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019>.

⁵² Ibidem.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The discussed virtual ecosystem and the dynamic of delegation and reward are discussed into an upcoming publication of N.G.Spagna of the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies (ITSTIME), reference title *Ethnographizing Islamic State's digital community on Telegram Platform: Socio-organisational anatomy and new models of threat*.

⁵⁵ R.Lohlker (ed.), *New Approaches to the Analysis of Jihadism on-line and off-line*, Vienna University Press, 2012.

⁵⁶ For references see the Memri Cyber & Jihad Lab <http://cjlaboratory.org/latest-reports/pro-isis-websites-emerge-on-decentralized-%e2%80%8eplatform-zeronet/> as well as the contributions of

- Client-orientation;
- A strong peer-to-peer approach;
- Security and difficulty to be controlled.

Examples of these platforms – already used by religious and political extremist groups – are Riot, ZeroNet, Mastodon and Beaker. Bitcoin, Ethereum, Zcash and Monero for cryptocurrencies.

In terms of target audience, the communications of violent extremist groups have shown that they are tailored for an audience which is global but not globalised, and divisible into diverse segments (e.g. geographic, cultural, socio-demographic, psychographic, etc.).

In fact, through the use of a variety of messengers, messages, themes, formats and communication channels, that appear to have been selected based upon the relevant public that ultimately sanctions their effectiveness, extremist groups have been able to target a global segmented audience by using communication means that range between the generalised and the very specific.

On the one hand, their propaganda has been addressed to large sets of people in terms of poorly-differentiated categories such as believers, potential recruits and donors.

On the other hand, extremist groups have shown the ability to dig much deeper. For instance, in December 2018 Al-Qaeda launched a magazine *Beituki* (Your Home) specifically devised for women, Daesh has targeted minors – the so-called “Cubs of the Caliphate” – through its generational propaganda, and reached local audiences (e.g. specific ethnicities) thanks to its local media departments also broadcasting in many languages.

On the political extremism side, taking the example of groups belonging to the “identitarians”, these have opted for a renewal of their ideology, adopting a moderated rhetoric⁵⁷ peppered with cultural references so as not to close in the historical re-enactment, but to attract young, white, educated, disillusioned and socially and politically active people. In doing so, in addition to old right-wing extremist spirits, they have appealed to the new conservative spectrum too.

1.4.2 Communicative context

The context needs to be understood as an active actor rather than a passive factor and based on this understanding, the communicative context and set-

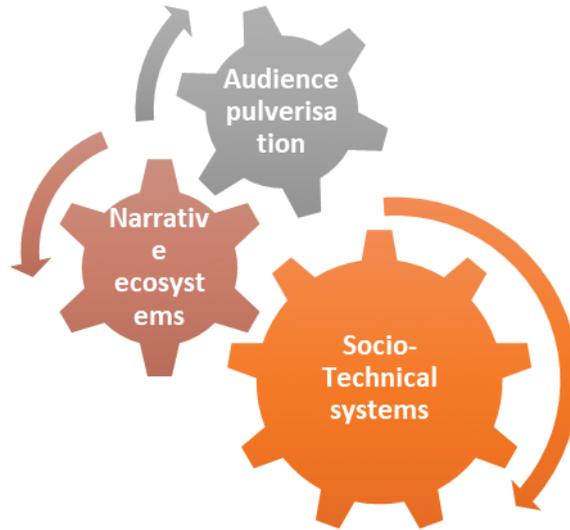
D.M. Barone on the ITSTIME website <https://www.itstime.it/w/?s=Daniele+Maria+Barone> and on the international journal *Sicurezza Terrorismo e Società* <http://www.sicurezzaerrorismosocieta.it>.

⁵⁷ See M. Feldman, *Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right Since 1945*, Explorations of the Far Right, ibidem Press, 2014.

ting of violent extremist communication and of the communications which counter it, assume extraordinary relevance.

Social and technological progress ensures that the communicative context continually evolves in order to keep abreast of it and gain a better understanding of the contemporary scenario, and three highly influential elements should be taken into consideration, presented below as gearwheels (Fig. 4).

Figure 4 - *Communicative context: influential elements*



Nowadays the discussion of technological innovations such as the internet of things (IoT), quantum computers, artificial intelligence (AI) and their impact is a priority in the international agenda and within this framework, the increasingly pervasive penetration into society of new information and communication technologies has led to deeper reflection on the interaction between technology and society, neither of which can be properly understood in isolation.

Accordingly, as the Encyclopaedia of Human-Computer interaction of the Interaction Design Foundation suggests, it is important to start reasoning in terms of Socio-Technical systems (STSs)⁵⁸.

Following this paradigm, the communicative context is a multi-layered one: the mechanical hardware layer, the information layer given by the sum of hardware and software, the human layer of use of the technology and the community layer where technology spreads into the collectivity.

⁵⁸ The Interaction Design Foundation website, <https://www.interaction-design.org>.

These layers are not so much watertight chambers but instead they interact with one another⁵⁹, and interaction is implicit in a proper understanding of the system's functioning and impact on communication processes.

The contemporary media system is part of the described Socio-Technical system and its complexity, distinguished by a constellation of products circling around a brand and a narrative concept, makes it possible to highlight the second influential element of the communicative context; the possibility to look at narratives not only in terms of a process that can give meaning to life events, transforming them into meaningful stories, but also as real ecosystems. Narrative ecosystems⁶⁰:

- Are *open systems*, inhabited by narrative forms, characters and users which change in time and space;
- Are *complex interconnected structures*;
- Tend to reach and maintain a certain *equilibrium*, creating a lasting world even outside the small screen space, while changing according to development lines that are difficult to predict;
- Are *non-procedural systems*. They are not determined by a sequence of functions, but by elements describing the environment, the characters and the relationships, rendering the narrative matter into a walkable universe that the user can navigate;
- Are formed by an abiotic component, the media context, and a biotic component, the narrative. Narrative ecosystems are environments to be inhabited.

Eventually, it is important to refer to the audience – those who belong to and comprise the Socio-Technical system and inhabit the narrative ecosystems. It would be a mistake to regard the audience as a homogenous entity. On the contrary, it appears as a heterogeneity of connected diversities.

In relation to this, it is worth noticing that the analysis of violent extremist communication, in particular of the spontaneous type which is observable in the virtual community of supporters and sympathisers of extremist groups and

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ Narrative ecosystems and their features have been discussed in the presentation *Understanding radical behaviour: Challenges for preventing/countering violent extremism* by M.Lombardi at the seminar *Understanding radical behaviour in support of preventing and countering violent extremism* held in Brussels, by the TRIVALENT consortium, in November 2019 <https://trivalent-project.eu/understanding-radical-behaviour-in-support-of-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism>.

ideologies⁶¹, would even signal the course of the segmented audience toward *pulverisation*.

Within this interpretative framework and also thanks to new technologies, the segments into which the audience could be divided would in fact merely constitute blurred macro containers within which the communicative network deflagrates into a multiplicity of networked singularities that create a dense web of interactions, where communication producers and consumers overlap and are no longer neatly distinguishable.

This complex, expanded, intricate and blurred communicative environment, into which again the revolutionary potential of new technologies acts, enables an extraordinary production and speed of information that becomes extremely difficult to control and manage, and is highly vulnerable to disinformation. Disinformation which, in the discussed communicative context, takes on new forms that are more perilous and difficult to detect and counter⁶².

1.4.3 Social context

The analysis of the audience targeted by the communication of violent extremist groups reveals the significance attributed to young and even very young people, although they do not represent the sole target.

Clearly, this is not by chance: demographic patterns of many areas of the world matter, and it is the result of a strategic calculus dictated by the need to look to the future, according to which new generations represent a key factor in perpetuating violent extremist groups and their ideology over time.

The youth factor deserves attention not only as a relevant public, but as a crucial component of the social context within which the communication of violent extremism – as well as communication combating it – take place.

In a recent perspective of the RAND corporation, Richard C. Baffa, Nathan Vest, Wing Yi Chan and Abbi Fanlo, attempting to define and understand the next generation of salafi-jihadis and applying a multidisciplinary approach, have focused on the so-called Generation Z – which includes individuals born between 1997 and 2012⁶³.

⁶¹ N.Spagna, F.Borgonovo, *L'operazione "Referral Action Days" di Europol*, <https://www.itstime.it/w/loperazione-referral-action-days-di-europol-federico-borgonovo-e-nicolo-spagna>.

⁶² E.Rosenbach, K.Mansted, *The Geopolitics of Information*, Defending Digital Democracy Project, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Paper, May 2019 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/geopolitics-information>.

⁶³ R.C.Baffa, N.Vest, W.Y.Chan, A.Fanlo, *Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadis*, Perspective, Expert Insights on a timely policy issue, RAND, August 2019

They argue that “Gen Z distinguishes itself from previous generations by its uniquely strong familiarity with technology that has profound implications for their social interactions, cognition, psychological development, and worldviews”⁶⁴.

Besides, the high vulnerability of Gen Z and more broadly of young generations to the communication of violent extremism emerges in the perspective, as do some highly useful insights that may be taken into consideration to inform strategic communication efforts in CVE.

The authors underline criticalities at many levels. Young people are engaged en masse in the use of the new communication technologies such as the internet and social media, for example using them as a primary source of socialisation and information. At the same time, this use is mostly superficial and lacks an adequate understanding of the technology and its impact, as for instance “the reported stunting of cognitive control network development by internet usage”⁶⁵.

Unfortunately, the risk does not finish in new technologies. The authors point out that youth and more specifically Gen Z encompass adolescence and young adulthood, two very sensitive developmental moments characterised by exploration, instability and propensity to take risks. In these periods, the individual’s cognitive capacities are not fully formed and mature, in the same way as skills such as critical thinking and decision-making, potentially leaving millions of subjects⁶⁶ susceptible to extremist communication⁶⁷, especially when it plays on feelings, emotions and affects.

The described lack of adequate cognitive capacities and skills becomes even more dangerous in combination with the difficult world circumstances we are presently living through. Youth is not the only vulnerable target and radicalisation emerges as a multidimensional phenomenon within which personal, group and context factors interact, not always leading to violence⁶⁸.

People in many regions of the world are facing tough cultural, social, political and economic challenges that:

<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE341.html>.

⁶⁴ Ibidem.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population facts, 2015 <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/YouthPOP.pdf>.

⁶⁷ R.C.Baffa, N.Vest, W.Y.Chan, A.Fanlo, *Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadis*, Perspective, Expert Insights on a timely policy issue, RAND, August 2019.

⁶⁸ See M.Vergani, M.Iqbal, E.Ilbahar, G.Barton, *The Three Ps of Radicalization: Push, Pull and Personal. A Systematic Scoping Review of the Scientific Evidence about Radicalization Into Violent Extremism*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2018.

- Are already exploited by violent extremist groups and their communication;
- Risk supporting polarisation and radicalisation processes.

Today's social context appears to present a breeding ground for polarisation, radicalisation and even conflict.

As the “Global Trends Paradox of Progress” of the US National Intelligence Council shows, many complex phenomena are impacting globally “at an unprecedented pace to make governing and cooperation harder”⁶⁹; this situation – aggravated by the aforementioned lack in large swathes of society of an effective cognitive framework of interpretation and intervention and by mechanisms of cognitive dissonance⁷⁰ – fosters a condition of tension⁷¹ in the social system and its settings that heightens the risk of polarisation, radicalisation and conflict⁷².

Social tension is fomented and exploited by violent extremist groups through their communication and action⁷³; reflecting on the possibilities of reducing it, Lewis Coser, back in the 50s, focused on the central role of public social institution as regulators, functioning like safety valves⁷⁴.

In relation to this, it is significant to note that today's social context reveals a disfunction of *intermediate bodies*: social collectors, “bottlenecks”, such as for instance religious and secular authorities, the media, teachers and parents who seem to lose – or at least significantly reduce – their negotiating space and role as mediators and moderators, with the result that social tension is more difficult to cushion.

1.5 Opportunities and threats

The analysis of external factors has highlighted several criticalities that characterise the communication of violent extremism, as well as the communicative and social context within which counter- and alternative narratives operate. In the meanwhile, looking beneath the surface, these very criticalities – which undoubtedly conceal a variety of threats – may also open a significant window of opportunity.

⁶⁹ US National Intelligence Council (NIC), *Global Trends Paradox of Progress*, January 2017 <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.

⁷⁰ L.Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, 1962.

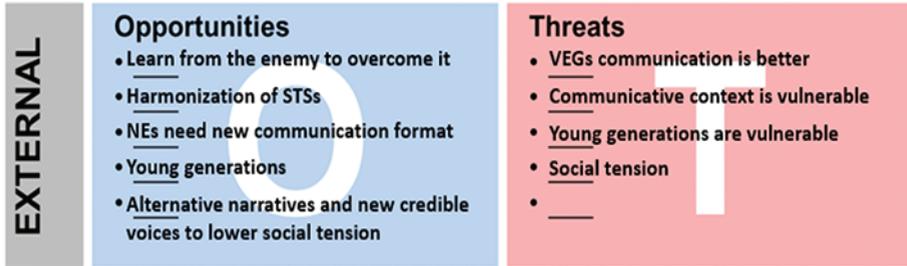
⁷¹ On social tension see N.Smelser, *Sociology*, Prentice Hall, 1994.

⁷² B.Lucini, M.Maiolino, *Social tension and Extremism: nexus and challenges*, in *Radicalization – Understanding a highly dynamic and multi-causal phenomenon*, Annual EENeT Conference 2019 in ATHENS / GREECE, EENeT Working Paper Series - 005, October 2019.

⁷³ Ibidem.

⁷⁴ L.Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict*, New York: Free Press, 1956.

Figure 5 - Sample of a SWOT matrix modified by the author



Source: www.Business-Docs.co.uk⁷⁵

In terms of threats, to date the communication of violent extremist groups appears to have been more proactive, sophisticated and effective than the communication enacted to counter them.

Violent extremist groups have been able to discern the prominent role of communication, to insert and harmonise it into their grand strategy and to direct it to the achievement of specific strategic objectives. Before us, they have understood and targeted a global segmented and even *pulverised* audience with a complex and coherent system of narratives, messages and formats, relevant and resonant for their specific public, combining both cognitive and emotive appeals. Besides, out of necessity, extremist groups have targeted young generations, calibrating the communication effort to them, and eventually understood and exploited the revolutionary potential of new technologies to their own ends.

That said, it is crucial to study the communication of violent extremism if we are to understand it, learn from it and finally overcome it, while capitalising on the comparative advantage enjoyed by the countervailing system of communication, in terms of its potential size and capacity, but which currently remains more in the realm of theory than practice and can be fully realised only by means of increased cooperation, coordination and coherence of the communicative enterprise.

Progress breaks down established patterns, it renders old schemes of interpretation and intervention ineffective and necessitates the discovery of new ones, a process that requires time and is characterised in the meantime by insecurity.

New technologies have caused the communicative context to evolve into a space that is susceptible to disinformation and is characterised by Socio-Technical Systems. Unfortunately, this new space is yet to be fully understood, defined and regulated and this lack of control represents a threat i.e. a weak point and

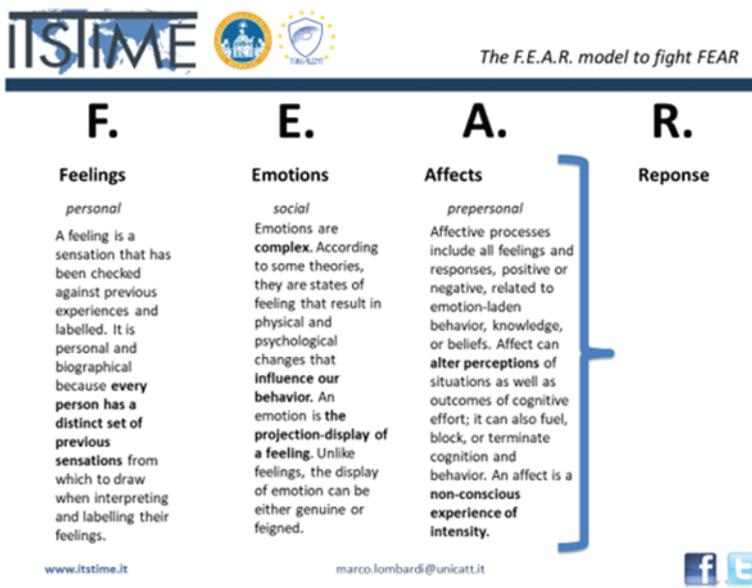
⁷⁵ Where Socio-Technical Systems (STSs), Narrative Ecosystems (NEs), Violent Extremist Groups (VEGs).

open “back-door” which may be and is already infiltrated by offenders, such as violent extremist groups that can freely enter and operate in this context with impunity, and with little effective opposition.

An understanding, definition and regulation of the new communicative context need to be fostered in order to effectively improve security and, within this framework, communication may be of assistance. It could be directed toward the harmonisation of Socio-Technical Systems, by promoting a positive interaction between society and technology, developed along two main trajectories:

- An alternative communication that educates on the knowledge, usage and impact of new technologies;
- A communication that combats disinformation by appeal to reason, as has already been done, but also by an appeal to feelings, emotions and affects; as recommended, for instance, in the F.E.A.R. model to combat fear (Figure 6)⁷⁶.

Figure 6 - The F.E.A.R. model to fight FEAR.



Source: M.Lombardi, presentation Understanding radical behaviour: challenges for preventing/countering violent extremism

⁷⁶ The F.E.A.R. model to fight fear was discussed by M. Lombardi in its presentation *Understanding radical behaviour: challenges for preventing/countering violent extremism*, during the seminar *Understanding radical behaviour in support of preventing and countering violent extremism* held in Brussels, by the TRIVALENT Consortium, in November 2019 <https://trivalent-project.eu/understanding-radical-behaviour-in-support-of-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism>.

Narrative ecosystems are part of the new communicative context and they too are vulnerable to violent extremism penetration. However, after careful examination, they reveal an opportunity to reflect about new communicative formats that would enable the audience to be more effectively reached and assisted to inhabit and navigate the ecosystem.

The social context has underlined the specific and multi-layered vulnerability of young generations to the communication of violent extremism, and also to the menace represented by social tension and its exploitation by violent extremist groups.

On the one hand, targeting the youth is strategically important inasmuch as it lends the communication effort against violent extremism a necessary perspective of potential sustainability and effectiveness in the long run, and new information and communication technologies could be effective to reach the target: young generations use these technologies on a massive basis, and their usage is set to increase in the future.

In any case, the communicative effort to counter violent extremism should not reject but, instead, exploit to the full the type (potentials) of interaction given by the technological medium, perhaps by promoting communication between peers also with a view to addressing young people's vulnerabilities, discussing a variety of themes assisted and empowered by a necessary multi-disciplinary approach. Here again new format of communication may prove to be useful.

On the other hand, the communication effort against violent extremism should also take social tension into account. For example:

- Alternative narratives might be devised and implemented to reduce social tension, but actions on the ground should accompany and empower the communication effort;
- The socio-communicative context may be sounded out in the search for potentially credible new voices that can recapture the eroded negotiating space and mediation and moderation role of the traditional intermediate bodies.

2. The Rise of the narrative ecosystem paradigm and the Format model against violent extremism communication

According to the findings emerged from the previous SWOT analysis, the following may be considered as key elements for developing a comprehensive communication strategy, addressing the topic of countering extremist communications:

- communication is a fundamental part of human interaction and societal relations. Radical extremism is also a communication action, this is true for instance looking at propaganda or radicalisation processes, where both depend on the effectiveness of their communication efforts.
- It means that propaganda and radicalisation processes are communication activities, implementing communication strategies to achieve their aims
- what people define as an act of violence, as violent content and as an extremist communication is a matter of personal interpretation that combines past experiences and cultural aspects
 - the types of violence as well as their identification are varied in nature, and they change according to the socio-technical contexts in which they are rooted

The third way, that of narrative ecosystem paradigm and format model, is based on the theoretical and methodological considerations indicated previously, oriented by the following assumptions:

1. the narrative ecosystem paradigm refers to the sociological theory of frame conceived by the sociologist Erving Goffman⁷⁷, and the mass media communication theory of framing and priming effects⁷⁸
2. the different-scape identified by Appadurai⁷⁹ referring to cultural processes and their dynamics
3. format is the cultural output emerging from the need to counter all types of violence, not only the radicalisation that is an effect of violent attitudes. Cultural and de-polarised broadcasting, broadening its meaning and placing this activity in the context of the new channels of communication

Going more deeply into the presentation, *the first assumption is based on three key factors:*

1. the definition of communication ecosystem referring to the study previously done by Kilkki⁸⁰:
 - how the ecosystem functions

⁷⁷ E. Goffman, *Frame analysis An Essay on the Organization Experience*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, USA 1974.

⁷⁸ M. Sorice, *Sociologia dei mass media*, Carocci editore, Roma 2009.

⁷⁹ A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996.

⁸⁰ K. Kilkki, *An Introduction to Communications Ecosystems*, 2012 <http://kilkki.net>, Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/c736/d55639c7c56bee4a7196d9d10f2a9f3d1787.pdf>.

- the fundamental effect on the communication dynamics on the management of an eco-system
- ecosystem interdependence with other ecosystems
- ecosystem evolution and changing nature
- adaptive and proactive essential features
- constructive and inclusive approach
- multiple intelligence: possibility of cultural convergence
- social relationship placed and framed in a context

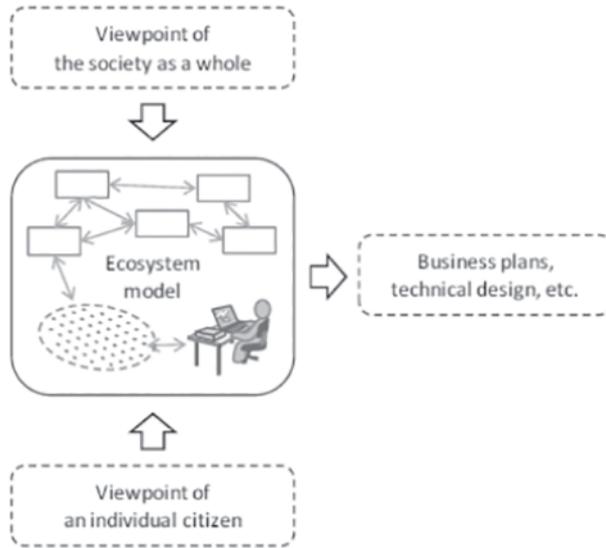
Figure 7 - Terminological map for communications ecosystem



(Kikki, 2012)

According to its own nature, the communication system is not the only system, but it is linked to other types of ecosystem as showed in the graph above (Figure 7).

Moreover, the complex ecosystem model includes various single stage ecosystems which are dependent on the various viewpoint provided both by society as a complex system and by the individual. The ecosystem as a whole will prove to be in balance, once the two different viewpoints are based on a common cultural background expressed in an effective communication action.

Figure 8 - *Ecosystems models and viewpoints*

(Kikki, 2012)

In relation to this systematisation, the second key factor are two theories which support this model.

The first theory is that of the frame analysis developed by Goffman⁸¹ providing a definition of primary framework:

When the individual in our Western society recognises a particular event, he tends, whatever else he does, to imply in this response (and in effect employ) one or more frameworks or schemata of interpretation of a kind that can be called primary. I say primary because application of such a framework or perspective is seen by those who apply it as not depending on or harking back to some prior or “original” interpretation; indeed a primary framework is one that is seen as rendering what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful.

Furthermore, Goffman⁸² identified the societal framework which address specific function for the balance of the whole society:

Social frameworks, on the other hand, provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being. Such an

⁸¹ E. Goffman, *Frame analysis An Essay on the Organization Experience*, Northeastern University Press, Boston, USA 1974.

⁸² Ibidem.

agency is anything but implacable; it can be coaxed, flattered, affronted, and threatened. What it does can be described as “guided doings”.

Focusing on a specific societal setting it is possible to define a correlation between the primary framework and a specific societal group, that is to say in the current context of this report, a potential tailored target audience:

Taken all together, the primary framework of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture, especially insofar as understandings emerge concerning principal classes of schemata, the relations of these classes to one another, and the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretative designs acknowledge to be loose in the world. One must try to form an image of a group’s framework of frameworks – its belief system, its “cosmology” – even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary social life have usually been happy to give over to others.

Goffman⁸³ never studied or defined a type of secondary framework, but the connection between primary framework and other frameworks appears to be clear and undeniable.

The second theory was developed within the theory of effects of mass communication, namely framing and priming effects.

Specifically, the framing theory focuses on the way news is framed by media agencies – but nowadays also by social media and social network users – considering their impact on the society or the people are exposed to this news.

This means going beyond the previous distinction made by Scheufele⁸⁴ between media frames and individual frames, considering the crucial role played by cultural processes in the definition of an event or a situation.

Furthermore, de Vreese⁸⁵ defines frame as a process: “The potential of the framing concept lies in the focus on communicative processes. Communication is not static, but rather a dynamic process that involves frame-building (how frames emerge) and frame-setting (the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions).”

The frame is also strictly related to cultural and anthropological backgrounds referring to the process of meaning making as stated by de

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ D.A. Scheufele, *Framing as a Theory of Media Effects*, Journal of Communication, Vol. 49, Issue 1, Oxford Academic 1999.

⁸⁵ de Vreese, C.H., *News framing: Theory and typology*. Information design journal+ document design, 13, 2005.

Vreese⁸⁶: “Gamson and Modigliani (1989) refer to frames as “interpretative packages” that give meaning to an issue. At the core of this package is ‘a central organizing idea, or *frame*, for making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is at issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989: 3, italics in original)”⁸⁷.

Cultural dimensions of communication frame are also essential in the priming process, addressing which news or – in the specific case of this research – action represents the type of violence that counts more for those who are dealing with it or countering it.

The *second assumption* are based on the theory developed by Appadurai⁸⁸, relating to cultural flows and their exchanges.

The theory of Appadurai⁸⁹ is based on the fact that the media are related to the wider global scenario, technological innovation and societal changes.

Taking into account these factors and the impact that they have on the shaping of personal and social identities, Appadurai⁹⁰ identifies the following “scapes”:

- *technoscape*
- *ethnoscape*
- *financescape*
- *ideoscape*
- *mediascape*

In the current state of complexity of the world and of individual societies, the aforementioned -scapes are all interconnected, influencing the way people define and interpret reality, and also influencing the various types of violence.

The third and final assumption is linked to the previous reflection, and cultural and de-polarised broadcasting proves to be a new and more effective way to disseminate messages and contents that counter violence, based on the evidence that the current audience is pulverised and generic in nature.

⁸⁶ Ibidem.

⁸⁷ Ibidem, in W.A. Gamson, and A. Modigliani, *Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach*, American Journal of Sociology, 95 1989.

⁸⁸ A. Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996

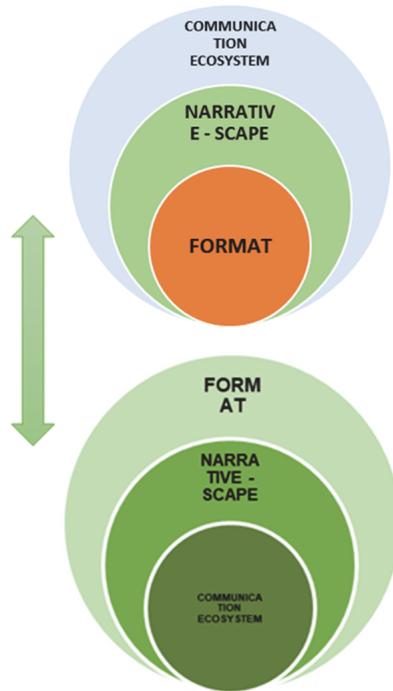
⁸⁹ Ibidem.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

The process leading towards the format model hinges on the reflection that radical and extremist persons are radical and extremist because they find their stance confirmed by their very status as a target for extremist communication.

The format model is constituted by two key elements such as communication ecosystem and narrative-scape.

Figure 9 - *The Format model*



Furthermore, the format model seeks to apply the findings that have emerged for the SWOT analysis:

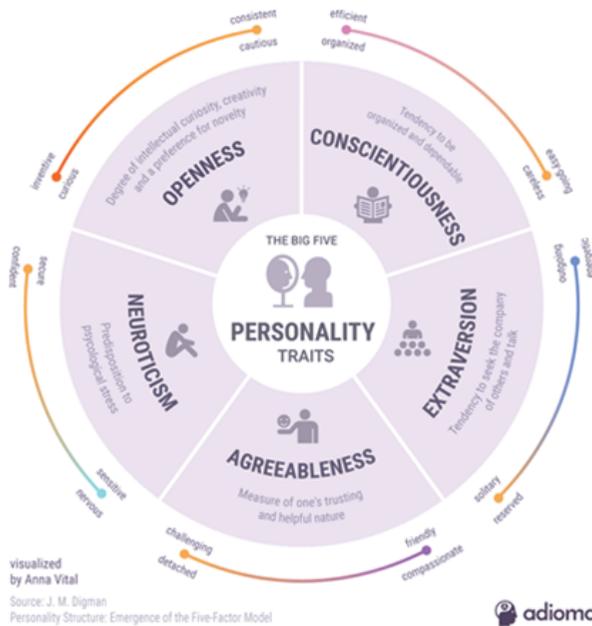
- the pulverisation of the audience and the need to be effective in focusing on microtargeting practice and segments of selected audience groups, without neglecting the relations between various audience groups (i.e. youth and their parents or other adults)
- the awareness to focus on complex and interconnected socio-technical systems, in view of their reciprocal influence
- the specific vulnerability represented by the social context where people live

To be able to achieve this aim providing an innovative interpretative key, the concept of violence needs to be focused as a multidimensional concept,

whereby the definition of what is or is not violent depends on personal, social and context variables:

The second key factor was the need to consider the essential role played by emotions, feelings and affects in defining the features of both the target audience and the communication ecosystem; certainly the FEAR model and its key elements such as feelings, emotions and affects perfectly fit the Big Five Theory factors elaborated by Costa and McCrae⁹¹, namely the theoretical explanations of the main personality traits as shown in the following figure (Figure 10):

Figure 10 - Five Factors Personality⁹²



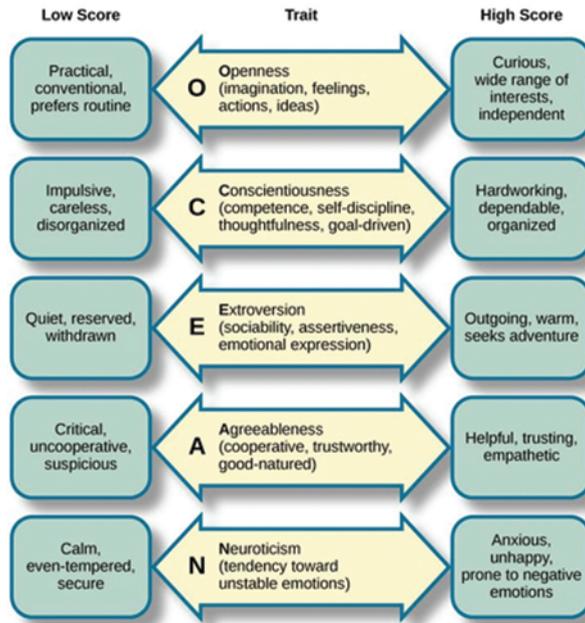
Source: J.M.Digman, Personality Structure: Emergence of the Five-Factor Model

The Big Five Theory was also taken into account in developing the OCEAN model situated in the context of the digital-online communication processes.

The OCEAN model consists of the following factors distributed according to a continuum between a minimum and maximum intensity point (Figure 11):

⁹¹ P.T. Jr Costa and R.R. McCrae R.R. (2005), *Personality in Adulthood, Second Edition: A Five-Factor Theory Perspective*, Guilford Press, New York City, USA.

⁹² https://www.reddit.com/r/Infographics/comments/ala9ti/five_personality_traits.

Figure 11 - *Ocean Model*

Source: www.bing.com-images_fig1_314151962

In relation to this main framework, the features of both Big Five Theory and of the Ocean Model influence the characteristics and the process of target audience and communication ecosystem, thus confirming the context-sensitive nature of both communication ecosystem and extremist narratives.

The element R – response of the F.E.A.R. model – introduced at page 13 is now represented by the Format that can be identified as a model for governing the communication processes which influence [both] radicalisation process, extremist communication and the proactive, adaptive prevention and countering actions.

The format focuses on the characteristics of being:

- context-sensitive and
- target oriented

Taking into account these characteristics it is possible to adapt forms and types of formats and communication processes that are based on socio-technical scenarios and for specific audiences.

Finally, note that the format model consists of two main parts:

- the emotions, feelings and affects which belong to all those who form part of an audience

- the context-sensitive nature of the communication ecosystem that shapes the narratives and the influences linked to the emotional aspect of each personality

These two parts are interrelated, and the added value of this proposal is to be adaptive based on key changes of audiences, scenarios, socio-technical ecosystem.

3. Conclusion

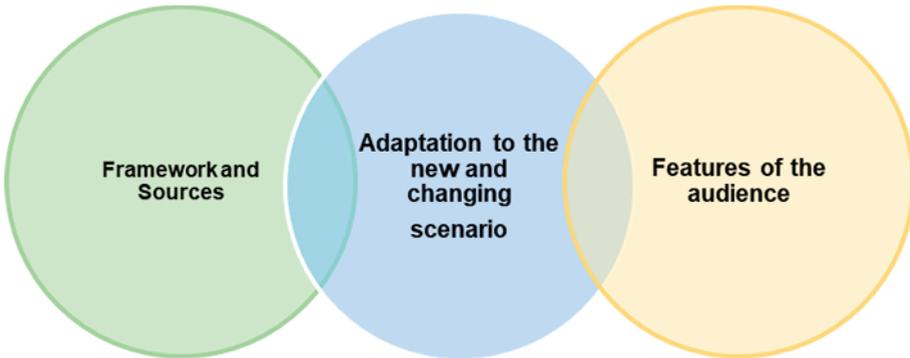
As shown in the previous paragraph, the format model raises emphasises the new holistic communication strategies to deal with communication, extremism and violence.

The holistic communication strategies emerging from the research activities, explained above, include the following guidelines or Decalogue:

1. the importance of developing stories, ideas and narratives specifically aimed at tailoring a target to address a more homogenous communication. The primary objective of a strategic communication tackling radical and extremist messages is to unify the communication, also in view of the coexistence of a general and a specific audience; this aspect is well known by Daesh, but is not as effectively addressed by the current counter- and alternative narratives paradigms. Further, the need to focus on the multidimensional perspective of concepts such as violence and extremism supports a pathway towards a more homogenous communication;
2. the context-sensitive communication process developed within the format model framework aims to avoid focusing on what may simply appear as a radical identity, focusing instead on a more general audience that represents a wider range of perceptions, feelings and emotions. This also enables preventive action, ensuring that the communication is a protective factor against potential radical and extremist visions;
3. focusing on the broader dimensions of a single concept, ensuring that the audience can be exposed to different contents and messages which may, occasionally, fail to confirm the cognitive and communicative expectations of potential radical and extremist identities. In this case, the format model support this statement, since it is possible to avoid being a direct target of a specific communication, based on idiosyncratic ideas of what is violent or otherwise, radical or otherwise: leaving open the cognitive horizon of defining what is violent or otherwise, without imposing patterns or visions that may contain bias and stereotypes;

4. the relation between framework, sources and audience needs to be multidirectional;
5. defining key features of the scenario and the context of the communication ecosystem, enabling one to define a specific target and audience with specific characteristics to be taken into account in applying the format model (Figure 12);

Figure 12 - *Elements of narrative – scape*



6. tailoring target audience according to the specific societal and technological frameworks (considering microtargeting, where possible), making communication efforts more adaptive and flexible in terms of both individual features and changes of scenario;
7. seeking to develop a grounded and collaborative audience⁹³; a grounded audience is one that is situated within a spatial dimension such as a communication ecosystem and a narrative-scape; while a collaborative audience reveals the relations that exist between audience and sources; audience and media; audience and institutions;
8. defining key features of an effective source: communication competences and abilities; relation with the channel; trust and credibility. In this context, an effective strategy is to involve influences who can share the message;
9. enhancing priming effects for violent messages, applying a sort of spiral of silence for violent and extremist contents, while promoting solidarity and societal inclusion;
10. planning a training course focused on how the development of the required soft skills could assist in managing the implementation of the format and the communication process.

⁹³ M. Fanchi, *L'audience*, Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2014.

To sum up, at the end of this study: an innovative vision to work towards a different conceptualisation of counter- and alternative narratives – that is the essence of the format model.

The format is a media-cultural product consisting of communication guidelines to implement when considering feelings, emotions, perceptions of an audience; types of narrations; features of the current scenario and narrative-scapes adapted to the single communication ecosystem and for the specific purpose of the communication process.

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