

Responding to Hate Speech and Incitement



This is an extract from an Institute for Strategic Dialogue publication.

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[On the Front Line: A guide to countering far-right extremism](#)

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Introduction

While extremist voices are in the minority, they are able to punch far above their weight because they are determined and dedicated to their cause. Whether individuals on social media, movements disseminating hateful videos or leaders making public statements, hate speech and incitement can have a damaging impact on target groups and those vulnerable or on the peripheries of extremist movements.

Taking down posters and graffiti in public spaces is important and critical to ensuring that communities do not live in fear of the far right. However, focusing exclusively on takedowns on the online space can be futile, because the rate at which new information is uploaded means it is impossible to catch everything. Civil society activists have therefore experimented with other methods of engaging directly with the ideologies behind hate speech and/or the individuals spreading it. The methods employed here matter; engaging with hateful content in the wrong way can have a counter-productive effect.

Key approaches

1. Takedowns

Aim to limit the dissemination and reach of hate speech and incitement. This includes takedowns of content, and use of reporting functions on sites like Facebook and Twitter. It also includes community mobilisation to remove stickers, posters and graffiti.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Against Violent Extremism network (AVE), YouTube Trusted Flaggers Program, Global

Aims/Objectives:

To combine the knowledge of ‘former’ extremists with the technical expertise of YouTube to improve existing procedures for video takedowns. The aim is to help remove extremist and gang-related content more effectively.

Descriptions/Activities

The Trusted Flaggers Program is a scheme devised by YouTube to use individuals with particular experience to flag the most malicious video content on their website. Any videos flagged by Trusted Flaggers are given highest priority for investigation and, if applicable, removed. As part of this program, YouTube has collaborated with the Against Violent Extremism network (AVE), to harness the experiential, first-hand knowledge of ‘former’ extremists and gang members to improve YouTube’s integrated flagging service. Chosen representatives from the AVE network, working across far-right and other ideologies, have received training from YouTube specialists with technical expertise, who in turn prioritise extremist videos flagged by these ‘experts’, as they have the relevant experience and understanding of the culture and ideology underpinning harmful or illegal content. Once they are Trusted

Flaggers, AVE 'formers' input and feed into future YouTube flagging policy, and a direct influence on the type of hateful content that can be removed.

2. Alternative narratives

Aim to unite the silent majority against extremism by emphasising solidarity, common causes and shared values. Alternative narratives come from a variety of actors, from inter-faith and inter-community leaders to sports personalities and pop artists, and promote more moderate and inclusive discourses.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

Never Again Association (NAA), Poland

Aims/Objectives:

To use civil mobilisation and education to counter ethnic and racial prejudice and contribute to an inclusive democratic civil society in Poland.

Description/Activities:

The NAA is a civil society organisation working to: raise awareness of the issues of racism and xenophobia; develop a broad movement against racism and discrimination; and to marginalise or eliminate racist and anti-Semitic attitudes and tendencies in Polish society.

The NAA have launched a number of high profile projects to promote both an anti-racism agenda and an understanding of different cultures and ethnicities. These include the 'Polish Woodstock' festival – one of the largest music festivals in Europe – as part of their campaign 'Music against Racism'. They actively work with musicians and major football organisations to ensure that positive narratives standing up for tolerance are given the right visibility in Poland. In 2012, they received funding from UEFA to implement the 'Let's Kick Racism out of the Stadiums' campaign and ran the 'Respect Diversity' programme during Euro 2012.

3. Counter-narratives

Aim to deconstruct, de-legitimise and de-mystify extremist propaganda.

This includes: picking apart extremist ideologies by undermining their intellectual framework; attempting to mock, ridicule or undermine the legitimacy of extremists; highlighting how extremist activities negatively impact on the people they claim to represent; demonstrating how their actions are inconsistent with their own beliefs, or questioning their overall effectiveness.

CASE STUDY

Project name/Country:

English Disco Lovers, UK

Aims/Objectives:

To counter the online presence of the English Defence League (EDL) through the use of “Google bombing” to reduce its significance on the internet.

Description/Activities:

The English Disco Lovers was founded in September 2012 as a London-based effort to counter the English Defence League. With messages of equality and respect (and with a good deal of humour), the English Disco Lovers were designed as a comical response to the xenophobia and racism of the EDL. The central tenet of this online campaign is to reduce the top result search of the English Defence League when typing EDL on Google. The English Disco Lovers also have Facebook and Twitter presences, with similar aims. They also run disco-themed events during EDL protests, donning colourful wigs and sparkly outfits.

Getting it right

Who to respond

Getting the right voices involved can expand the reach of alternative or counter-narratives and ensure they don't simply preach to the choir. This includes amplifying the voices of former extremists and survivors of violent extremism, who bring a human element to the issues and will be most credible among those at risk of radicalisation.

Celebrities and cultural leaders, particularly those well respected by individuals vulnerable to far-right narratives, can often reach much farther than anti-racism organisations on their own. For example, a tweet by popular British rapper Professor Green (who has 1.97 million Twitter followers) on the evening of the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in Woolwich, London asking “why are idiots running around attacking mosques? why are edl supporters taking to the streets? to kill more innocent people?” was re-Tweeted thousands of times more than any tweet by the EDL themselves, or by those countering the EDL.

Finally, some of the most important counter-campaigns are led anonymously, e.g. the Slovak Facebook group called *Frankly Speaking about Slovaks*, which pokes fun at the far right's anti-immigrant claims by making ridiculous claims about Slovak people. The campaign's success is that it remains anonymous, and therefore cannot be undermined as no one knows who is behind it. These kinds of initiatives also give the impression that they are led by the general public. Similarly, flash campaigns (spontaneous campaigns) led by the public are difficult for the far right to undermine; for example, #creepingsharia, a Twitter hashtag used by former EDL leader Tommy Robinson, which was hijacked by hundreds of members of the public to ridicule the assumption that ‘Muslims are taking over.’ Though they cannot be anticipated or planned for, front-line professionals can encourage and help to snowball these initiatives when they see them.

Where to respond

While it is important to ensure there are spaces online to share and disseminate moderate information, such platforms can have limited and self-selecting readership. Setting up new websites to share alternative

narratives can simply divide the audience and risk having little or no impact on those susceptible to extremist messaging. Disseminating ‘alternative narratives’ on mainstream social networks and platforms, where the audiences already are, is a better strategy than trying to pull them to new locations.

How to respond

Confronting extremist messages and rhetoric directly and on an individual level can be difficult and risky. Getting into individual debates with far-right groups can often push them into a defensive and combative position, and can simply serve to confirm what both sides think. It is best to leave the one-to-one engagement with far right individuals to those who are trained and experienced in doing this. Front-line professionals can have a greater impact by planting seeds of doubt in the minds of those vulnerable or already signed up to extremist narratives. Seeds of doubt are pieces of information that, without directly undermining the narrative, push the individual to question key tenants of far-right groups and ideologies.

Quantity matters

Practitioners countering the far right have, to date, struggled to match their investment of time and energy. Some shortcuts can be made if they train themselves up in technologies which can boost their social media presence, like Hootsuite or Tweetdeck and other applications. They should also seek to identify people who are looking for ways to get involved, both on and offline, and mobilise them to play a positive and collective role in promoting alternative or counter-narratives, rather than simply responding to extremists on their own. Some of the best initiatives have worked with young people who want to take action, to train them to develop successful counter-campaigns, including the Amadeu Antonio Stiftung in Germany.

Quality matters more

Counter-narratives are often unappealing cut and paste jobs that fail to reach a computer savvy, media-saturated, video game-addicted generation. They often simply present facts to try and undermine the false claims of the far right. However, facts alone will not win this battle. Front-line

professionals need to mirror the far right in their strategies and match their use of emotional appeals, modern technology, culture, and public relations. Some of the more popular counter-narrative methods involve directly playing on the brands of the far right. For example, the English Disco Lovers use the 'EDL' acronym to subvert the EDL's messaging by replacing it as a top search result on sites such as Google and Facebook, and hijacking its Twitter hashtag. Other popular strategies have involved hijacking hashtags used by the far right, like #creepingsharia, which was first used by former EDL leader Tommy Robinson, but was co-opted by civil society ridiculing the assumption that 'Muslims are taking over'.

Real-time evaluation

The counter-narratives space is new territory for most organisations, and there is very little understanding about what works. Front-line professionals can rely on some open source tools to track who is engaging with the content they post online and gauge which kinds of content receive greater attention. For example, on Twitter, these might include *TwitterCounter* to count followers over time; *Tweetmap* to show the location of these followers; *Hootsuite* for analysis of click-rates on articles posted on Twitter accounts; and applications like *Crowdbooster* to overall understand how engaging and far-reaching campaign Tweets are.

The problem of far-right extremism will not go away in the near future. This is no easy challenge, however this project aims to offer a platform for the good work that is being done across Europe to prevent, intervene and respond to this challenge. Cross-border exchange at the European level encourages innovation, will allow us to learn faster, and means that those with less experience can learn from those with more. This is the first set of resources in the FREE Initiative, which will grow over time as new methods are tried and tested and new lessons learned. Visit www.theFREEinitiative.com for inspirational films, testimonies and case studies on tackling far-right extremism across Europe.

About the author

Vidhya Ramalingam is Research and Policy Manager at ISD, leading a programme of work on far-right extremism and intolerance. She regularly briefs governments and NGOs on far-right extremism across Europe, and methods for response and intervention. Her work on the far right has been featured in the Guardian, the Telegraph, Huffington Post, the New Statesman, and international press. Vidhya holds an MPhil in Migration Studies from the University of Oxford, and a BA in Anthropology and Inequality Studies from Cornell University.

