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Normalisation campaigns do not prevent radical online cultures

Avoid the pitfalls of counter-narratives

Gemmerli, Tobias

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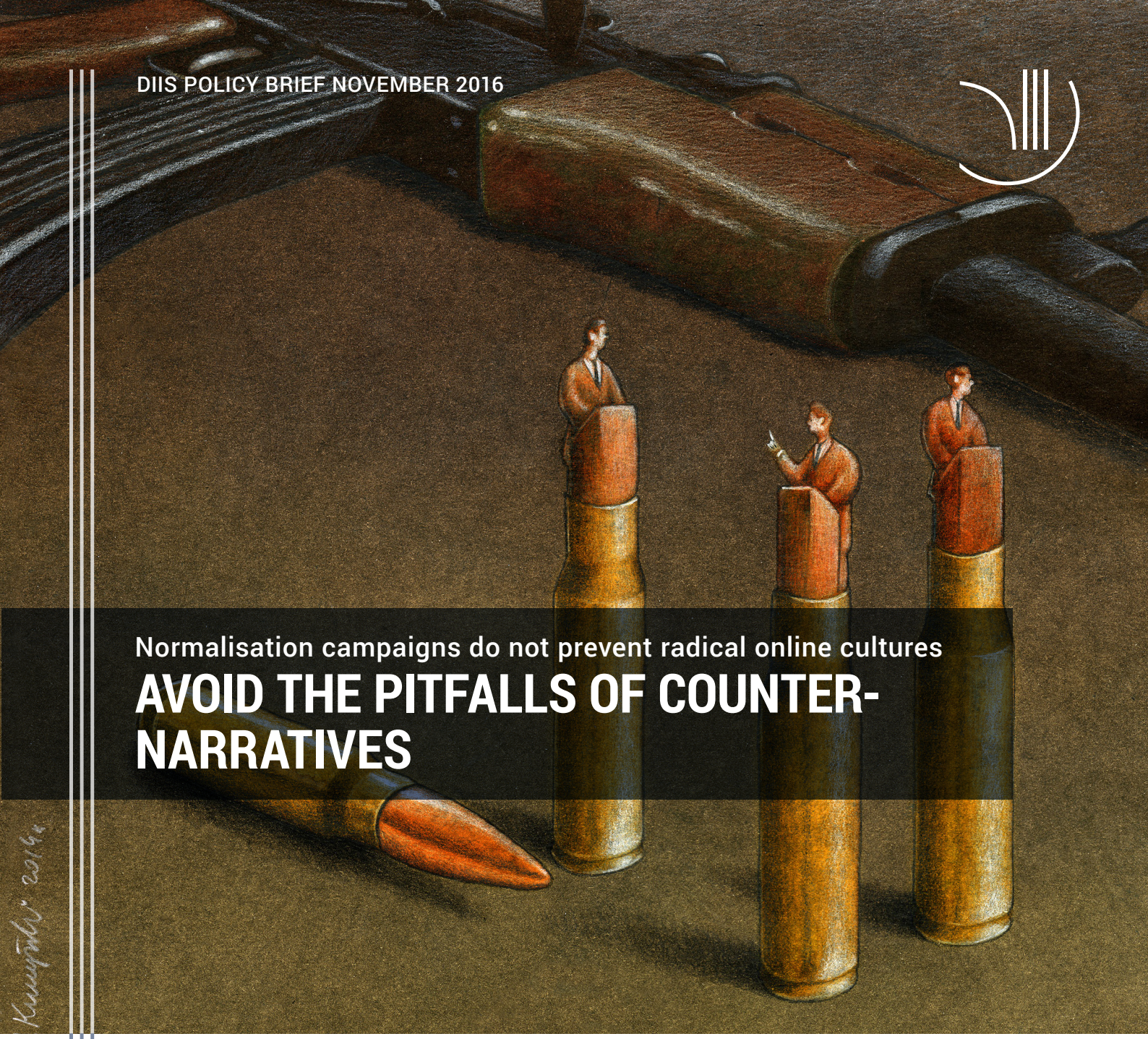

Normalisation campaigns do not prevent radical online cultures

AVOID THE PITFALLS OF COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Counter-narratives and campaigns promoting normality, are often highlighted as universal means against online propaganda from militant movements. However, such campaigns are driven by a number of unfortunate assumptions and are difficult to apply in practice.

We often turn to information campaigns to inform and instruct the general population. Such campaigns are also pointed to as possible tools, to combat radical and militant counter-cultures on the internet. However, reaching broad segments of the population is one thing. It is more challenging, to direct communication at a smaller audience, which cannot immediately be

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Only use counter-narratives when objectives, target groups, and success criteria from the start can be described precisely and in detail
- Do not base counter-narratives on the notion that it is possible to describe 'facts' about reality, but instead address feelings, dreams, and opinions that youths can relate to
- Do not use campaigns that promote normality as a positive alternative to radicalism

Understandings of reality and political standpoints are not lifestyle choices in line with choosing organic coffee

"By exaggerating the significance and influence of the jihadi propaganda, the Western media and political counter-measures are doing nothing more than boosting the counter-power potential of militant Jihadism"

identified and defined, such as vulnerable youths, radicalised individuals, ideological deviants, violent extremists, foreign fighters, etc.

Know the exact objective, target group and sender

Counter-narratives and campaigns that promote normality as a positive alternative to radicalism, can have very different objectives. A successful strategy therefore, requires the objective to be described accurately and in detail. For example, is the objective to discourage youths from travelling abroad to take part in violent Jihad in conflict zones in the Middle East, or is it to stop them from using violence in a domestic context? Is the objective to encourage youths to leave violent milieus, or is it to inspire individuals or groups to change their opinions or replace their radical ideologies and perceptions of reality, with something more moderate and generally accepted? These objectives are very different and distributed over a broad spectrum, from exit and disengagement (behavioural change), to de-radicalisation and normalisation (opinion change).

Clearly, the target groups and success criteria vary with the objective, and in this context, the counter-narratives face a difficult task. The volatility and lack of precision within the concept of radicalisation, means that the target group will remain difficult to identify and define. Who are the vulnerable youths and/or ideological deviants? Should we focus on changing opinions or behaviour? The categorisations are abstract and hard to apply in practice. Moreover, it is uncertain how the success of online campaigns can be measured. The number of clicks, likes, or shares are in themselves not adequate measurements, as the figures say nothing about the spread or the effect, on the target group. Hence, uncertainty regarding target groups and success criteria, makes counter-narratives as an approach, full of pitfalls. Therefore, only use counter-narratives when objectives, target groups and success criteria from the start, can be described precisely and in detail..

This raises the question of who is to be responsible for disseminating a given counter-narrative, which places campaigns in a sender paradox. Among the most important arguments here, is that the sender should preferably not be associated with the authorities, as this will merely strengthen the opposition and be counter-productive. Simultaneously however, it is a typical mark of mistaken identity politics, to perceive e.g., moderate Imams, as voices 'from within' that can talk sense into young radical Islamists and foreign fighters. Moderate Imams represent exactly the normality and authority the youths are trying to break away from. In this context, a returning foreign fighter would probably be a more effective solution. However, this 'voice of doubt' emanating from within, is almost impossible to include as part of the authorities' strategic communication, without damaging the credibility of the messenger and thereby losing its effect. The distribution strategy for counter-narratives should therefore be thoroughly thought through.

Counter-narratives as a discursive weapon

In the search of new weapons for the discursive arsenal of different counter-narratives, understanding of the core problem is often wrapped up in two metaphorical frameworks, which point prevention policy in the wrong direction. The first problematic metaphor, from which this policy brief also borrows its language, is the metaphor of war. The fundamental assumption here is that information can be understood and applied strategically as weapons in virtual warfare. Counter-narratives are thought of as information bombs containing contagious cognitive viruses

that spread through social media and influence the actions of individuals. According to this logic, the discursive propaganda bombs just have to hit as many as possible. However, a more detailed explanation for the impact of the counter-propaganda is never touched upon, and the effect is often implicitly understood as a natural impact, resulting from exposure (direct causality). Yet the spread of information or narratives does not equal impact, and people are not incited to action as directly and unambiguously, as the proponents of propaganda warfare assume. Counter-narratives cannot be planned and prepared like troop movements on a battlefield.

In a wider perspective, the militant Jihadi propaganda –that the authorities often attempt to defend themselves against – is just a drop in the internet ocean of normality-stabilising and pro-Western messages. There is only one hegemony in the global information market: the West, and especially the US. By exaggerating the significance and influence of the Jihadi propaganda, the Western media and political counter-measures are doing nothing more than boosting the counter-power potential of militant Jihadism.

The various counter-narratives often apply a simplistic understanding of the individual in which (vulnerable) young people are reduced to social products of the information at hand. However, radical online cultures arise from much more than simple propaganda. Radical narratives are not simply constructed by strategically chosen words; they are composed of people and social practices. Relationships, dreams, feelings, politics, etc. also play important roles. Radical online cultures are about the social community and the identity that is created around the sharing of e.g., messages and images. When counter-narratives attempt to present 'facts' about reality, they ignore the matter that narratives always highlight select information and that they speak into a specific political context. Most radical youths can see through this, which leaves counter-narratives with an aura of manipulation. ***Consequently, do not base counter-narratives on the notion that it is possible to describe***

Challenges from online radicalism and propaganda glamorising violence, should not only be understood as a strategy game, and counter-narratives cannot simply be dropped like information bombs on the social media. Photo: American soldiers drop pamphlets over an Iraqi village in 2008.

'facts' about reality. Instead, address feelings, dreams, and opinions that youths can relate to.

Normality campaigns for the identity market

The other problematic metaphor, the market metaphor, is founded on the idea that you can 'sell' young people a better alternative than, for example, Islamism or militant Jihadism. In this context, identity and political standpoints are thought of as a matter of supply and demand, and young people are perceived as consumers in an identity market. This metaphor leads to the idea that the rational identity shoppers merely lack the right information and attractive alternatives to make a healthy lifestyle choice. However, firstly 'selling' an identity is not the same as selling other products to a consumer. Within the market analogy, online radicalism's normality-critical youths, correspond to a criticism of consumerism. Here, we must first create alternative patterns of consumption, which embed the ethical choice (e.g., fair trade products). Real alternatives to normality are required.

Secondly, 'selling' another view of the world - another ideology - is a somewhat greater challenge than merely selling an alternative consumer product. Understandings of reality and political standpoints are not lifestyle choices in line with choosing organic coffee. Therefore, the challenge is not a question of analysing radical propaganda and allying with marketing experts and scriptwriters to design convincing counter-narratives that promote the Danish middle-class normality, as a positive alternative to radicalism. Part of the attraction of radicalism is precisely that it turns its back on a normality that can appear unattainable and is not open to the kind of political and religious diversity youths seek. ***Therefore, do not use normality campaigns.***

Read more about radicalisation in the two 2015 policy briefs ***The fight against online radicalisation starts offline*** and ***Radicalisation: a politically contrived concept*** by Tobias Gemmerli

Tobias Gemmerli, MSc in Political Science, International Security (toge@diis.dk)

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