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A Lifestory Strategic Communications Framework: The Case on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Strengthening Resilience

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Abstract

Lifestory narratives can be used for strategic communications and messaging as they can be viewed as one of the tools on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and promoting resilience. Lifestories are authentic, personal and emotional - hence the reason for using them in the context of P/CVE, but in order to be effective the framework outlined below needs to be adhered to. It outlines the target audiences and goals per each, as well as the dissemination mediums. The main contribution lies on introducing a new typology of lifestory narratives that can be used for strategic campaigning on P/CVE. It proposes to use lifestory narratives, the counter and alternative narratives and adds two new types: resilience and destigmatization narratives. It is important to note that the counter narratives are suggested to be less frequently used, as it may have a counter-productive impact on society, potentially increasing hatreds and/or perceptions of stigmatization of communities and countries that are represented as perpetrators. Broadly speaking these types of lifestory narratives provide solutions, specifically *positive examples* regarding countering and preventing violent extremism, thereby aiming to inspire various target groups if found in similar situations to prevent and counter radicalization and thereby increase resilience.

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Introduction

Lifestories are individual, subjective narratives of one's own experience.¹ They provide a glimpse into one's personal life, and can provide a deeper insight into the behaviors, events and processes that have shaped an individual, beyond network and institutional levels. Through a biographical approach, lifestories uncover social experiences, surrounding relationships, and identify the commonalities and differences between individuals.² Lifestories can be used for research and practice purposes, thus they can valorize research and increase societal impact. They enable forms of empathetic knowing and solidarity beyond disciplinary debates.³

More specifically, reported achievements in using lifestory interviews in the field of psychology and sociology in order to **enhance the identities** of patients and citizens⁴ may be successfully used to alleviate security challenges.⁵ By using lifestory interviews to enhance the identity, the lifestory approach presents a theory of change that could successfully alleviate radicalization challenges. In fact, lifestory narratives can be used for messaging campaigns and strategic communications, as they can be viewed as one of the tools of strategic communications on prevention and countering violent extremism (P/CVE).⁶

Even though lifestories have not generally been used in the context of P/CVE in the short format that we have employed, they present a socially innovative approach to counter violence and have been used in the project "Countering Radicalisation through Lifestories in the Western Balkans". The Global Coalition Against DAESH, the Counter Communications Department based in London, has used lifestories highlighting the experiences of people who lived in the Syrian conflict for strategic communications purposes. Similar initiatives with a different format have been conducted by the US based International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism. These projects also pioneered the approach in P/CVE using lifestories (referred to as counter narratives).⁷ Similarly, the Women without Borders have contributed to the approach with videos of directly affected individuals, mainly mothers.⁸

So far, think tanks and some academics have proposed some guidelines to follow in order to ensure successful counter messaging campaigns. Several criteria are recommended by

1 Atkinson, Robert. *The Life Story Interview*. Sage, 1998.

2 Ibid.

3 Inayatullah, Naeem. *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*. Routledge, 2010.

4 Moos, Inger, and Agnes Björn. "Use of the Life Story in the Institutional Care of People with Dementia: A Review of Intervention Studies." *Ageing & Society* 26, no. 3 (2006): 431–54.; Rapoport, Anatol. *The Origins of Violence: Approaches to the Study of Conflict*. Transaction Publishers, 1994.

5 For more information, please see the policy report on P/CVE with Lifestory Narratives.

6 For more information, please see the policy report on P/CVE with Lifestory Narratives.

7 Speckhard, Anne, Ardian Shajkovci, and Neima Izadi. "Using Counter Narrative Campaigns on Facebook to 'Break the ISIS Brand' in Iraq – ICSVE." ICSVE (blog), November 13, 2018. <https://www.icsve.org/using-counter-narrative-campaigns-on-facebook-to-break-the-isis-brand-in-iraq/>.

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRYS-YQ2DLg&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR32sA406Nc8lWD9HLYHF6rb0fiKnaPHZadwhe7JpG7SArSnuL6mQoYPCw>

the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) for devising counter and alternative narratives that could lead to a successful campaign. It is recommended to identify and understand the target group, then to develop a theory of change and to know the target audience. In fact, the target audiences know best, and the timing should be rightly ensured. In addition, emotions seem to be more important than evidence, and campaigns should be sustained, rather than sporadic. Moreover, professionalism and production quality are vital. Going viral should not be the aim of the campaign, but it is important to link the online and offline counter campaign initiatives. Lastly, humor and satire is considered to be effective.⁹ Other guidelines, such as the GAMMMA+ principles, propose a framework on developing effective counter and alternative narratives based on key lessons derived from the RAN Working Group on Counter Narratives as well.¹⁰ Other studies suggest the inclusion of the local communities,¹¹ which the lifestories approach view as an integral part in all stages, namely during the collection of lifestories in the field,¹² designing audiences, goals and mediums for dissemination, identifying the messages in the lifestory narratives, making the videos,¹³ monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the lifestories approach,¹⁴ and dealing with fieldwork challenges such as security risks and so on.

This paper outlines the most important aspects that need to be taken into account when following the framework for the development of lifestory narratives on P/CVE. As explained earlier, lifestories are authentic, personal and emotional - hence the reason for using them in the context of P/CVE - but in order to be effective, the framework outlined below needs to be adhered to. This paper has been divided into four parts discussing how to develop effective counter narratives on P/CVE strategic communication campaigns. The first part introduces the target audiences on P/CVE, namely the violent extremists and vulnerable individuals - often referred to as directly affected individuals - that are beneficial for the lifestories approach. It highlights the importance of clearly identifying the target audiences. Goals and mediums need to be tailored accordingly to each audience - the goals per each target audience are therefore outlined and the dissemination mediums that need to be used for the lifestories approach are explained. Most importantly, the last section outlines the main finding by introducing a new typology of lifestory narratives that can be used for strategic campaigning on P/CVE. It incorporates

⁹ Radicalization Awareness Network. "Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives RAN Issue Paper," 2015, p.4

¹⁰ Radicalization Awareness Network. "RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+)" 2017. The following criteria are listed: devise clear, realistic and measurable goals; identify the target audience; send a relevant message; use a credible messenger; use media tailored to the preferred medium of target audiences, both online and offline; offer a call to action for those wishing to become involved in the issue at hand; ensure monitoring and evaluation components from the start which can be adjusted later on if necessary; and assess security risks for your organization and partners.

¹¹ Radicalization Awareness Network. "Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities", 2018.

¹² A separate paper on Lifestory Fieldwork on P/CVE will be published which will outline strategies for access, challenges and mitigation strategies.

¹³ A separate policy paper on Technical Guidelines on Making videos will be published outlining steps on how to develop effective lifestory videos anywhere.

¹⁴ A separate policy paper on monitoring and evaluation will be published as well.

the traditional narratives such as counter and alternative ones, but it also adds two new types, namely resilient and destigmatization narratives. All these lifestory narratives provide various authentic messages that are key for P/CVE strategic communications. Information on other issues related to the framework for the development of lifestory narratives, such as the rationale behind the lifestory narratives on P/CVE, fieldwork challenges on collection of lifestory narratives (risks, confidentiality),¹⁵ measuring, monitoring and assessing the effectiveness (impact) of lifestory narratives,¹⁶ and the technical guidelines on making lifestory videos, can be found in separate papers.

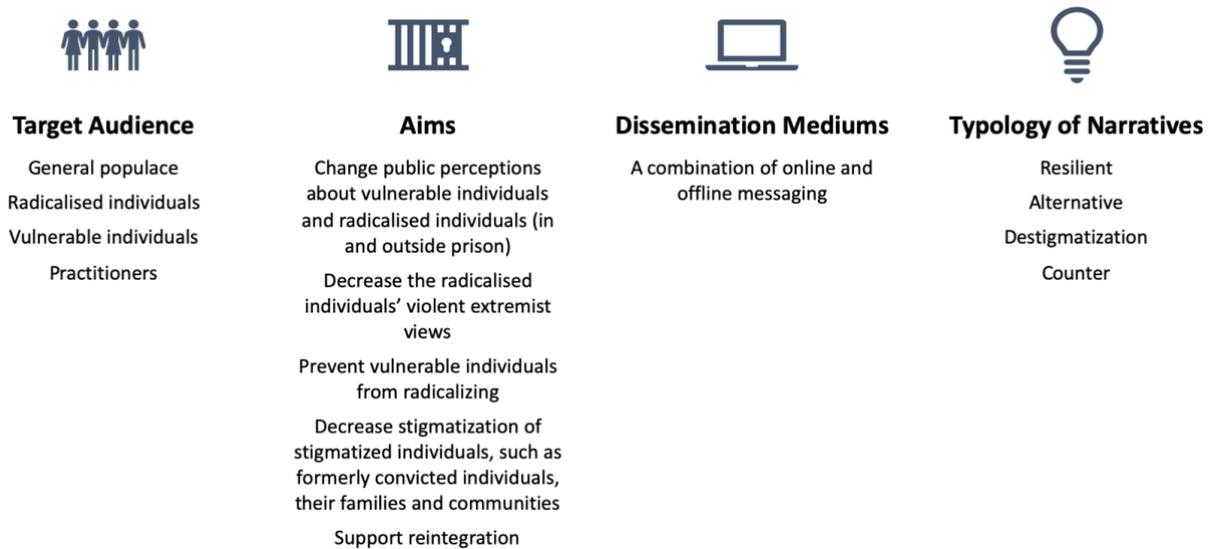


Table I: The Lifestories Strategic Communications Framework

A discussion on the target audiences that need to be used for strategic communications on P/CVE is provided below.

Target Audience

For effective messaging through lifestory narratives on P/CVE, it is essential to identify the target audiences, and accordingly tailor the goals and mediums for dissemination. Generally diverse target audiences are preferred on P/CVE as the *holistic/whole society approach* necessitates engaging all elements of society. Such an approach is essential to ensure an increase in people reached, which thereby increases impact. The approach is likely to cause less counter-productive impact. This is mainly because incorporating various audiences from various groups, communities and states decreases the likelihood of antagonizing specific individuals, groups, communities and states. Therefore, it is important to take an *inclusive approach* towards audiences, as excluding some may result in alienating or creating the feeling of being stigmatized among the individuals, groups, or

¹⁵ See the paper on Fieldwork Challenges.

¹⁶ See the HCSS policy paper on Monitoring and Evaluation of lifestories.

communities that are incorporated. Thus, a **representative sample of target audiences** is important to incorporate. Selecting individuals from different countries, locations (rural-urban), socio-economic classes, genders, ethnicities and religions will allow for an effective lifestory narrative messaging-campaign. Moreover, the sample should include individuals from the countries themselves but also from the diaspora. This ensures that the links between mother countries and diasporas, and that various types of radicalization (religious, ethno-national), are tackled. Such an inclusive approach refutes common criticism towards early stages of the campaigns, such as stigmatizing specific communities and countries, mythicization of the other, and potential backlash. Consequently, the campaigns including representative target audiences increase the likelihood of effective impact in the long term, even though the process may be longer.

The main target audiences of messaging campaigns through life story narratives are (i) general populace, (ii) radicalized individuals, (iii) vulnerable individuals and groups who are also directly affected and (iv) practitioners. The radicalized individuals are homegrown violent extremists and foreign fighters (both legally charged and uncharged). Vulnerable individuals are usually youth at risk,¹⁷ being directly affected from terrorism/radicalization as they may have been approached by terrorist organizations. Directly affected individuals include (i) family members, such as parents, children, siblings and cousins, (ii) friends, (iii) community observers, (iv) religious and ethnic officials and (v) approached individuals. Therefore, to strategically message both radicalized and vulnerable individuals and groups, the lifestories of both formerly radicalized and directly affected individuals are used. The latter lifestories are used since they possess a degree of credibility after former violent extremists, and other types of experiences that provide a holistic representation of the impact of terrorism.

Although lifestories can be tailored to the audience, it is also important to show stories from various target groups to all audiences in order to increase the impact. Sometimes the target groups would like to hear stories from their own target group, such as families-family stories or former foreign fighters' stories. However, showing a wide range of stories will likely impact them more as their impact in the wider community beyond their group becomes more visible. In other words, while lifestory narratives can be tailored to specific audiences, it is also possible that family members are interested in listening to a life story narrative that is more directly applicable to the life of a family member or religious leader, and so on. Therefore, it is important to show various stories in order to increase impact.

In addition, it is argued that target audiences know best.¹⁸ Thus the campaign content that is co-created with individuals in the target audience/ local communities will have credibility and will most likely resonate more. Since lifestories are told from the local

¹⁷ "The Role of Youth in Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans." Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 2018.

¹⁸ Radicalization Awareness Network. "RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMMA+)" 2017.

citizens and members of diasporas, the local context/cultural knowledge elements will be part of the campaign as well. This ensures local inclusion in the long term.

Furthermore, the *spectrum of radicalization* is important for an effective strategic messaging campaign. In fact, the key to designing a successful campaign is the correct identification and understanding of the chosen target audience and where they are situated on the extremism spectrum.¹⁹ Our hypothesis is that lifestories work better with individuals that are situated at a low level within the extremism spectrum rather than with individuals that are further along within the spectrum of extremism, as it is more difficult to intervene on individuals holding highly radical beliefs. However, since lifestories have a strong emotional appeal,²⁰ and are combined with facts (i.e. crimes committed in war zones) and credible voices (former homegrown violent extremists, former foreign fighters, directly affected individuals), they may influence violent extremists as well. Even though individuals that are highly radicalized may be less susceptible to lifestories, showing them lifestories of various target groups may instigate a dilemma, which thereby results in these individuals being more likely to change their attitude and behavior. Lifestory narratives aim to erode the intellectual framework adopted by extremists through planting ‘seeds of doubt’, as research seems to identify it as one of the factors contributing on P/CVE.²¹ Moreover, to the individuals who are in the early stages of radicalization (low spectrum of radicalization), stories of approached individuals that rejected the pathway of violent extremism can be shown, as they mirror their situation and provide an alternative route from the one that they may be inclined to choose. While the stories of approached individuals should primarily be shown to this group, complementing them with the lifestories of directly affected individuals can increase impact, as the potential consequences beyond themselves into the wider family and community will become visible. Now, it is essential to turn to the goals of the strategic campaign through lifestory narratives per each target audience.

Aims of the Lifestories on P/CVE and Matching their Narrative Typology

Effective strategic communication campaigns must have goals that are clear, realistic and measurable.²² While lifestory narratives goals are clearly explained below, whether they are realistic is questionable as their impact needs to be measured in the affected communities.²³ Broadly speaking lifestories provide solutions, specifically *good examples* about what goes well. They provide concrete examples of how various target groups can react positively in specific situations, thereby aiming to inspire them if found in similar

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See the separate policy paper on P/CVE with lifestory narratives.

²¹ Briggs, Rachel, and Sebastien Feve. “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism” 2013.

²² Radicalization Awareness Network. “RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMMA+)” 2017.

²³ An upcoming paper will be released on measuring the impact of lifestory narratives.

situations to prevent and counter radicalization. Thus, lifestory narratives aim to change: public perceptions about vulnerable individuals and radicalized individuals (in and outside prison); decrease the radicalized individuals' violent extremist views; prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing; decrease stigmatization of stigmatized individuals, such as formerly convicted individuals, their families and communities; and support reintegration.

More specifically, to change public perceptions of the general populace about violent extremism, lifestories of all target groups can be used, namely former violent extremists, directly affected individuals and practitioners. In order to decrease the **radicalized individuals'** violent extremist views, lifestory narratives of formerly radicalized individuals are used. In addition, the narratives of directly affected individuals can be shown to them as these explain the impact beyond themselves to their families and communities. For various types of radicalized individuals, and at various stages, a story is matched from the same type of individual. For example, to convicted individuals, showing a lifestory narrative of a formerly convicted individual is likely to have greater impact. In addition, stories of directly affected individuals can be shown as well to exemplify their impact in the wider community. Counter, alternative and destigmatization narratives are important for this group because they represent voices of directly affected individuals.

In order to **prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing**, lifestories of formerly radicalized individuals, as well as those of directly affected individuals and approached individuals are used. This incorporates a whole society approach, as vulnerable individuals will become aware of their potential impact, not only for themselves but also for their family, friends, community members and others associated with them. In addition, matching the stories of approached individuals who rejected the radicalization path despite being approached, may also assist vulnerable individuals in condemning violence. Resilient, alternative and counter narratives are of significant importance for this group because they mainly offer positive messages, except the counter narratives which can serve as a deterrent.

Among the general populace and practitioners, in order to decrease stigmatization of stigmatized individuals and groups, such as formerly convicted individuals, or their families and communities, and to support rehabilitation and re-integration of these individuals, lifestories of both formerly radicalized individuals and directly affected individuals who positively accepted them back into society can be used. Destigmatization, counter-disengagement and counter-deradicalization narratives are key to this group because they show both the processes of radicalization and the positive changes. Now, the mediums that can be used to achieve these goals will be outlined below.

Dissemination Mediums Tailored to Local Communities

For effective dissemination of the lifestory narratives, it is important to create a dissemination strategy incorporating the elements below. It is crucial to identify the mediums/channels (online and face to face) in advance and adjust timing. RAN's report also stresses that dissemination needs credible messengers, enlisting five types: government, civil society, religious leaders, institutions, communities, formers, victims, and suggests to use credible mediums. The usual channels for dissemination are traditional media and social media, and the timing of delivery is viewed to be important.²⁴ In addition, Hedayah's report recommends identifying the medium(s) where the message will be disseminated on both online and offline platforms. The suggested key medium(s) are social media, websites, radio, television, film, cinemas and other offline platforms. While developing a strategy for dissemination, it is important to utilize networks of non-governmental organizations, civil society and media partners. Moreover, it is important to consider how the material can be repackaged and disseminated on various platforms for a broader reach, how to ensure the timing/launch of the campaign and how to provide for two-way communication between messengers and target audience.²⁵ Similarly, like RAN, Hedayah's report suggests that the *timing* is very important in order to have an effective counter-messaging campaign.²⁶ The best campaign may fail if timing is wrong. Rapid response capabilities are required to capitalize on unanticipated events, social media campaigns or announcements.²⁷ Therefore, the lifestories campaign can start once the lifestories are identified, collected, and translated into videos in order not to disrupt their dissemination in the long run. Since various lifestories will be collected, timing of their release can be adjusted according to the local dynamics in the country. Counter-narrative campaigns implemented over *a sustained period of time* will have more impact than one-off efforts.²⁸ Therefore, it is recommended to collect lifestories bi-yearly and produce a sustainable counter radicalization messaging campaign over lengthier periods of time. This may counter the terrorist propaganda as it represents a long-term strategy. In addition, the broader governmental strategies on CT and P/CVE need to align with the strategic messaging, otherwise they may hamper any potential effective lifestories messaging campaign.

A combination of online and offline messaging is essential for the lifestory narratives to be effective. While online counter messaging is essential, it needs to be complemented with one-on-one messaging with individuals who already hold extremist views and/or are vulnerable to radicalization. The online and offline platforms need to be tailored to each

24 "Preventing Radicalisation To Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Delivering Counter – or Alternative Narratives." RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices. Radicalization Awareness Network, 2018.

25 "Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism." Hedayah and The International Centre for Counter Terrorism (The Hague), 2014.

26 Ibid.

27 Radicalization Awareness Network. "RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+)" 2017.

28 Ibid.

country due to different political, economic, security, religious and historical developments.

Most importantly, a *worldwide lifestory database* (<https://storiesofpeace.eu> - open access) is created, containing short videos of biographies of formerly radicalized individuals whose life experiences reveal important aspects of both the radicalization and dis-engagement, de-radicalization and re-integration processes that serve to prevent radicalization and promote re-integration. Moreover, the stories of individuals directly affected by terrorism will be used. The database focuses on lifestories providing solutions, especially in regard to good examples about what goes well on prevention and countering violent extremism. The online database, which will be accessible at all times, will also contribute to capacity building. Based on these lifestories, new outputs can be produced, such as documentaries and instructional videos on various P/CVE themes, to ensure capacity building, as they will remain accessible after the project ends, and can be used by local partners.

Online the lifestory videos can be disseminated through mediums such as social media (Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram, vlogs, blogs), lifestory database/website, radio, television, film and cinema. Moreover, the *Google/Moonshot redirect method* will be used, which identifies individuals watching terrorist narratives and redirects them to lifestories narratives on different platforms. In addition, TV channels which are highly followed by the citizens need to show the videos as well. The local partners are key to facilitate links to the media network.

The lifestory videos can be distributed via credible messengers offline like directly affected individuals, former violent extremists, think tanks, NGOs (researchers), religious and ethnic organizations (imams or ethnic leaders), academia (professors), media (journalists) and the IO's (local and international officials). Governmental entities are generally not suggested to be used for dissemination among those communities, due to legitimacy challenges and lack of trust. This ensures that governments will not be able to utilize the lifestories for political gains. In fact, they can be advised to not use lifestories for any type of political campaign. The governments however can serve as facilitators/connectors. However, there are exceptions. In some cases, it is important to identify the trustworthy entities within local government to use them for strategic communications on P/CVE. In addition, governments that are a source of radicalization and that have changed their position may assist on P/CVE, if they condemn violent extremism. Their impact may be limited as some groups may still reject the government's messaging efforts.

It is essential that the messengers possess a wide range of knowledge on ethnic and religious contexts, in addition to considerable understanding of violent extremist ideologies, as well as cultural sensitivity. It enables them to provide refutation and

clarification of distorted or misunderstood interpretations related to the theological, ideological and political narratives advanced by violent extremist groups.²⁹

Complementary to the online activities, the offline dissemination can include a combination of regional and country level workshops; conferences; peer-to-peer trainings and discussions in community/youth centres; educational facilities; ethnic-oriented facilities and religious institutions; and one-on-one meetings. The regional workshops can highlight the relevance of strategic campaigning (including the lifestories database) and how to utilize them from the whole society approach. The country workshops aim to train local officials on how to use the lifestories database, how to collect lifestories themselves, how to produce videos technically and how to create strategies for dissemination. Moreover, peer-on-peer trainings with lecturers and students are essential, as then these individuals will continue to collect lifestories themselves for their research purposes in their own communities, which can afterwards be uploaded online into the lifestories database. In turn, this ensures capacity building and sustainability. Lastly, conferences can be organized to strengthen the dissemination and bring together the main local and international actors involved to initiate an analysis, review and changes in policymaking. Generally, all the actors mentioned can be advised to use the lifestories approach as an informal educational tool. Now, we turn to the types of lifestories such as resilient, alternative, counter and destigmatization that can be disseminated in various settings.

Typology of Lifestory Narratives

While most of the research so far focuses on developing counter and alternative narratives,³⁰ the lifestories approach uncovered two more types of narratives that require more attention, namely resilient and destigmatization narratives and sub-categories of counter narratives, which are positive in their nature. The proposed typology also deals with the criticism that counter narratives are defensive in their nature.³¹ Therefore, it provides counter narratives with a positive nature such as countervailing narratives showing how directly affected individuals contributed to P/CVE effectively. Moreover, lifestories present narratives which move away from the dichotomies propagated by violent extremists: either join and become a “believer” and extremist, or you are a traitor. These various types of lifestory narratives aim to inspire the potentially radicalized and vulnerable individuals to disengage and deradicalize, and to encourage policy makers from around the world to use lifestories of directly affected individuals and formerly radicalized individuals to counter and prevent radicalization and strengthen the re-

²⁹ Briggs, Rachel, and Sebastien Feve. “Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism,” 2013.

³⁰ “Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism.” Hedayah and The International Centre for Counter Terrorism (The Hague), 2014.;

“Preventing Radicalisation ToTerrorism and Violent Extremism: Delivering Counter – or Alternative Narratives.” RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices. Radicalization Awareness Network, 2018.

; Radicalization Awareness Network. “Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives RAN Issue Paper,” 2015

³¹ Reed, Dr Alastair. “An Inconvenient Truth: Countering Terrorist Narratives - Fighting a Threat We Do Not Understand,” July 2, 2018.

integration strategies. Thereby, it aims to implement a socially innovative approach in P/CVE (inside and outside prisons).

Thus, this section outlines a typology of lifestory narratives uncovered from interviews conveying four types of messages, namely (i) resilient, (ii) alternative, (iii) counter, and (iv) destigmatization narratives. The current typology of lifestory narratives highlights positive messages that are authentic and given by directly affected individuals (vulnerable) and formerly radicalized individuals. These stories also point out successes by providing concrete examples of the role that one can play in supporting vulnerable individuals and communities. In fact, these lifestories aim to provide peace infrastructures³² in societal levels through communication campaigns that have long-term the potential to build resilience, which can trickle into the governmental level.

Peace infrastructures are peacebuilding frameworks that could support the transition of the individual, group or community from an extremist/radical perspective to a perspective of peace, contributing to sustainable practices and systems. It addresses the structural causes of conflict, and it has a multi-stakeholder society-wide approach focused on transposing a message of peace from one stakeholder to another, working on all levels, from governmental to grassroot actors.³³ Generally, therefore the current typology of lifestories can also contribute to peace building, not only P/CVE when used effectively in conflict zones in the long term. The following types of lifestories narratives can be translated into videos and used for strategic communications.³⁴

Resilient Narratives

The most important lifestory narratives are the *resilient* narrative, as they represent stories of individuals who were exposed to radicalization but still rejected the violent path. They aim to create resilience among the youth and vulnerable groups and ultimately support P/CVE. They present a balanced view based of the experiences of vulnerable individuals. These types of stories show both experiences of resentment, grievances and discrimination, but also instances of shifting away from violence despite negative experiences. These stories also often show dissatisfaction with the state. Stories told by the diaspora may highlight real or perceived stigmatization. However, it is important to note that these individuals endorsed peaceful approaches to resolve their differences. These types of stories are present in various audiences but are mainly found among individuals approached by terrorists. We categorize those as ‘approached individuals’, which are also vulnerable. Therefore, it is argued that these stories are more appropriate for strategic messaging campaigns as they may resonate with and reach many individuals around the world, and it can be translated into different socio-political, religious and

³² Please see the forthcoming policy paper on P/CVE through Lifestories Approach

³³ Davis, Quinn. *Building Infrastructures for Peace: The Role of Liaison Offices in Myanmar’s Peace Process*. Siem Reap: The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS), 2016.

³⁴ For more, see the separate policy paper on “The Technical Guidelines on Developing Lifestory Videos”.

cultural contexts. Thereby, the resilient narratives may become key to P/CVE for research and impact purposes.

Resilient narratives present examples of how various formerly radicalized individuals or directly affected individuals, as well as government officials, contributed positively towards P/CVE and deradicalization efforts. They are positive in nature, meaning that they deal with processes individually, within their families or within their communities, rather than opposing violent extremist content. In addition, they provide concrete, tangible and relatable examples of the role that one can play in supporting vulnerable groups. For example, they show how individuals exposed to terrorist organizations reject terrorism, they show how the police reacted well to an incident and prevented an individual from traveling to a conflict zone, how family members prevented their loved ones from endorsing radicalization and/or disengaging/de-radicalizing, how community members prevented individuals from joining violence through dialogue and mediation (theological, ideological or political), or how various ethnic and religious officials interpret religion or ethnicity.

Alternative Narratives

Alternative narratives exhibit positive messages from various target groups that do not involve violence.³⁵ They often highlight stories related to role models, social/cultural values, tolerance and diversity. They aim to inspire people to strengthen their values on tolerance and peace, foster critical thinking and ultimately contribute to P/CVE. Prof. Alex Schmid also argues that offering young people alternative identification objects and role models and thereby the possibility to develop a different and positive identity is a road that needs to be explored more thoroughly.³⁶ For example, an elderly individual can tell the lifestory of their childhood, education, family relations and so on highlighting their peaceful local and cultural values and habits. Since they don't engage directly with extremist content, they can be considered as less contentious in society. In comparison to counter narratives, they pose a lower risk of alienation of target audiences when used because they provide alternatives that are affirmative in their nature. Moreover, the local social/cultural values and peaceful themes are less likely to be rejected. Consequently, they can be undertaken not only by civil society but also by the government, as it may strengthen their trust and relations with citizens.

Counter Narratives

The counter narratives discredit the violent extremists' narratives, mainly with strong emotions. At times, they may also involve violent memories, such as rape of women, killings of children or beheadings. In fact, these stories may hinder some individuals from

³⁵ Radicalization Awareness Network. "RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMMA+)" 2017.

³⁶ Schmid, Alex P. "Radicalisation, de-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review." ICCT Research Paper 97, no. 1 (2013): 22.

endorsing violence. However, their impact may be questionable as alternatives are not presented. Moreover, they are defensive in their nature as they mainly respond to violent extremists' messages.³⁷ From violent extremists, they may be perceived as propaganda despite lifestories being fact based. Therefore, these narratives should only be directed at audiences that are well understood and which are already engaged with violent extremist content.³⁸ In the process of production of counter-narratives, the mitigation of potential adverse effects of the counter-narratives themselves should be considered.

There are three lessons that can be used for crafting a successful counter-narrative. Firstly, crafting messages that undermine the leadership and decrease the credibility of leaders and authority figures is vital. Secondly, it is important to highlight civilian suffering and the hypocrisy of the opposing narrative. Lastly, the violent extremist's acts should be portrayed as criminal acts with punitive consequences for the individual, in order to remove the aura of purity surrounding their ideology.³⁹ The use of defensive counter narratives highlighting disengagement and deradicalization processes (disengagement and deradicalization narratives) are not highly recommended for usage on strategic communications. Generally, these stories aim to inspire individuals to de-radicalize and disengage, decrease the radicalized individuals' violent extremist views, prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing and decrease stigmatization of formerly radicalized individuals and their families.

These narratives are told by directly affected individuals, formerly radicalized individuals, as well as governmental officials (police, etc). The counter narratives with defensive nature are the de-radicalization narratives, which present stories of individuals that de-radicalized from violence and successfully re-integrated back into society. There are also counter narratives with defensive nature, disengagement narratives, showing stories of individuals who radicalized and endorsed violence, but over time shifted toward using peaceful tools to resolve grievances. These lifestories of disengagement and deradicalization are usually provided by formerly radicalized individuals, such as former foreign fighters or former homegrown violent extremists.

Destigmatization Narratives

The *destigmatization* lifestory narratives highlight formerly radicalized individuals and their families as ordinary people and aim to remove the stigmatization of these individuals. The destigmatization narratives are of particular importance due to their sensitive nature. Questions are inevitably raised, such as who decides what is normal. Moreover, some of the formerly radicalized individuals, as well as directly affected

³⁷ Reed, Dr Alastair. "An Inconvenient Truth: Countering Terrorist Narratives - Fighting a Threat We Do Not Understand," July 2, 2018. <https://icct.nl/publication/an-inconvenient-truth-countering-terrorist-narratives-fighting-a-threat-we-do-not-understand/>.

³⁸Radicalization Awareness Network. "RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMMA+)" 2017.

³⁹ Ibid.

individuals, may endorse some democratic principles while rejecting other democratic principles, and still call for society to accept and reintegrate them. In theory, these stories may be of assistance. However, there are also risks involved as Al-Qaeda's ideology may unintentionally be supported through these campaigns as their current method seems to aim to capture the state gradually by normalizing non-democratic principles.⁴⁰ Therefore, they are not recommended to be used frequently in messaging campaigns on P/CVE, and if used, they should be designed very carefully. If used, it is essential to assess whether any democratic principles are subject to misinterpretation, misuse or threat, and if a dangerous political narrative could be construed through their use. If so, then they should not be used. For instance, lifestories showing desire for reintegration but lack of desire for respecting i.e. LGBT rights should not be used, especially in states which already have struggled with such sensitive topics, have a negative human rights track record or have a government that might be labelled as undemocratic. This also holds true if the strategic communication campaigns are sponsored by states with strong democratic or liberal political systems. Otherwise, questions regarding the legitimacy of the lifestory campaign will arise.

Conclusion

To conclude, lifestories highlight the personal experiences of people, which have a deeply human element and foster an understanding of the self, both subjectively and objectively. They can cross boundaries as everyone has a lifestory to tell and have the potential to make people relate and empathize with one another. They present an opportunity to conduct interdisciplinary research, combining oral history and security studies, and present an authentic, people-centered, emotional and socially innovative approach to counter and prevent radicalization and strengthen resilience.

For lifestories to be effective in messaging campaigns, a framework for the development of lifestory narratives has been devised that needs to be abided to. This paper outlined the most important aspects that need to be taken into account when following the framework for the development of the lifestory approach used for strategic communications campaign on P/CVE: the audience; goals; mediums; and the typology of life story narratives.

It is important to note that the main target audience of the lifestory narratives are (i) radicalized individuals (homegrown and foreign fighters), (ii) vulnerable individuals (directly affected individuals such as youth, family members, friends, community members, religious and ethnic leaders) and (iii) practitioners. The lifestory strategic communications campaign aims to (i) change public perceptions about vulnerable individuals and radicalized individuals (in and outside prison), (ii) decrease the radicalized

⁴⁰ See the forthcoming report on countering radicalization in the Western Balkans.

individuals violent extremist views, (iii) prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing, (iv) decrease stigmatization of stigmatized individuals, such as formerly convicted individuals, their families and communities, and (v) support reintegration. Moreover, to ensure effective dissemination of the content it is important to create a dissemination strategy, which identifies the mediums/channels (online and face-to-face) in advance and adjusts the timing of publicizing the lifestory narratives. A combination of online messaging and offline campaigning is essential. In addition, the governmental policies on P/CVE should align with campaigns, in order for the lifestory narratives to be effective. While online counter messaging is essential, it needs to be complemented with one-on-one messaging with individuals who already hold extremist views and/or are vulnerable. On the one hand, online dissemination includes mediums such as social media⁴¹, lifestory website, radio, television, film and cinema. In addition, the redirect method can be used. On the other hand, offline campaigns can include activities such as regional or country level workshops, conferences, peer to peer trainings, discussions in religious and ethnic facilities/schools/universities and one-on-one meetings. The messengers needs to be credible and can be an NGO, the media, academia, and at times also the government (in the case of alternative narratives) and individuals that have been interviewed for research purposes, also provide a good avenue to disseminate the lifestory videos via the website (<https://storiesofpeace.eu>) or the Youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGGyE4NviSu5qI-zqxu4LWw>). It is important to note that for counter narratives, dissemination needs to be tailor-made to the targeted groups.

Most importantly, the lifestory narratives provide four types of messages, namely (i) resilient, (ii) alternative, (iii) counter, and (iv) destigmatization. The most important narratives are *resilient narratives*, representing stories of individuals who were exposed actively to radicalization but still rejected the violent path. They aim to create resilience among the youth and vulnerable groups and ultimately support P/CVE. They may become key to P/CVE. They also show stories of directly affected individuals and how they contributed positively to P/CVE. The second category is *alternative narratives*, which reveals positive alternative perspectives and show stories related to role models, social/cultural values, tolerance and diversity. The third category includes *counter narratives* which discredit the violent extremists' narratives, mainly with strong emotions and extreme violence. They are mainly defensive in nature presenting narratives of de-radicalization and disengagement. Broadly, they aim to inspire individuals to de-radicalize and disengage, decreasing the individuals' violent extremist views, preventing vulnerable individuals from radicalizing and, overall, decrease stigmatization of formerly radicalized individuals. The last category of lifestory narratives includes *destigmatization* narratives, which portray formerly radicalized individuals and their families as normal, and aim to destigmatize formerly radicalized individuals and the affected individuals and groups. The

⁴¹ Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram

latter stories are not highly recommended to be used. Therefore, it is proposed to mainly use the alternative and resilient narratives and less often the counter and stigmatization narratives due to their potential counterproductive impact. These stories need to be co-created with local communities as well as disseminated with them.

Annex: Summary Table of The Lifestories Strategic Communications Framework

Types of Lifestory Narratives	Goal	Target Audience	Dissemination Medium
Resilient Narratives	Aim to inspire individuals to reject and counter radicalization if found in similar situations, and specifically to create resilience among the youth and vulnerable groups and ultimately support P/CVE.	(i) Radicalized individuals (homegrown terrorists and foreign fighters) (ii) vulnerable individuals (youth at risk, but also directly affected individuals from terrorism/radicalization) and (iii) potential practitioners	<p>Online</p> <p>The mediums (tv/radio/social media) that are highly followed by citizens on the ground can be used for dissemination online.</p> <p>Redirect method via Google/Moonshot CVE on social media and Youtube.</p> <p>Dissemination of the website (lifestory videos).</p> <p>One-to-one messaging with individuals who are vulnerable.</p> <hr/> <p>Offline</p> <p>Face to face dissemination via the following activities: regional and country level workshops, conferences, peer to peer trainings, discussions in religious and ethnic facilities/schools/universities, prison facilities, via interviewees and one-on-one meetings.</p>
Alternative Narratives	Aim to inspire people to strengthen their social/cultural values, diversity and tolerance, foster critical thinking and ultimately contribute to P/CVE.	Vulnerable individuals.	See above, in collaboration with local communities.

<p>Destigmatization Narratives <i>(not highly recommended due to their potential abuse)</i></p>	<p>Aim to destigmatize formerly radicalized individuals and the directly affected individuals, support their re-integration by showing de-radicalization and disengagement narratives, and ultimately contribute to P\CVE.</p>	<p>Formerly radicalized. and vulnerable individuals.</p>	<p>See above, in collaboration with local communities</p>
<p>Counter Narratives <i>(not highly recommended due to their defensive nature)</i></p>	<p>Aim mainly to inspire individuals to de-radicalize and disengage, decrease the radicalized individuals' extremist views, and potentially prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing, decrease stigmatization of formerly radicalized individuals and their families, and ultimately contribute to P\CVE.</p>	<p>Radicalized individuals and potentially vulnerable individuals.</p>	<p>Targeted to specific groups, in collaboration with local communities.</p>