



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken



HCSS Security

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

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Please refer to the Policy Report: A Lifestory Strategic Communications Framework on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism and Strengthening Resilience by the same author as it is based on it and that some parts in this brief are duplicates.

Lifestories highlight the personal experiences of people, exhibiting a deep human element and fostering 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. The policy brief outlines 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 Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE): the audience, goals, mediums, and the typology of life story narratives.

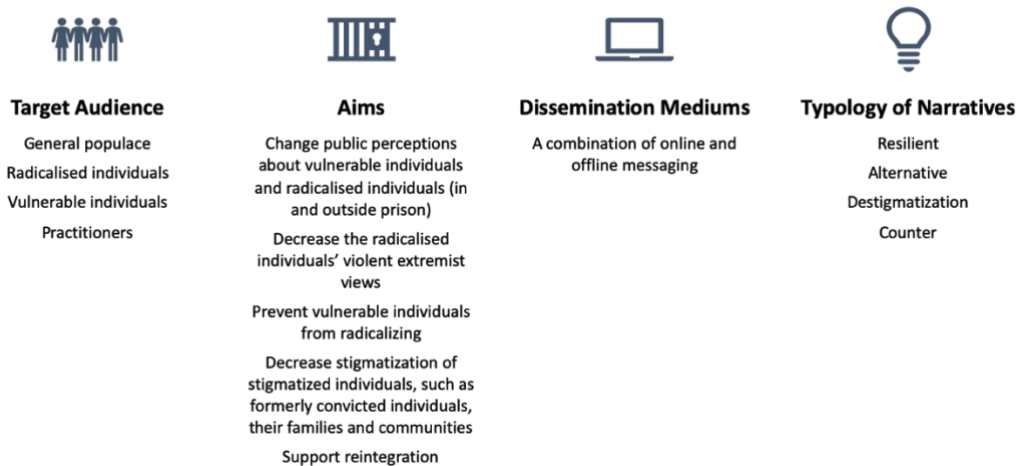


Table I: The Lifestories Strategic Communications Framework

Generally, the lifestory approach purposely targets audiences in all demographic segments of the population, adopting a *whole of society approach*. Hence lifestory interviews took place with interviewees from different socioeconomic strata, gender groups, religious communities, ethnic groups, locations, et cetera. In this way, the lifestories technique, complemented by various interviewees and target audiences, pose no risk of alienating specific groups. It is important to note, however, that within these demographic groups the main target audience of the lifestory narratives are: (i) radicalized individuals (homegrown and foreign fighters), and in particular those on lower levels of the spectrum of radicalization; (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, while targeting the groups mentioned above, aims to change public perceptions about vulnerable and radicalized individuals (in and outside prison), decrease the radicalized individuals' violent extremist views, prevent vulnerable individuals from radicalizing, decrease stigmatization of radicalized individuals, such as formerly convicted individuals, their families and communities, and support reintegration. Depending on the objective pursued, different types of lifestory narratives and different target audiences shall be engaged in order to maximize the desired impact (for more information, see Annex I: Summary Table on *The Lifestories Strategic Communications Framework*).

Moreover, to ensure an effective dissemination it is indispensable to create a dissemination strategy, which identifies the mediums/channels (online and face-to-face) in advance and adjusts the timing of the publication of the lifestory narratives. In addition, the governmental policies on P/CVE should align with these campaigns, in order for the lifestory narratives to be effective. Nonetheless, this alignment must be done in a careful manner so as not to create an overly visible link between the government and the lifestory campaign, as this may induce an *a priori* ideological opposition and dramatically reduce the effectiveness of the campaign. A combination of online messaging and offline campaigning is essential. Online dissemination includes using mediums such as social media (Youtube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Viber, Telegram), the lifestory website, radio, television, film and cinema. Methods of automatic redirecting, such as provided by Google Moonshoot, shall be used in concert as to enhance the effectiveness of the online campaign. At the same time, the online efforts should be complemented with a more personal one-on-one messaging with individuals who already hold extremist views and/or are vulnerable. On the other hand, offline campaigns should include activities such as regional/country level workshops, conferences, peer-to-peer trainings, discussions in religious and ethnic facilities/schools/universities and one-on-one meetings. The messengers need to be credible and can be NGOs, media, academia, and at times also the government (in the case of alternative narrative) and interviewees that have been met 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>). The sustainability of this strategic campaign is underpinned by an effort of the local individuals (i.e. assistants and students) trained to collect lifestories. These facilitators, while collecting lifestories for their own research and educational purposes, will also expand the lifestory repository openly accessible on the aforementioned website, continuously feeding lifestories and good P\CVE practice into policymaking. In this way, the lifestories P\CVE strategic campaign can become a locally sustainable effort.

Most importantly, the lifestory narratives provide four types of messages that can be used for the strategic campaign, namely (i) resilient, (ii) alternative, (iii) counter, and (iv) destigmatization.

The most important narratives are *resilient narratives*, representing 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 also present examples of how various formerly radicalized individuals, directly affected individuals and government officials contributed positively towards P/CVE and deradicalization efforts. They are positive in nature, meaning 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. They may become key to P/CVE.

The second category are *alternative narratives*, which reveal positive alternative perspectives and show stories related to role models, social/cultural values, tolerance and diversity. They present stories from youth, academics, religious and ethnic officials, and so on. Consequently, they can be undertaken not only by the civil society but also by the government, as it may strengthen their trust and relations with the citizens as well.

The third category includes *counter narratives*, which discredit the violent extremists' narratives, mainly with strong emotions and the showcasing of extreme violence perpetrated by radicals. They are defensive in nature. They also present de-radicalization narratives and disengagement narratives. Broadly, they aim to inspire individuals to de-radicalize and disengage, decrease the individuals' violent extremist views, preventing vulnerable individuals from radicalizing and, overall, decrease stigmatization of formerly radicalized individuals (countervailing ones). Nonetheless, they remain slightly controversial due to the mixed record related to their effectiveness. Counter narratives, and particularly the defensive ones, may alienate individuals, often ending up being refuted as a state-propaganda by vulnerable and radicalized subjects. Their employment in P\CVE campaigns must therefore be carefully designed and employed only with targeted communities.

The last category of lifestory narratives are those showing *destigmatization*, which portray formerly radicalized individuals and their families as regular or 'normal' citizens to reduce the stigma laid upon the formerly radicalized and their relatives. They pose certain risks that must be considered. Most importantly, these narratives may unintentionally foster the dissemination of antidemocratic principles, in case the deradicalized and reintegrated individual continues to hold certain illiberal views. This point should generally highlight the overarching rationale that in order to fully exploit lifestories' preventative and disengagement potential, they must be employed sensitively in line with the do-no-harm principle.

Broadly speaking, the lifestories representing counter and destigmatization narratives are suggested to be used with caution. Therefore, it is proposed to mainly use the alternative and resilient narratives and less regularly the counter and destigmatization narratives due to their potential counterproductive impact. All these stories need to be co-created with local communities as well as disseminated within them.

Finally, from a broader perspective, it should be noted that the long-term impact of lifestories extends beyond the P\CVE. While collecting human stories in order to craft national P\CVE strategies, the creation of peace infrastructures and societal resilience to political violence are simultaneously stimulated. Lifestories not only have the potential to prevent violent extremism, but also contribute to overall cross-sectoral peacebuilding efforts.

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>