A Strategic Communications Approach to Tackling Current, Emerging and New Violent Extremist Threats in Europe

Richard Chalk

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

A Strategic Communications Approach to Tackling Current, Emerging and New Violent Extremist Threats in Europe

Richard Chalk
ICCT Policy Brief
March 2024

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

About ICCT

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices.

Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

Licensing and Distribution

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

Contents

Abstract

This policy brief explores new and innovative communications approaches to reduce the threat from all forms of violent extremism in Europe today based on a precise analysis of the strategic problem and corresponding strategic communications solutions deployable in response. In the context of an ever-evolving violent extremist landscape, including new and emerging forms of violent extremism, unfolding events in Israel and Gaza, and an accelerating digital environment – this policy brief looks at how governments can take a more strategic approach to preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Based on a strategic analysis of current events and an informed analysis of previous policy responses, this policy brief offers a new and practical approach to the use of strategic communications aimed at safeguarding all communities from all forms of extremist and violent threats, to turn back the tide of extremist influence for good.

Keywords: strategic communications, violent extremism, P/CVE, Gaza, Israel, Hamas, civil society, digital technology

Introduction

In the wake of the current war between Israel and Hamas, the threat from violent extremism in Europe is as real and as present today than it has been at any point over the past few years. Since the fall of ISIS – who inspired a spate of terrorist attacks on European soil[1] – we have witnessed the emergence of a myriad of new violent extremist threats, including: the resurgence of violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) groups, new forms of VRWE such as accelerationism,[2] the emergence of the global incel movement,[3] a rise in anti-government/anti-authorities extremism and other forms of violent protest,[4] as well as new forms of extremism such as 'eco-extremism'.[5]

In response to current events in the Middle East, extremist ideas, commentary and concepts are filtering into mainstream social and news media, normalising extremist perspectives and popularising new and historic extremist sensitivities. This normalisation and popularisation are creating a reinforcing 'cycle of influence'[6] – where different violent extremist actors, from across the extremist spectrum, share a similar operating model, in which they aim to polarise communities, promote violence, trigger wider social unrest, and undermine trust in authorities, democratic institutions, broad values, and specific ways of life. They believe that by doing so, extremist ideas can take root. The ongoing Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, and ongoing hybrid adaptations have the potential, therefore to provide a substantial and new strategic opportunity for violent extremists to radicalise and recruit individuals, by exacerbating underlying community tensions, from which they can drive polarisation and go on to target, recruit, and operationalise individuals to carry out acts of terrorism. Ever since the emergence of ISIS – who instigated a new paradigm in violent extremists' use of communications and exploitation of the internet[7] – violent extremists, of all types, have been increasingly adept at both adopting and adapting new digital technologies[8] to reach their audiences online and distributing powerful communications content that engages and energises their audiences to great effect. This use of emerging new digital technology has been particularly prevalent in response to events in Gaza.

In contrast, pro-social and counter-extremist voices have become less visible in recent years after the demise of ISIS and the attempted creation of its caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Civil society communications were an important part of efforts to counter ISIS, and civil society voices were at the forefront of responding to ISIS predominance of the media and online spheres,[9] but have declined in recent years. With that decline has come a similar and worrying decline in the adoption of new technology in response to extremist influence, exposing a significant digital deficit represented by the difference between extremist use of new emerging technology[10] and that of the pro-social and civil society capacity.[11] The combination of a lack of a powerful capacity

1 Wilson Center, 'Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State', 2019. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state

2 The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 'Accelerationism', 2022. https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/accelerationism/

3 RAN Practitioners, 'Incels: A First Scan of the Phenomenon (in the EU) and its Relevance and Challenges for P/CVE', 2021. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/ran_incels_first_scan_of_phenomen_and_relevance_challenges_for_p-cve_202110_en.pdf

4 Sam Jackson, 'What Is Anti-Government Extremism?', *Perspective on Terrorism*, vol XVI, issue 6, 2022. https://pt.icct.nl/article/what-anti-government-extremism.

5 Paolo Andrea Spadaro, Journal of Strategic Security, 'Climate Change, Environmental Terrorism, Eco-Terrorism and Emerging Threats', 2020. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol13/iss4/5/

6 European Strategic Communications Network , 'ESCN Compendium: Insights and advice on the use of strategic communications for the prevention of extremism in Europe'', 2019.

7 European Strategic Communications Network , 'ESCN Compendium: Insights and advice on the use of strategic communications for the prevention of extremism in Europe'', 2019.

8 Shannon N. Green, 'Changing the Narrative: Countering Violent Extremist Propaganda', *CSIS,* 2015, https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-narrative-countering-violent-extremist-propaganda.

9 UNODC, 'Civil society is a key actor in preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism', https://www.unodc.org/unodc/ngos/civil-society-is-key-to-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html.

10 F Jens Binder, 'Terrorism and the internet: How dangerous is online radicalisation?', *NCBI,* 2022. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9606324/

11 RAN Practitioners, 'Digital frontrunners: Key challenges and recommendations for online P/CVE work' 2022. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/ran-cn-digital-frontrunners-key-challenges-and-recommendations-online-pcve-work-riga-16-17-june-2022_en

of civil society influencers across communities able to adopt and adapt to the rapidly changing use of new and emerging technology presents a real threat to any attempt to respond to the emerging strategic challenge now offered by violent extremist groups exploiting recent events to radicalise and recruit. Historic responses to radicalising efforts have often been tactical in nature, frequently addressing the ideological or religious propositions of violent extremist groups,[12] and delivered in the context of a policy approach which has been dependent on the prevention of violent extremist and terrorist behaviour. Given the specific strategic model now adopted by violent extremist groups – to polarise communities, promote violence, and trigger social unrest – an opportunity exists to refresh our understanding and use of strategic communications in response and with it, the nature of new and imaginative policy approaches that would have a powerful strategic impact in reducing the influence of violent extremist groups.

In this policy brief we offer an updated view of the use of strategic communications and make a case for why and how governments should take both a strategic approach to understanding and responding to the evolving threat(s) in a way that can address the challenge presented by the nature of the immediate and ongoing hybrid threats across Europe. We therefore attempt to analyse the nature of the current violent extremist threat(s) and present a new strategic communications approach that can be adopted by governments, with a series of practical recommendations for how governments can use communications more strategically to tackle all forms of violent extremism today and in the future.

The Current Hybrid Threat

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas has enabled violent extremist groups to open historical, religious and ethnic fault lines, exploiting existing grievances within communities, and exacerbating underlying tensions between communities across Europe from which they can radicalise and recruit. Framing a simple 'us versus them' narrative, extremist content and messages are filtering into mainstream news and social media content, rapidly responding to changing events in a way that normalises extremist propositions.[13] For jihadist movements, their proposition is that 'the West is at war with Islam' – with the aim of dividing and polarising communities, potentially mobilising new groups of young Muslims to defend their faith and their communities, while attacking the West and its interests simultaneously.[14] An uptake of violent activity and even protest will likely motivate further violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) recruitment, creating a risk of spiralling community tension and retributive attacks.

All groups exploit events to polarise, isolate, target, radicalise and then operationalise those they need to carry out acts of terrorism (the recruitment process).[15] Within a frenzied media and information environment, actors on all sides are weaponising digital technologies and platforms to proliferate extremist content at a rapid pace[16] – such as Telegram, TikTok, and AI tools – to create and spread large volumes of powerful, divisive, and polarising content. The escalation and amplification of extremist content comes at a time when Europe is already facing a range of existing violent extremist threats (outlined earlier). Meanwhile, the normalisation and proliferation of extremist and polarising content are representative of a new toxic hybridity, in which extremist influence is happening everywhere, all the time across Europe. The combined effect of this

12 UNCTC, 'Countering violent extremism and terrorist narratives', 2022. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/countering-violent-extremism-and-terrorist-narratives

13 Ken Dilanien, 'Pro-Hamas extremists and neo-Nazis flood social media with calls for violence', *NBC News*, 2023. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/-hamas-extremists-neo-nazis-flood-social-media-calls-violence-rcna121043.

14 Jason Burke, 'Al-Qaida and IS call on followers to strike Israeli, US and Jewish targets', *The Guardian*, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/22/al-qaida-and-is-call-on-followers-to-strike-israeli-us-and-jewish-targets

15 Robert J. Lifton, 'Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Nov., 1956), pp. 75-88.

16 Stuart Thompson and Mike Isaac, 'Hamas Is Barred From Social Media. Its Messages Are Still Spreading', *New York Times*, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/technology/hamas-social-media-accounts.html. New York Times, 'Hamas Is Barred From Social Media. Its Messages Are Still Spreading', 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/technology/hamas-social-media-accounts.html.

violent extremist influence can already be seen within communities across Europe,[17] in which we have we seen a significant rise in anti-Semitic sentiment and Islamophobia.[18] We have also seen how large numbers of people have been mobilised to join protests – both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian protest movements and counter-protests, some of which have been reportedly infiltrated by extremists.[19]

A New Strategic Communications Approach

Communications have always played a significant role in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). In the context of an evolving and increasingly complex and toxic hybrid landscape, including new and polarising forms of violent extremism, unfolding events in Israel and Gaza, and an accelerating digital environment, a new and sophisticated strategic communications response is required. The Royal College of Defence Studies defines strategic communications as "a course of action that integrates ends, ways and means to meet policy objectives".[20] This suggests that responding to the current scale of toxic hybridity requires both a comprehensive strategic analysis of the problem and a corresponding strategic set of comprehensive responses that match. To this end, we have developed a new model that defines the strategic nature of the visible problem with a set of practical responses called the 'Terrorist Recruitment, Operationalisation and Response Model'. Rather than devoting time here to any further analysis of the nature of extremist narratives that are circulating online and in the media, this approach attempts to examine the problem in the context of determining the strategic effect that defines the overall extremist model of influence in whatever narratives are circulating. Given the rapidly changing nature of responses to events in Gaza, for example, this attempt to define the strategic effects that violent extremist groups require for recruitment and radicalisation to work helps shape responses. Once a clear set of strategic effects are defined, that frame the extremist model, a clear set of strategic effects can be described in response.

In this approach, recommended 'strategic communications' responses are framed by a clear set of strategic effects that prevent a radicalisation and recruitment process from working. The model suggests an effects-driven strategic response could shape practical, holistic, multi-agency approaches across governments in partnership with communities on and offline. This model comprises three integrated, interdependent layers of strategic activity that link the dynamics of the communication that define an extremist activity, the strategic effect of that activity, and the appropriate strategic response to that activity. The model defines three communications dynamics that can be evidenced now, five stages of strategic communications effects that are already underway, and six potential strategic communications responses. It is based on two decades of work in this field.

Communications Dynamics

This model defines three communications dynamics that map the changing nature of communications activity being driven in response to events which are fundamental to radicalisation or recruitment activity working successfully.

17 M Muvija and Natalie Thomas, 'Tens of thousands join pro-Palestinian march in central London', *Reuters,* 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/thousands-expected-take-part-pro-palestinian-rally-london-2023-11-25/.

18 UNOHCHR, 'UN Human Rights Chief condemns rise in hatred', 2023. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/un-human-rights-chief-condemns-rise-hatred.

19 Ryan Prosser, 'Leader of Islamic extremist group that held protests in central London hails Hamas terrorists as 'heroes'', *Daily Mail,* 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12660393/Leader-Islamic-extremist-group-held-protests-central-London-hails-Hamas-terrorists-heroes-says-October-7-attack-Israel-happy-shocking-comments.html.

20 Government Communication Service, 'Strategic Communication: MCOM function guide', 2021. https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Cabinet_Office_Strategic-Communications_Function_Guide.pdf

1. **Normalisation and proliferation:** the dynamics of the communication begin with a stage that describes how extremist content is already being normalised and proliferated into mainstream media and extensively shared online in response to any event. This is evidenced by the vast scale of daily content that relates to events in Gaza, and material, images and messages that have specific extremist messaging attached. Osama bin Laden's "Letter to America," which went viral on TikTok and X (formerly Twitter) is evidence of this.[21]

2. **Escalation and acceleration:** once normalised and proliferated, violent extremists escalate and accelerate communications that are even more extremist in nature.[22] This appears in the form of narratives and propositions which draw more specifically on the justification of ancient prejudices, specific extremist interpretation of events or the explicit defence of extremist propositions which have been circulating in the media or online.[23]

3. **Intensification and personalisation:** the third stage in the dynamics that define extremist communications activity is an intensification of effort by tailoring content to specific audiences and adding, where possible, implied or explicit calls to action, such as calls to attack Israeli, US, and Jewish targets.[24]

Recruitment and Operationalisation Process

To succeed, our understanding of the violent extremist radicalisation and recruitment process suggests that they must achieve a clear set of five specific effects for their model of influence to work.

- **Polarise:** The first clear strategic step is to successfully use the communications dynamics described earlier to polarise audiences and communities into an *'us versus them'* construct.

- **Isolate:** Once successfully polarised, a process of isolation begins, with communities of interest becoming the subject of controlling activity where a vast scale of extremist communications is used as a mechanism to isolate communities from any external influence.

- **Target:** Once polarised and isolated, a process of direct targeting takes place with individuals or communities becoming the subjects of targeted attention based on a known appetite for extremist content.

- **Recruit:** Once targeted, the actual effort to recruit informally or formally begins with violent extremist groups aiming to deploy communications designed to recruit vulnerable individuals to become members of violent, extremist, or terrorist networks and organisations.

- **Operationalise:** Once personal associations have been made, violent extremists use persuasive communications tactics to deepen loyalties among their members to motivate them to carry out acts of terrorism and violence.

21 Drew Harwell and Victoria Bisset, 'How Osama bin Laden's 'Letter to America' reached millions online', *The Washington Post*, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/2023/11/16/guardian-osama-bin-laden-letter-to-america/.
22 Drew Harwell and Elisabeth Dwoskin, 'Hamas turns to social media to get its message out — and to spread fear', *The Washington Post*, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/18/hamas-social-media-terror/.
23 Oliver Trapnell, 'Al Qaeda leader threatens to attack US 'like it did on 9/11' in bid to stop Gaza attack', *GB News*, 2023, https://www.gbnews.com/news/world/al-qaeda-leader-khalid-batarfi-threaten-attack-us-gaza-israel.
24 Jason Burke, 'Al-Qaida and IS call on followers to strike Israeli, US and Jewish targets', *The Guardian*, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/22/al-qaida-and-is-call-on-followers-to-strike-israeli-us-and-jewish-targets.

Strategic Communications Responses

A strategic communications response which addresses the required effects of the violent extremist radicalisation and recruitment process can be achieved within a single integrated model of campaign activity. The response model is made up of six sets of integrated activities, namely:

- **Frame:** Governments should aim to frame conversations about or in response to events and their interpretation of them, before they can be contextualised by extremist communications to polarise communities. One of the opportunities is to articulate narratives based on unifying propositions around which communities can agree. An example would be to define the need to protect communities from harm, including any form of intimidation, hate or attacks, regardless of ethnicity or religion.

- **Promote:** If successful at framing a response to events that unify communities affected by the conflict, Governments can go on to promote other simple, unifying propositions as an antidote to violent extremists' influence. An example would include the promotion of aid packages to affected areas.

- **Engage:** Once framed and promoted, Governments can develop additional opportunities to engage affected communities with activities specifically designed to discuss subjects of relevance and interest on a multi-faith basis in contrast to extremist groups aiming to isolate, control, and polarise communities.

- **Obstruct:** Obstructing the efforts of violent extremist groups to radicalise and recruit can take on many forms, but promoting the existence of civil society groups – that actively provide protective factors aimed at intervening in the radicalisation process – among vulnerable individuals who need their help, would prove effective.

- **Disrupt:** Disrupting violent extremist recruitment through the deployment and promotion of community-based interventions and civil society programmes.

- **Prevent:** Existing prevention programmes can be promoted, which would address the direct risk of violent behaviour.

The delivery of an integrated set of activities would require significant new capacity. There are two clear areas of strategic capacity that would be required to address the radicalisation and recruitment model.

The Digital Capacity Gap

In our hybrid world, the lines between online and offline have become increasingly blurred. Da'esh instigated a new era of violent extremists' use of digital communications and exploitation of the internet.[25] However, accelerated innovations in digital technology have presented violent extremists with even more opportunities to reach their audiences through the deployment of powerful new technology.[26] Current events surrounding the conflict in Gaza have shown how extremists depend on digital technologies to create and disseminate powerful communications content which not only engages their audiences online but also have real-world effects.

25 European Strategic Communications Network , 'ESCN Compendium: Insights and advice on the use of strategic communications for the prevention of extremism in Europe'', 2019.
26 UNCCT, 'Countering Terrorism Online with Artificial Intelligence', 2021. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/countering-terrorism-online-with-ai-uncct-unicri-report-web.pdf.

As technology continues to evolve, the digital recruitment challenge will only become more pronounced, making it ever more difficult for policymakers, frontline practitioners and civil society organisations (CSOs) – who are on the frontline in tackling violent extremist threats in our communities – to contest the space, intervene, and respond. While technology represents a significant challenge, it can also be a force for good. Not only can it be used to identify escalating trends, understand behaviours, increase awareness of support, and more, but AI tools, for instance, can now make it easier and quicker for practitioners and CSOs alike to write, narrate, produce, curate, and promote their own content.[27] However, policymakers, practitioners and CSOs not only lack the knowledge to keep pace with changes in the digital environment, but also lack the skills, capacity, and resources to adopt, adapt and use the latest digital technologies,[28] leaving them significantly 'behind the curve' in understanding and deploying the latest digital trends and technological innovations. Many local youth groups are often not present on or using the same digital platforms as the young people they care about.

A critical strategic digital deficit now exists between violent extremists' exploitation of the internet, and the ability of policymakers, practitioners and CSOs to adopt and use the latest digital technologies. The lack of civil society capacity online is representative of the need to rebuild the capacity of civil society effort as the first point of contact with vulnerable individuals and the first line of defence against violent extremist influence, both on and offline.[29]

The Local Capacity Gap

With the violent extremist threat ever evolving and with new forms of violent extremism ever emerging, it has often been the case that Governments – whose budgets fluctuate depending on the immediacy of the perceived current threat(s) – are only able to react to the threats that are in front of them. However, given the hyper-local nature of the current threat, governments must partner and work with community-based groups, namely civil society organisations (CSOs), who have the reach among, credibility with and trust of many of the audiences targeted and affected by violent extremist influence.

Between 2014 and 2018, following the emergence of ISIS and its global communications influencing efforts, which inspired a series of terrorist attacks on European soil, European governments developed new relationships with CSOs to push back against the tide of extremist influence online and in communities.[30] However, since the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, many governments have been unable to continue to support these groups and invest in a long-term capacity which can deal with new and emerging threats as they arise. Much of the support that once existed has now eroded.

A critical deficit now exists between violent extremist's ability to reach and engage young and/or vulnerable people offline in communities and the ability of CSOs to offer support and/or intervene. These groups not only need support to get online, but need support to create content, deliver interventions and sustain their activities.

27 UNCCT, 'Countering Terrorism Online with Artificial Intelligence', 2021. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/countering-terrorism-online-with-ai-uncct-unicri-report-web.pdf

28 European Commission, 'Civil Society Empowerment Programme' https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/civil-society-empowerment-programme_en.

29 European Commission, 'Civil Society Empowerment Programme' https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/civil-society-empowerment-programme_en.

30 UNODC, 'Civil society is a key actor in preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism', https://www.unodc.org/unodc/ngos/civil-society-is-key-to-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html.

Policy Recommendations

We propose several policy recommendations as outlined below.

Safeguarding as a Policy Response

Governments should broaden their policy response, beyond a dependence on 'prevention', and which has the ability to unify communities, namely to 'protect' and 'safeguard' communities from the effects of violent extremist influencing efforts. Any government's response to the crisis should be seen as a key strategic element of any response designed to prevent radicalisation and recruitment. A response to current events which can address all forms of violent extremism, which de-politicises, de-securitises, and de-stigmatises communities, would prove effective.

Strategic responses should define and promote unifying narratives which provide an antidote to extremist influence, particularly as they set out to polarise communities – a centrepiece of an effective strategy. Governments should identify a unifying and inclusive narrative which frames events in a way that cannot polarise – 'protecting' communities from all forms of violence, rather than 'preventing' violent extremism is one such narrative. An opportunity exists to engage communities in efforts to protect and safeguard communities from all forms of violent extremism. This new strategic and unifying narrative will enable governments to build new partnerships with communities to tackle extremist influence at every step of the recruitment process, shifting away from a dependence on prevention-based narratives.

Build New Civil Society Capacity

Governments should rapidly build a new sustainable capacity of civil society effort, at the scale required to properly match and eclipse the scale of violent extremist influencing efforts, both online and in communities. While a new strategic framing of responses will enable governments to work in partnership with communities, a grander scale of effort is required to tackle extremist influence at every step of the recruitment process. It is often community-based groups that have the reach among, credibility with and trust of many of the audiences targeted and affected by violent extremist influence. However, to do so, governments must urgently support the development of a new scale of civil society effort needed to properly address the threat. In doing so, governments must equip, resource and train a powerful new network of community partners, including civil society organisations (CSOs), youth groups, and faith-based groups, to support this new counter-recruitment effort. If successful, this community engagement exercise could leave a legacy of renewed community cohesion, engagement, trust and resilience.

CSOs not only need grants to do their work, but need support in the form of strategic advice, creative support and training, and networking support across multiple agency platforms to effectively reach and engage their audiences, both online and offline, and to sustain their efforts.

Embrace Digital Technology

Governments must urgently narrow the strategic digital gap, by dramatically increasing the ability of civil society organisations and frontline practitioners to adopt, adapt and use the latest digital technologies to reach and engage vulnerable audiences online.

In recent years, governments have collaborated with the tech industry, especially with internet service providers and social media companies, through initiatives such as the European Union

Internet Forum (EUIF),[31] to remove extremist content from their platforms. Meanwhile, the Digital Services Act (DSA),[32] which came into effect in August 2023, requires large platforms to publicly explain how their content moderation algorithms work and act on user complaints of illegal content, with the aim of preventing illegal and harmful activities online and the spread of disinformation. However, while these efforts will reduce the amount of extremist content online, given the sheer volume of content propagated daily, they cannot alone prevent all content from reaching young people online - we must do more.

Alongside this effort we need to reach and engage young people online, to offer them support where they need it and to intervene when required. This can only be done by civil society organisations (CSOs) and frontline practitioners, such as youth workers, social workers and exit workers, who have credibility with these audiences. To do this, we need to urgently narrow the digital knowledge, skills, and capacity gap. This can be done by inspiring CSOs and frontline practitioners to get online, encouraging them to embrace technology, and helping them to integrate the digital world into their work.

Through a sustained programme of training and practical support, CSOs and frontline practitioners should be kept up-to-date with the latest digital innovations, developments and trends, taught how to use the latest digital technologies and tools to understand, reach and engage their audiences – including AI tools which can make it easier and faster for them to work online – and supported to build and maintain their own digital platforms, design digital programmes and campaigns, and create compelling digital content.

31 European Commission, 'European Union Internet Forum (EUIF)', https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-union-internet-forum-euif_en..
32 European Commission, 'Digital Services Act', 2023. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package.

Bibliography

Binder, F. Jens, 'Terrorism and the internet: How dangerous is online radicalisation?', *NCBI,* 2022. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9606324/.

Burke, Jason, 'Al-Qaida and IS call on followers to strike Israeli, US and Jewish targets', *The Guardian,* 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/22/al-qaida-and-is-call-on-followers-to-strike-israeli-us-and-jewish-targets.

Dilanien, Ken. et. al, 'Pro-Hamas extremists and neo-Nazis flood social media with calls for violence', *NBC News,* 2023. https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/-hamas-extremists-neo-nazis-flood-social-media-calls-violence-rcna121043.

European Strategic Communications Network , 'ESCN Compendium: Insights and advice on the use of strategic communications for the prevention of extremism in Europe'', 2019.

European Commission, 'Civil Society Empowerment Programme' https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/civil-society-empowerment-programme_en.

European Commission, 'European Union Internet Forum (EUIF)', https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-union-internet-forum-euif_en.

European Commission, 'Digital Services Act', 2023. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-services-act-package.

Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, https://gifct.org/about/.

Government Communication Service, 'Strategic Communication: MCOM function guide', 2021. https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Cabinet_Office_Strategic-Communications_Function_Guide.pdf.

Green, Shannon N. 'Changing the Narrative: Countering Violent Extremist Propaganda', *CSIS*, 2015, https://www.csis.org/analysis/changing-narrative-countering-violent-extremist-propaganda.

Harwell, Drew and Bisset, Victoria. 'How Osama bin Laden's 'Letter to America' reached millions online', *The Washington Post,* 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/2023/11/16/guardian-osama-bin-laden-letter-to-america/.

Harwell, Drew and Dwoskin, Elisabeht. 'Hamas turns to social media to get its message out — and to spread fear', *The Washington Post*, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/18/hamas-social-media-terror/ .

Jackson, Sam. 'What Is Anti-Government Extremism?', *Perspective on Terrorism,* vol XVI, issue 6, 2022. https://pt.icct.nl/article/what-anti-government-extremism.

Muvija, M and Thomas Natalie. 'Tens of thousands join pro-Palestinian march in central London', *Reuters*, 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/thousands-expected-take-part-pro-palestinian-rally-london-2023-11-25/

P/CVE work' 2022. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/ran-cn-digital-frontrunners-key-challenges-and-recommendations-online-pcve-work-riga-16-17-june-2022_en.

Prosser, Ryan. 'Leader of Islamic extremist group that held protests in central London hails Hamas terrorists as 'heroes'', *Daily Mail*, 2023. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12660393/Leader-Islamic-extremist-group-held-protests-central-London-hails-Hamas-terrorists-heroes-says-October-7-attack-Israel-happy-shocking-comments.html.

RAN Practitioners, 'Incels: A First Scan of the Phenomenon (in the EU) and its Relevance and Challenges for P/CVE', 2021. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-10/ran_incels_first_scan_of_phenomen_and_relevance_challenges_for_p-cve_202110_en.pdf.

Robert J. Lifton, 'Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Nov., 1956), pp. 75-88.

Spadaro, Paolo Andrea, 'Climate Change, Environmental Terrorism, Eco-Terrorism and Emerging Threats', *Journal of Strategic Security,* 2020. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol13/iss4/5/.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 'Accelerationism', 2022. https://www.isdglobal.org/explainers/accelerationism/.

Thompson, Stuart A. and Isaac, Mike. 'Hamas Is Barred From Social Media. Its Messages Are Still Spreading', *New York Times,* 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/18/technology/hamas-social-media-accounts.html.

Trapnell, Oliver. 'Al Qaeda leader threatens to attack US 'like it did on 9/11' in bid to stop Gaza attack', *GB News,* 2023 https://www.gbnews.com/news/world/al-qaeda-leader-khalid-batarfi-threaten-attack-us-gaza-israel.

UNCCT, 'Countering Terrorism Online with Artificial Intelligence', 2021. https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/countering-terrorism-online-with-ai-uncct-unicri-report-web.pdf.

UNCTC, 'Countering violent extremism and terrorist narratives', 2022. https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/countering-violent-extremism-and-terrorist-narratives.

UNODC, 'Civil society is a key actor in preventing and countering violent extremism conducive to terrorism', https://www.unodc.org/unodc/ngos/civil-society-is-key-to-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism.html.

UNOHCHR, 'UN Human Rights Chief condemns rise in hatred', 2023. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/un-human-rights-chief-condemns-rise-hatred.

Wilson Center, 'Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State', 2019. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state.

About the Author

Richard Chalk

Richard is CEO of REOC Communications, a strategic communications agency, based in London and Brussels, which specialises in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Richard has a twenty-year track record of helping international institutions and governments structure their strategic communication, and building and running teams to deliver communications projects to address some of the most complex challenges in the world today. From 2012 to 2019, Richard worked closely with the UK Home Office to develop a pioneering approach to Counter Terrorism and Counter Violent Extremism communications. Richard can be contacted on richard@reoc-communications.com