

EX POST PAPER

'The role of Informal Actors in delivering effective counter- and alternative narratives'

The RAN C&N working group focussed on so-called informal actors and their role in delivering counter- and alternative narratives during its meeting on 20 – 21 September in Helsinki. Building on the outcomes and discussions of the group's earlier meetings, for example, on mental biases and how to involve peers in counter- and alternative narratives, we looked into the specifics of informal actors. Informal actors are individuals who promote narratives without an organisational mandate.

In this ex post, a brief sum up of first ideas and elements regarding possible informal actors, their role and how to possibly support or empower them in delivering effective counter- and alternative narratives. This is no rocket science but may help when trying to figure out how informal actors can support the delivery of the message of your alternative or counter-narrative campaign. This paper is written for first line practitioners who are planning and carrying out alternative and counter-narrative campaigns.

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Introduction

Counter- and alternative messages seem to have the most effect on a person vulnerable to radicalisation or someone who has already radicalised when they come from people within their direct social context. It follows that, in some cases, the most effective counter- or alternative narratives may be delivered by friends, family members and neighbours, or non-CVE organisations that have a relationship with people vulnerable to radicalisation, such as sports clubs, drug addiction charities and social development programmes. These persons are the so-called informal actors.

We know that, on a local level, these so-called informal actors already constantly promote counter- or alternative narratives and alternative courses of action.

"In contrast to the current academic and policy fixation, much countermessaging work is done informally by citizens with no connection with government security policy or any wider community organisations. At the micro level, this means conversations with friends and family, discussions around the dinner table, in clubs, community centres, and in the back rooms of pubs."

Benjamin J. Lee, *Informal Countermessaging: The Potential and Perils of Informal Online Countermessaging*

They, therefore, (un)consciously limit the space for extremists to recruit.

Who are these informal actors and what do they do exactly and when? What kind of narratives do they use and when do they communicate

them? Also, how can we increase the resilience-building effect of informal actors?

During the RAN C&N meeting in Helsinki, first line practitioners, such as youth workers, exit workers, community workers and counter- and alternative narrative communications experts discussed the role of informal actors in delivering effective counter- and alternative narratives. They shared

their insights on who these informal actors are, what role they can play and what kind of environment you can foster to increase the positive influence of informal actors in CVE and PVE.

Who are informal actors?

We defined informal actors as those persons who do not have an organisational mandate to participate in CVE or PVE activities but could deliver alternative or counter-narratives. A broad definition ensures we do not overlook the obvious, but maybe most powerful, actors when it comes to alternative or counter-narratives.

Examples of informal actors:

- Family members (parents, brother, sister, cousin, aunt, uncle...)
- Friends
- Classmates
- Peers
- YouTube peers
- Girlfriend/ Boyfriend
- Teachers
- Sports coach
- Social/community worker
- Iman / religious teacher
- Neighbour
- Doctor

Basically, anybody who has a relationship with the possibly radicalising person can be an informal actor. He or she can, in normal interaction, deliver insights, alternatives or, sometimes, even a counter message without maybe always realising it. Think about situations where you discuss a specific issue with family members, friends or at the sports club. How often do you take away a different outlook or additional aspects following these discussions?

What do informal actors say and what do they actually do?

Most of the time, an individual will share his or her opinion with the people surrounding him. While sharing, she/he is also checking or testing this opinion. This can be done in real life and via social media and online platforms, which can be relatively anonymous. Peers, friends, others on the online platform, family members, etc react to this opinion. Several elements play a role when an informal actor successfully delivers an alternative or counter message:

- There is a personal connection between people; it is easier to consider the other person's opinion.
- The other person is a role model. This may be because he/she is the parent, a successful peer or co-worker, a respected teacher or considered to be an authority on the topic of discussion.
- The other person truly understands or shares the grievance discussed.
- An emotional connection. Facts alone will not do the trick; they need to be delivered with emotion. This will give the whole argument an emotional upgrade.

"Facts alone will not do the trick; they need to be delivered with emotion. This will give the whole argument an emotional upgrade."

whereby society's norms, values and traditions are transmitted. It, therefore, makes sense to have the process of socialisation in mind when looking at the transmission of counter- and alternative narratives.

CREST distinguishes between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation takes place during childhood, when children develop their core identity. Secondary socialisation extends into adolescence and adulthood, when the young adult learns how to behave in society; that is, putting what they learned as a child into practice. Also, some sites of socialisation are seen as particularly significant for extremist transmission.

CREST created an insightful mind map to visualise the different socialisation processes, which you can find on the final page of this paper.

Model of ideological transmission

To help understand the theory behind the transmission of ideas, we would like to share a model and theory that we employed during our meeting.

The process of successfully delivering a counter- or alternative narrative can be described as ideological transmission. [The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats \(CREST\)](#) has studied this phenomenon for several years now and concludes that there is no universally accepted model that explains ideological transmission. But they also conclude that socialisation is a process

What kind of environment fosters interventions by informal actors?

Looking into situations and campaigns where alternative or counter-narratives were delivered by informal actors, we considered several elements that foster the transmission of ideas:

- A non-judgmental environment, where people can freely discuss and share their opinions (safe space).
- An informal setting, such as a debate in a pub, at the sports club during or after a workout, in online gaming platforms, etc.
- An enjoyable experience, for example, when creating videos or another fun activity.

- In the natural social environment of the target audience

Tips

1. When developing a counter- or alternative narrative campaign, take potential informal actors into account. You may want to target them with your campaign and communicate with them, instead of the group of people you want to influence. Example: Inform parents about the narratives of extremist groups who are targeting their children with extremist ideas.
2. Backfire effect: The moment you officially include informal actors in your campaign, they might become 'formalised' and, therefore, be considered less credible.

Interesting background reading

- Read an article regarding the informal delivering of counter and alternative narratives here: [Benjamin J. Lee, Informal Countermessaging: The Potential and Perils of Informal Online Countermessaging](#)
- In this ex post paper of the meeting of RAN C&N in 2018 you can find a list with mental biases that play a role when people are forming their opinions. Relevant background information when looking into supporting informal actors delivering alternative and counter narratives. [RAN C&N Checklist of relevant mental biases and mechanisms for developing counter or alternative narratives, Vienna 07-08 February 2018](#)
- In this ex post paper more information about involving young people when

delivering alternative or counter narratives. They can be the informal actors in your campaign. [RAN C&N Involving young people in counter and alternative narratives – why involve peers?, Madrid 25 April 2018](#)

- In this paper specific guidelines on how to develop counter and alternative narratives when involving local communities, also supporting informal actors: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/developing_counter_and_alternative_narratives_together_with_local_communities_en.pdf
- Find general guidelines, tips and tricks on how to set up an effective counter or alternative narrative campaign here: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-c-and-n/docs/ran_cn_guidelines_effective_alternative_counter_narrative_campaigns_31_12_2017_en.pdf.

