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Voices Against Extremism: A case study of a community-based CVE counter-narrative campaign

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of the recently conceived and ongoing counter-extremism campaign, *Voices Against Extremism*, a campaign designed and implemented by university students from Vancouver, Canada. Through a multifaceted approach that includes extensive use of social media, academic research, and grassroots community activities and involvement, *Voices Against Extremism* operates under the mission statement of countering and preventing violent extremism and radicalization through the humanization of minority groups and through the education and engagement of the silent majority. This article examines the effectiveness of this campaign as a proactive counter-radicalization strategy by outlining its specific components and activities. Based on the results of this campaign, suggestions are then offered regarding specific counter-extremism and counter-radicalizations policies that may be adopted by law enforcement, policymakers – or any other organizations concerned with countering and preventing radicalization and violent extremism – with a specific focus on the potential benefits of proactive and long-term social and community engagement.

Keywords: countering violent extremism (CVE); counter-radicalization; community-based approach

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Introduction

The rise of violent extremism around the world since the turn of the century has brought with it a rise in the number of programs, policies, and initiatives meant to prevent and discourage problematic extremist behavior. These strategies have come to be collectively known by governments and academics as 'countering violent extremism' (CVE), which is generally designed with the intent of steering individuals away from radicalization and potential terrorist activity through non-coercive means (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016). CVE initiatives have been designed and implemented by governments, law-enforcement organizations, NGOs, businesses, and the public at the local, national, and international levels – to varying degrees of success.

In September of 2016, a class of students from Simon Fraser University (located near Vancouver, Canada) created their own community-based CVE initiative, *Voices Against Extremism* (VAE), which recently received international recognition at a CVE competition hosted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This paper outlines the activities and approach taken by VAE and draws from this grassroots campaign, in conjunction with the contributions of other radicalization and CVE scholars, suggestions and recommendations for current and future CVE campaigns. It is argued that the VAE campaign, though small and modest in scope, offers important and meaningful insights that can be applied to CVE policy more generally.

Specifically, there are eight CVE policy recommendations that will be introduced based on the VAE approach, however, before outlining the program and introducing these recommendations, it is important to first provide a brief history of past CVE strategies, as well as a condensed definition of radicalization and extremism.

Radicalization and Extremism – Definitions and Causes

Like terrorism itself, the phenomenon of radicalization is one that is often nebulously defined (Hoskins & O'Laughlin, 2009). Similarly, there is no uniform consensus on what exactly constitutes extremist thought or extremist behavior (Borum, 2011). No matter how they are specifically worded, most definitions of radicalization and extremism seem to share the idea that the processes involve the gradual adoption of beliefs and attitudes that are in opposition to the mainstream status quo and dominant sociopolitical discourses (Goerzig &

Al-Hashimi, 2015; Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017). For example, the Canadian RCMP (2009) has defined radicalization as the process by which individuals, "are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views" (p. 1).

However, in the same document the RCMP reminds us that radical beliefs and extremist attitudes are not necessarily illegal, nor are they inherently negative, citing historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi as radicals of benevolent intent. It is not altogether uncommon for several individuals to, at some point in their life, hold views or opinions that may be considered extreme. In a majority of these cases, violence or any other problematic manifestations of these beliefs will not occur (Lindekilde, 2012; Bakker, 2015). Taken by itself then, adherence to radical ideas is not necessarily something that is innately worthy of condemnation (van San, Sieckelinck, de Winter, 2013). Opposition to dominant sociopolitical ideology is generally not a problem – indeed it is the right of citizens in a democratic society to hold these beliefs – it is when these beliefs take on more nefarious forms that it becomes a serious problem in need of solving. Social and legal efforts to counter violent extremism must then strike a balance between deterring and preventing radicalized activity, while at the same time taking care not to infringe on individual rights or to discourage the free flow of ideas by imposing undue censorship.

A comprehensive understanding of what exactly causes an individual to become violently radicalized is well beyond the scope of this paper, but it must be stressed that radicalization is an incredibly complex process, and while there may be some similarities between those who become radicalized, it is ultimately a process that will be uniquely different for each individual (Selim, 2016). A number of potential factors have been suggested as key radicalizing agents ranging from demographic imbalances (Bakker & Kessels, 2012), social and political stigmatization (Bakker, 2015) and disenfranchisement (Brown & Saeed, 2015), religious discrimination and persecution (Greenberg, 2016; Shirazi, 2017), psychological factors (Mirahmadi, 2016), social alienation (Bowman-Grieve, 2013; van San, Sieckelinck, de Winter, 2013), and many other sociological, demographic, and economic factors at both the micro and macro levels.

Countering Violent Extremism – Programs and Initiatives

A notable example of a CVE initiative, and one which is often considered to be foundational, is *Prevent*, the arm of the United Kingdom's larger counter-terrorism strategy that focuses specifically on the prevention of radicalization and extremism (Vidino & Brandon, 2012). As part of its strategy, *Prevent* emphasized the significance that community involvement, faith groups, education, and artistic intervention (Bartlett, 2011) have in identifying and preventing radicalization. Soon, other European nations and organizations modeled their own CVE programs after *Prevent.* For example, in 2007 the Dutch government introduced their *Polarisation and Radicalisation Action Plan*, while in 2014 the European Commission adopted the *EU Strategy for Combating Radicalization and Recruitment to Terrorism* which aimed to identify and counter the methods, propaganda and conditions through which people are drawn into extremism (Bakker, 2015). Intergovernmental organizations such as the OSCE have also released their own similar CVE strategies (Bakker & Kessels, 2012).

The American equivalent of *Prevent* (of which it was partially based on) is the *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, introduced in 2011, which similarly was intended to specifically counter violent extremism by incorporating communities and supporting the building of resilience from the ground up (Weine et al., 2013; Cohen, 2016). In addition to the aforementioned government-implemented CVE programs, a multitude of local, publicly-created CVE programs also exist in communities all over the world (see Mirahmadi, 2016 for an example).

The strategies adopted by the various CVE initiatives, while similar in their ultimate goal of preventing violent extremism, range in their primary targets and methods of implementation. A select few examples of these strategies include increasing the surveillance/policing of communities, engaging and conversing with religious leaders, the attempted removal of extremist media and propaganda, the release of counter-messages and counter-narratives, community cohesion programs, mentoring programs, and educational initiatives aimed at teaching anti-discrimination and the acceptance of cultural/religious differences (Lindekilde, 2012).

However, though well-intentioned and generally comprehensive, many of the original CVE initiatives such as *Prevent* have been met with criticism and their overall effectiveness

in reaching their goals have been questioned (Lakhani, 2012; Vidino & Brandon, 2012). Some of the more recurrent criticisms of CVE initiatives thus far will now be briefly addressed.

CVE – Criticisms and Oversights

Emphasis on Immediate Results

Initial CVE policies have generally been implemented as reactive responses to terrorist attacks rather than as proactive protective measures. Noteworthy terrorist events such as the 9/11 attacks and the Madrid and 7/7 bombings have elicited immediate counter-terrorism and CVE responses from governments, but these responses have been described as hastily conceived and lacking in emphasis on the root causes of terrorism and radicalization (Spalek & Lambert, 2008; Bakker, 2015). Given the public and political pressure for a swift response that often arises in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack, the speed with which these various measures were drafted and implemented is not surprising, but it has been suggested that counter-terrorism and CVE policies that aim at creating immediately noticeable results while ignoring the root causes of extremism are ultimately bound to be ineffective (Vidino & Brandon, 2012; Weine et al., 2013).

Undefined Aims and Lack of Directly Measurable Results

Though CVE policies generally share the same eventual goal of reducing or eliminating terrorism and violent extremism, the precise ways in which this goal is achieved and the processes by which its effectiveness is evaluated have been criticized as underdeveloped and largely undefined. By their nature, many current and past CVE policies deal with concepts that are difficult to empirically measure and evaluate, making it difficult to assess their overall effectiveness (Widmer, Blaser & Falk, 2007; Lindekilde, 2012). For politicians and policy makers who often rely on tangible results and statistical data to highlight the efficacy of their decisions, this poses an obvious problem. A suggested challenge for current and future CVE programs, then, will be to establish clearly defined goals, while also refining metrics for evaluation of said goals (Vidino & Brandon, 2012; Mirahmadi, 2016).

Overreliance on a Macro-Level Law-Enforcement Approach

Post 9/11 CVE initiatives have been criticized as adopting a primarily militaristic/law-enforcement approach to combatting extremism, as opposed to educational, social, or community-based approaches that may arguably be more effective (van San, Sieckelinck, de Winter, 2013; Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017). While it is perhaps undeniable that the involvement of law enforcement agencies to some extent is necessary for CVE programs, many have argued that this approach alone is not enough to yield significant results (Cohen, 2016; Selim, 2016). In addition, foundational CVE initiatives have operated primarily from a macro-level perspective, with policies aimed at addressing entire national populations (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016). It has been suggested that in order to be more successful, CVE initiatives must move away from this macro-level perspective towards one that is more individualistic or community-based (Bakker, 2015; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016).

Overwhelming Focus on Islamic Extremism

Prevent, along with many other CVE programs that have arose in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks, tended to focus their efforts almost exclusively on the threat of Islamic extremism, often ignoring completely other extremist ideologies (Bartlett, 2011). Given that a large number of significant terrorist attacks in the 21st century have been perpetuated by Islamic extremists this is perhaps unsurprising, however, CVE programs have nevertheless been criticized as neglecting the rise and potential danger of violent extremism that is influenced by various other secular and political ideologies such as right-wing extremism (Widmer, Blaser & Falk, 2007; Koehler, 2016; Perry & Scrivens, 2016).

It has been suggested that this emphasis on Islamic extremism has led to a perpetuation of the stereotype that all violent extremists are Muslims, as well as an increase in overall Islamophobia (Cherney & Hartley 2015; Shirazi, 2017). Given that one of the potential factors that can foster extremist attitudes and lead to radicalization is perceived religious and social discrimination, the tendency for CVE programs to focus almost exclusively on Islamic extremism may ironically be leading to an *increase* in the social conditions that breed extremist attitudes (Lindekilde, 2012; Selim, 2016; Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017).

In addition to potentially spreading Islamophobia, CVE programs which primarily focus on Islamic extremism and attempt to involve and engage with Muslim communities have also been scrutinized and met with suspicion from Muslims themselves who feel as if these efforts serve as little more than veiled attempts at increasing surveillance by law-enforcement agencies (Lakhani, 2012; Cohen, 2016; Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016). It is argued that this has led to a widening schism between the Muslim community and law enforcement agencies, wherein the former feels as if they are being encouraged to surveil, spy, and report on each other at the behest of the latter (Spalek, 2014; Mirahmadi, 2016; Spalek, 2016).

Inadequate Response to Online Extremism

Many terrorist and extremist organizations have found the Internet to be a powerful and game-changing tool, and have utilized online spaces to effectively spread their message, solicit new recruits, and facilitate communication among their increasingly globalized cells and sympathizers (Klausen, 2015; Leiber & Reiley, 2016). This has proven to be a challenge for most CVE programs, many of which do not have a sufficient or effective strategy for combatting extremists and extremist media across online spaces. Many extremist organizations of varying ideologies and sizes have sophisticated and highly productive social media and propaganda campaigns (Huey, 2015), and while efforts have been made to remove extremist content, this has yielded mixed results. On the one hand, the removal of extremist content and the banning of extremist social media accounts has been shown to disrupt online media campaigns to a degree (Berger, 2016b), but on the other hand, it is extremely difficult to entirely remove altogether online media, as diligent and tech-savvy extremists can often replace it as quickly as it is removed (Greenberg, 2016).

In addition to the challenge of removing online extremist media, CVE and counter-terrorism practitioners face the difficulty of ensuring that they are not violating individual rights to free speech or imposing undue censorship online (Cohen, 2016). Taken by itself, the espousal of radical beliefs online is not an illegal activity, a fact that effectively limits the direct actions that a CVE policy is able to take (Spaaij, 2012). The success of many modern extremist organizations is highly dependent on their ability to use the Internet to their advantage, something that has yet to be adequately addressed by a majority of CVE programs.

CVE in Canada

The rising threat of violent extremism has not eluded Canada. The country has seen several recent attacks on its soil including a shooting in Ottawa in 2014, and most recently, a shooting at a mosque in Quebec City early in 2017. In addition, it has been estimated that more than 150 Canadians have left the nation to fight for the Islamic State (Ahmed, 2016). Some have noted that, when compared to other nations, Canada lacks recent experience combatting extremism within its borders (Jacoby, 2016). Unlike nations in Europe and the Middle East, Canada's recent experience with internal extremism is limited by comparison (Canada's most notorious extremist organization, the *Front de libération du Québec,* disbanded in 1970, and is for many a distant memory). The current increase in homegrown extremism has caused many Canadians to call for a more direct and robust response to these issues, and as a result, a number of CVE initiatives have begun appearing across the country.

Canada's official counter-terrorism strategy, *Building Resilience Against Terrorism,* was outlined in 2013, and, like many of the aforementioned CVE policies, has been criticized for having an overtly reactive approach as opposed to a more proactive and preventative one (Jacoby, 2016). However, this strategy does still contain preventative elements aimed at building partnerships between government agencies and local communities. Other examples of Canadian CVE campaigns include the Calgary Police Department's *ReDirect*, which is aimed at countering the radicalization of young people, the opening of the *Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence* in Montreal, the *Campaign Against Violent Extremism* (a partnership between the British Columbia Muslim Association and the RCMP), and most recently, *Voices Against Extremism,* the subject of this case study (Davies et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2016).

Voices Against Extremism

Voices Against Extremism (VAE) was conceived and implemented as part of a larger, international CVE competition called *Peer to Peer: Challenging Extremism* (P2P). The P2P initiative, which is the result of a partnership between the United States Department of Homeland Security, Facebook, and EdVenture Partners, encourages and provides funding for university students from around the world to develop and carry through with their own CVE campaigns. As the name indicates, P2P encourages its university participants to operate at the

community level by targeting and incorporating peers, other students, local citizens, and community groups and organizations in the fight against violent extremism. In the words of the Katie Moffett and Tony Moffett (the content marketing manager and founder/CEO of EdVenture Partners respectively):

> The program objectives were to design, pilot, implement, and measure the success of a social or digital initiative, product, or tool that motivates or empowers students to become involved in CVE among uncommitted populations, a silent majority, civic-minded individuals, or at-risk youth. Uncommitted populations have formed no opinion about the violent extremist narrative and therefore have not been involved in preventing or promoting it. The silent majority are those who oppose violent extremism but currently are not active in raising public awareness about it or broader prevention efforts. Civic-minded individuals are interested in the public good but not necessarily focused on preventing radicalization and/or engaging in grassroots CVE efforts. At-risk youth are those who are exposed to the violent extremist narrative and vulnerable to radicalization. (Moffett & Sgro, 2016, p. 148).

To date, over 2000 students representing 95 universities and 35 countries have competed in the P2P initiative, including 23 undergraduate students from a criminology course at Simon Fraser University. The students in this course, who all agreed to participate in the P2P initiative prior to their registration, were tasked with planning, developing, and implementing their own CVE campaign over the course of one semester. In the initial weeks of the course, the students would meet to discuss how issues of extremism and radicalization were effecting their community, and what actions they could take to help counter these issues, while also familiarizing themselves with the recent news and academic literature surrounding extremism.

The result of their efforts (which arose from many sessions of research, conversation, and occasional debate) was *Voices Against Extremism*, a CVE campaign modelled primarily around the establishment of an effective counter-narrative aimed at challenging extremist beliefs while simultaneously promoting awareness and education about how these issues impact the community. The battle against extremism is often interpreted as a battle of ideas, and many have argued that to subvert the extremist narratives of hate, difference, and

violence, a more prosocial narrative that stresses the opposite values of community, tolerance and togetherness must be promoted in its place (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Davies et al., 2016). To this end, the students responsible for VAE decided to build their counter-narrative campaign around the four key pillars of humanization, education, respect, and empowerment (H.E.R.E), the specific details of which will now be briefly summarized.

Humanization – During the early stages of the VAE campaign, many Canadian cities, including Vancouver, had recently become home to an influx of Syrian refugees, and while the Canadian government and much of the general public proudly welcomed these individuals, there was a degree of social confusion and apprehension among some of the public about who these people were, why they had to leave their country, and why they had to come to Canada. The students of VAE, having learned that well-connected and supportive communities can be instrumental in preventing extremism, decided that part of their program should be devoted towards humanizing these individuals are portraying them not as labels ('refugees'), but as real people with their own faces, names, and stories.

To this end, VAE created *Stories of Resilience*, an online social media campaign that featured individuals of various social and professional backgrounds sharing their experiences of how extremism has affected their lives as well as their thoughts and opinions on community and Canadian identity. Presented through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and updated every few days, *Stories of Resilience* featured a variety of individuals including recent refugees, recent immigrants, law enforcement officials, academics, politicians, aboriginal leaders, university students, artists, and even former members of extremist organizations. By allowing these individuals to show their faces and share their stories and insights, VAE hoped to humanize them in the eyes of the public by presenting them not as the labels that they are often referred to ('refugees', 'cops', 'immigrants'), but as members of the community who are united in their efforts to challenge extremism and extremist narratives.

Education – During their initial research, the students of VAE were made aware of the powerful role that education can have in challenging extremist beliefs and attitudes, and because of this, they made education one of the primary components of their campaign. The aim of the educational component was primarily to inform the general public about extremism and terrorism by defining these concepts, tracing their history, and attempting to explain how

and why they are able to occur. To this end, VAE wrote educational essays (featured on their website[3]), created an educational video that was uploaded to YouTube (entitled *An Evolution of Violent Extremism &Terrorism*), and maintained information kiosks around various university campuses where VAE members could speak to other students directly about these issues.

Respect – Given that Vancouver is a highly multicultural city, VAE endeavored to challenge the prejudicial attitudes that can often rise in such an environment and, in some cases, lead to hate-based extremism. This was done by consistently reinforcing a message of respect and acceptance through their social media campaign and by engaging directly with members of the community. More specifically, VAE members took part in activities such as visiting elementary school classrooms and asking the children to paint pictures based around the themes of cultural diversity and community inclusion.

Empowerment – Finally, VAE attempted to empower members of the community to become more actively involved in confronting extremism. More specifically, they attempted to reach the 'silent majority', the large proportion of the general public that disagrees with extremist behavior, but does little to openly challenge it. The VAE approach was modelled upon the belief that community members themselves are the most potent anti-extremism and anti-radicalization forces, but only if they are confident enough to speak about issues of extremism as they arise. This aim lead to VAE's largest undertaking, an art gallery event entitled *Art is H.E.R.E: Reshaping Identities.* This event, which occurred in downtown Vancouver and was open to the public at no cost, hosted art from a variety of local artists (in addition to the art created by the elementary school students) and acted as a forum where all individuals who had been involved with the campaign to that point could meet and engage with members of the local community. Several guests at the event who had direct and varying degrees of experience with extremism shared their stories, while all attendees were encouraged to speak of and against extremism within their community.

[3] voicesagainstexremism.ca

Voices Against Extremism: Impacts, Outcomes, and Shortcomings

Voices Against Extremism, though modest in its scope, should be viewed as an effective and successful grassroots CVE initiative. During the 14 weeks that it took to draft and implement VAE, the students were able to form many connections and partnerships with a number of diverse groups and organizations, laying the groundwork for an effective and lasting CVE counter-narrative campaign. Through consistent engagement and updates on various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), VAE was able to spread their prosocial narrative to a large number of individuals both within Canada and around the world. More specifically, the VAE Facebook page had a total reach (defined as the number of unique individuals who were exposed to the content) of over 160 000. Offline, VAE members were able to directly engage with nearly 100 elementary school students, and with nearly 300 members of the general public who attended the art gallery event. In addition, the campaign was covered and featured by a number of local newspapers, radio stations, and websites, and received international recognition when some of the students responsible were invited by the OSCE to present their campaign at the international UnitedCVE P2P competition in Germany (where they would finish in second place). Though the class responsible for VAE officially ended in December, 2016, a number of the students, not wanting all their efforts to 'go to waste', committed to carrying on with the campaign following the conclusion of the semester, continuing to build upon the foundation that they started.

However, this is not to say that VAE represents a golden standard that all future CVE campaigns should seek to emulate. The campaign was relatively successful within its own context of a limited budget, a team comprised entirely of university students, and many other time and resource restraints. Still, there are several possible oversights of the campaign that should be addressed. For example, the campaign's primary goal of fostering humanization, education, respect and empowerment, while noble, lacks empirical clarity. No attempt is made to define or describe how these concepts are measured or validated, and as a result, there is no concrete way of telling whether or not VAE had any significant impact on them. This criticism reflects what has been said about CVE initiatives more generally, that is, they often lack clearly defined and measurable goals (Vidino & Brandon, 2012; Mirahmadi, 2016).

VAE may also be criticized for its tendency to incorporate, feature, and in some cases, target individuals who are already actively involved in countering extremism and

radicalization. Many volunteers featured in the *Stories of Resilience* campaign and many attendees at the art gallery event, for example, came from law-enforcement, academic, and community-leader backgrounds and already had knowledge of CVE issues and policy. This may have resulted in a 'preaching to the choir' situation, wherein CVE's messages were being delivered to the people already receptive to them, and perhaps not to the silent majority public at which they were originally aimed.

CVE Policy Recommendations

Despite these oversights, the VAE approach to countering extremism, along with many of the campaign's objectives, activities, and strategies, can still provide an effective framework for more generalized guidelines and suggestions that current and future CVE initiatives may wish to consider. The following eight recommendations, while inspired by the specifics of the VAE approach, have been tailored to apply to CVE more generally and should be of interest to policymakers, politicians, academics, or anyone else interested in tangible suggestions for countering extremism and radicalization. It is worth noting that these recommendations largely reflect suggestions that have already been made by several current CVE scholars, and as such, they are not meant to provide an entirely novel outlook on CVE approaches, but rather to reinforce the proactive, multi-perspective strategy that many have already deemed necessary for challenging extremism.

1. The Importance of Community-Based and Micro-Level Approaches

VAE, while eventually demonstrating a modest international reach, was founded primarily with the local Vancouver community in mind. The decision of the students to focus principally on the local community was partially made based on the suggestions of other academics who have noted the benefits of a more micro-level community-based approach as opposed to those of a more macro and generalized nature (see Weine et al., 2013; Johns, Grossman & McDonald 2014). By drafting a CVE program at the community level, it becomes possible to incorporate the perspectives of local community members and leaders, while also taking into account the unique situational factors of specific communities. Additionally, tailoring CVE programs with community specifics in mind allows for resources

to be more efficiently devoted, directly and indirectly, towards the at-risk individuals who require them (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016).

Within the larger body of criminological literature, communities themselves are often viewed as important resources for tackling social problems such as crime, anti-social behavior, and unemployment, and it follows that this should apply to issues of extremism and radicalization as well (Spalek & Lambert, 2008). More recent CVE initiatives have begun to adopt the community-centered approach, acknowledging that the key to countering extremism very likely lies within the local dynamics of communities themselves (Cohen, 2016), and we recommended that this approach should be become the standard.

It must also be acknowledged that examples of extremist-fostering behavior are often witnessed at the most micro of levels – one-on-one social interactions – and because of this, an effective CVE program is one that should make attempts at arming individuals with the social tools required to challenge these behaviors at the ground level as they witness them. VAE, and the P2P initiative as a whole, stress the important role that individuals themselves play in motivating their peers to challenging extremism and to speak against hate (Moffett & Sgro, 2016). This can be done in numerous ways. For example, Brown and Saeed (2015) noted in their study of female Muslim university students that these students (many of whom wore the traditional hijab) were often willing to answer questions and engage in dialogue with curious members of the public who wondered about their attire and customs. These interactions serve to both humanize the 'other', while simultaneously offering education about cultural differences to those who are interested. Teaching people how to respond to and speak up against instances of racism, Islamophobia, and sexism at the micro-level should also be a goal of CVE initiatives. These micro-level examples, when taken by themselves, may seem small and inconsequential, but they lay an important foundation for community strength and resilience against extremism.

2. CVE Policy Should Be Aware of Different Ideologies and Individual Trajectories

A large majority of CVE programs, in addition to the social and political discourse that often surrounds issues of extremism, has tended to focus almost exclusively on Islamic extremism, often ignoring other ideologies completely (Mirahmadi, 2016). While much of

this may be attributed to the ways in which politicians and the media tend to report on extremism and which individuals/events receive the 'extremist' label and which do not, effective CVE policy should rise above this myopic view and be well aware of the fact that extremist attitudes stem from a variety of ideological motivators. VAE was careful to speak of extremism in more general terms, choosing not to focus strictly on radical Islam as many others have. This is of course not to say that Islamic extremism should be forgotten, it is indeed an important issue worthy of consideration, but so too is extremism that is guided by other ideologies, some of which may ultimately pose a larger and more immediate threat including; hate-based extremism, political extremism, racial extremism, and gender-based extremism (Perry & Scrivens, 2016; Ayaz & Naseem, 2017). Ideally, any well-drafted CVE program should be effective against all types of extremism, not just the Islamic variant.

Additionally, it is worth noting that many terrorism scholars are in consensus that there is no such thing as a universal terrorist/extremist profile. Extremists come from a wide range of religious, educational, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds which makes precise attempts at targeting based on these variables problematic (Horgan, 2014; Bakker, 2015; Cohen, 2016). Future CVE programs are advised to keep this mind, and to avoid targeting or profiling individuals based on any of these specific factors.

3. There is no Universal Approach to CVE Policy

Voices Against Extremism is a robust, well-informed, and generally successful CVE campaign, however, it must be stressed that is was successful within the unique social, cultural, and political context of Vancouver, Canada. If the VAE model was exactly imitated and implemented somewhere in Europe, Australia, or Africa, it may not have been as successful as it was. This should serve as an important reminder that there is no universal, one-size-fits-all approach to CVE policy. VAE, while also attempting to reach beyond provincial and national boarders, was drafted and implemented primarily with the Vancouver community in mind, and while communities often share similarities, they are also distinctly unique, and so too should be their approach to CVE.

Many CVE programs have been created predominantly by law-enforcement/policy officials and implemented from the top-down at the national level – to their detriment as some

have argued (Vidino & Brandon, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016). To remedy this, it is suggested that moving forward, future CVE programs should instead be drafted from the ground-up, paying close attention to the unique situational factors of different cities and geographic locales. In addition, while law-enforcement perspectives are undeniably valuable, they should be supplemented by the insights of academics, educators, and community leaders, and should encourage a multi-disciplinary approach to CVE policy (Cohen, 2016; Mirahmadi, 2016).

While it may be more efficient to create CVE policy from one location and implement it universally across a nation, and while there may indeed be some common CVE factors that will always apply, this approach is likely to ignore the distinctive and idiosyncratic factors of various communities, and may end being flawed as a result. Therefore, it is suggested that CVE programs and policies remain open, flexible, and ready to adapt at the ground level.

4. CVE Policy Should Incorporate Multiple Voices and Perspectives

One of the primary strategies of VAE was to provide individuals from a multitude of different social and professional backgrounds with a platform from which they could share their experiences and insights on extremism in their own words. Community members who participated with the program via the *Stories of Resilience* initiative included recent refugees, immigrants, law enforcement officials, academics, politicians, aboriginal leaders, university students, artists, and former members of extremist organizations. The intention of incorporating such a wide variety of perspectives was to highlight the fact that extremism is an issue that affects and is understood and approached in many distinct ways by individuals from different social and professional occupations.

Extremism is an issue that can affect people, some of whom will be more or less directly impacted than others, in different ways based on a number of distinct variables. Because of this, it is important to consult with a variety of different social representatives and gatekeepers including local police, social workers, educators, religious leaders, families, and marginalized populations (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2016; Mirahmadi, 2016), and, when possible, former members of extremist organizations, who will often have intimate and invaluable

firsthand experiences to draw from (Greenberg, 2016; Harris-Hogan, Barrelle & Zammit, 2016).

Additionally, it is vitally important that these diverse contributors are able to share their insights in their own words. To engage Muslim communities, for example, it is essential that any CVE efforts incorporate the voices of the Muslims themselves, and to allow them the opportunity to participate and contribute, rather than attempting to dictate policy on their behalf (Spalek & Lambert, 2008; Vidino & Brandon, 2012). This can be done in a number of different ways. For VAE this involvement was primarily through the *Stories of Resilience* campaign, though other methods have also seen success, such as the stage play *Not in my Name*, which aimed at reaching those who might be vulnerable to radicalization and was written partially by contributions from the Muslim community (Bartlett, 2011).

Ultimately, by including a diversity of opinions and perspectives, some of which have traditionally been ignored in the planning stage (Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017), and by allowing community members of all stripes to share their insights and concerns in their own words, it is believed that CVE programs will be more robust in their design and more effective in their implementation.

5. CVE Policy Should Acknowledge the Role of Social Networks and Positive Outlets

Although there is no consistent profile for those who become radicalized towards extremism (Horgan, 2014), it has been suggested that there are some characteristics that these individuals tend to share. For example, those who feel socially isolated, outcast, alienated, and disenfranchised with their society and their position within it may be more prone to radicalization and extremist attitudes than others (Cottee & Hayward, 2011; Bowman-Grieve, 2013; Cohen, 2016). Extremist organizations are seemingly aware of this, and will often tailor their messages and media towards these alienated and disenfranchised individuals (Davies et al., 2015; Macnair & Frank, 2017). As such, it is important for CVE programs to be aware of this, and to offer more positive alternatives and outlets for these at-risk individuals.

This can be done in two ways. The first is by providing these individuals with positive outlets where they may direct and voice their frustrations in more prosocial ways. For VAE this involved encouraging engagement through art, but this is only one of several options that

may be considered. Sports, for example, have been shown to be positive activities where at-risk individuals can channel their frustrations while simultaneously building bonds and friendships (Johns, Grossman & McDonald 2014; Spaaij 2015). Other diversion strategies that stress social and community involvement, self-expression, and social interaction would all be effective and proactive tactics that might help prevent the social conditions that lead to extremist behavior before it is able to manifest in any potentially harmful ways (Mirahmadi, 2016).

Secondly, effective CVE policy must be aware of the importance that an individual's social network may play in the radicalization process. It is extremely rare for an individual to become radicalized entirely on their own as this process almost always requires some degree of influence from the people they know in their own social network (Neumann, 2008; Bakker, 2015; Nash & Bouchard, 2015). Because of this, CVE programs are encouraged to emphasize the importance of positive social networks that can guard an individual against extremist belief. For those who lack an inherently positive social network (through family and friends), mentorship programs, the involvement of educators, youth workers, and other community members may be a viable solution (Spalek, 2014).

6. CVE Policy Should Incorporate Effective Counter-Narratives

Individuals are not radicalized in an isolated vacuum, they require exposure to external radicalizing messages and extremist thought. The ability for extremist organizations to deliver these messages has increased substantially in the digital age, where any information can be easily and readily shared and discovered. The online media campaigns of many extremist organizations are expansive and relentless, and any curious individual could spend endless time wading through the vast amount of extremist content that exists online. While some efforts have been made to remove and block this content, there is simply too much of it to eliminate it altogether. Due to this, many CVE experts have suggested that, rather than attempting to remove this content, efforts should be focused on creating effective counter-narratives and counter-messages (Venhaus, 2010; Leiber & Reiley, 2016; Musial, 2017).

VAE attempted to challenge narratives of hate, prejudice, and discrimination (which are often the genesis of extremist attitudes) by promoting through art, social media, and

community involvement, counter-narratives of respect, acceptance, and peace. However, the counter-extremist messaging of VAE dealt largely with generalized concepts and terms. This is a promising start, but future CVE programs are encouraged to be even more specific with the content of their counter-narratives. If they are challenging Islamic extremism, for example, they would be advised to draft counter-narratives based around positive, non-violent interpretations of Islam, or representations of the harsh realities that recruits of the Islamic State face (Greenberg, 2016).

Topical and demographic-specific counter-messaging should be a staple of any comprehensive CVE campaign, but of comparable importance is how these messages are being delivered, and more specifically, who is delivering them. Organizations like the Islamic State have cleverly featured recruits from foreign nations such as Canada, France, and Australia in their videos in an attempt to more directly appeal to potential sympathizers in these nations (Bourrie, 2016; Macnair & Frank, 2017), and so too should CVE campaigns be strategic about who is delivering their counter-messages. Featuring a selection of diverse messengers that are able to speak and relate more directly to specific demographics is important for ensuring that the messages are more likely to be treated seriously by those who are most in need of hearing them (Berger, 2016a). Of particular credibility are those who have direct ties to extremist organizations. For example, VAE was able to interview a former member of a prominent Canadian rightwing extremist organization for their media campaign. These individuals, while not always easily accessible, have direct and invaluable experiences and should be considered, whenever possible, to act as counter-messengers.

7. The Importance of Education and Pedagogy

Extremist attitudes and actions are commonly founded upon the prejudicial hatred of certain racial, religious, and cultural groups, and oftentimes this hatred stems from confusion, misrepresentations, and misunderstandings about who these groups really are. Education, then, is an important component that should always be utilized in the fight against extremism. Educating students, particularly at an early age, about the differences that exist between the variety of individuals that comprise a multicultural society and encouraging understanding and acceptance of these social, cultural, and religious differences should help mentally equip

the future generation with some of the necessary tools to resist extremist attitudes (Cohen, 2016; Arshad-Ayaz & Naseem, 2017). For VAE, this involved visiting elementary school classrooms and asking the students to paint pictures on topics such as community, Canadian identity, and peace.

It has been noted that many school systems do little to challenge extremist beliefs unless they actually manifest in physical ways such as graffiti or targeted assaults (van San, Sieckelinck, de Winter, 2013), and by that point, the individuals expressing these beliefs will likely have internalized them to a degree that will be more difficult to counter. Educators and school systems are instead encouraged to be proactive, and to challenge these beliefs before they are able to take shape. For example, if a teacher wanted to proactively counter Islamophobia in their classroom, it might be a good idea to invite a local imam to speak to the class, to answer questions, and to potentially prevent and of the religious and cultural misunderstandings that could potentially lead to hatred and eventual extremist behavior.

However, beyond encouraging social acceptance and cultural awareness, education can be used in many other ways that can benefit CVE initiatives. Given the ubiquitous role that the Internet plays in the lives of young people, and the fact that many extremist organizations aggressively use the Internet to reach and solicit potential sympathizers (often targeting young individuals) to their cause, educators should also be emphasizing the importance of digital and media literacy (Stevens & Neumann, 2009). Teaching young people about the Internet by advising them on how to make sense of the vast amount of competing information on it, showing them how to identify ‘good’ and ‘bad’ information, and encouraging them to be critical about the content they come across is crucial for ensuring that future generations develop the digital literacy required to navigate the important, but potentially dangerous, online interactions that will be a large part of their social and professional lives.

Finally, it has also been noted that many individuals who become radicalized often ‘cross the line’ following a major ‘triggering’ event or crisis in their lives, such as the death of a loved one or an attack on a group that they identify with (Bakker, 2015). Therefore, it is also important for educators and counsellors to have a hand in teaching individuals how to cope with traumatic events in more positive ways that are less prone towards radicalization and extremism.

8. CVE Policy Should be a Proactive and Long-Term Investment

The lingering threat of violent extremism is an unfortunate reality of our times, and given the increasing tension of the social and political climates in many places around the world, it is perhaps a problem that may indeed become worse before it gets better. However, if policymakers are committed to effectively addressing this problem, it is important to begin taking proactive actions that target the causes of violent extremism at its roots. Politicians and policymakers, who often face intense public pressure in the wake of extremist attacks, are unrealistically expected to provide immediate results and quick fixes to these problems (Weine et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the social, cultural, and political circumstances that breed extremist thought and behavior are often deeply entrenched within a society, and because of this, there is likely no such thing as an immediate or overnight solution.

On a micro level, VAE encourages educators and community members to be proactive by challenging the beliefs that can lead to extremist attitudes as they see them on the streets and in the classroom. This is of particular importance when children are concerned. Prioritizing from an early age the importance of community and respect of social differences should lead to a future generation that is more mentally defended against extremist influence. On a macro level, it has been suggested that societies that are more egalitarian and socially just are more naturally defended against the homegrown extremism that often results from social and cultural discrimination and inequality (Bakker & Kessels, 2012; Bakker, 2015). While promoting and striving for a more socially just society may, among other benefits, lead to a decrease in the social factors that lead to extremist belief, it is of course not a transition that occurs quickly.

Ultimately, effective and proactive CVE policy is not likely to have immediately tangible results – a fact that may not sit well with some – but if this problem is to be sufficiently addressed, it is recommended to eschew quick-fix solutions in favor of a more long-term investment approach.

Conclusion

The threat of radicalization and violent extremism are unfortunate realities of the times – threats which are further exacerbated by recent innovations in media communication technologies, increases in political, racial, and cultural friction around the world, and the ongoing aftereffects of the Syrian Civil War and other similar conflicts. Adding to this problem is the inherently complex nature of radicalization, the impetus and trajectories of which often vary greatly from one induvial to the next. Since the turn of the century, governments, NGOs, and other concerned organizations have introduced a number of plans, policies, and programs for countering and preventing violent extremism and radicalization, but the overall effectiveness of these efforts has been questioned. As the phenomenon of radicalization has become increasingly understood through academic work, policy results, and other trial-and-error observations, many have suggested that current mainstream CVE polices should be revised to more accurately address the external and internal factors that can lead to radicalization and violent extremism.

Voices Against Extremism is a grassroots, student-lead CVE campaign that attempted to acknowledge and incorporate these recent advancements in radicalization studies. By adopting a community-focused approach modelled after the primary themes of humanization, education, respect, and empowerment, VAE was able to achieve modest success in spite of its limited resources. However, the goal of this case study was not to claim or argue that VAE is a perfect CVE model that all others should attempt to emulate, rather, the goal was to add to the growing body of radicalization research by pointing out specific components of the campaign that were deemed to be innovative or effective, and to make more generalized suggestions about CVE policy based on these components.

Though there is still much work to be done in understanding radicalization and in addressing the social, cultural, political, and individual circumstances that can lead to it, those interested in creating effective CVE campaigns are advised to consider the suggestions put forth in this paper and to approach these issues proactively and with long-term effects in mind.

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