Moving beyond Islamist extremism: assessing counter narrative responses to the global far right

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international relations, democracy, political science, and sociology. The thought-provoking arguments and richness of the empirical cases make it a must-read for any critically minded person interested in deciphering how state security practices contribute to the growing global democratic recession.

Disclosure statement

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Moving beyond Islamist extremism: assessing counter narrative responses to the global far right, by William Allchorn, Stuttgart and Hannover, Ibidem Press, 2022, 240 pp., £35 (Paperback) (UK), ISBN 9783838214900

Scholars have long identified the role of narrative in the dissemination of extremist propaganda, at the core of which ideology often stands, with extremist messaging blending elements of historical truth with fabricated storylines designed to resonate with different audiences. In recent times, scholars have begun to question the extent to which counter-narratives can be successful in combating violent extremism. Defined as a message that deconstructs, disproves or delegitimises extremist narratives, counter-narratives have become a key part of Western counterterrorism's toolkit for tackling what William Allchorn has termed Islamist extremism, particularly in the aftermath of the high-profile campaign waged by Islamic State, who successfully utilised social media to disseminate propaganda, incite violence and recruit foreign fighters. Despite an increase in research, little is known about how effective counter-narratives are in combatting far-right extremism, and herein lies the originality of *Moving Beyond Islamist Extremism: Assessing Counter Narrative Responses to the Global Far Right*, which is a meaningful and interesting contribution by the author to an evident gap in the field.

At the beginning of the book, the author references the phenomenon of stochastic terrorism – a term referring to events that are random and impossible to predict individually, but whose occurrence can be reliably forecast, meaning it can be predicted that an event will occur, but not when, where, or how (Braddock 2020). The potential security risks posed by

stochastic terrorism are identified as becoming particularly pertinent in recent times, following several high-profile attacks including Christchurch, New Zealand, 2019; El Paso, Texas 2019; and Buffalo, New York, 2022, and, perhaps the most extensively reported, the incident on 6 January 2021, when a group of domestic terrorists, encouraged by outgoing president Donald Trump, attacked the Capitol Building in Washington D.C.

The first section of the book offers a fascinating critical analysis of some of the key narratives utilised by contemporary far-right movements, which the author groups into cultural threats, ethnic threats, accelerationism, anti-establishment rhetoric, misogyny, environmental concern, and victimhood. He draws attention to the fact that, for many far-right extremists, narratives are vehicles to carry the ideology – they are memorable, emotional, and predominantly a call for action, and are thus central not only to identifying far-right groups and movements, but also to a collective understanding of their internal processes. The author also offers a review of the existing theoretical and empirical academic literature on extremist counter narratives, tracking the history of the concept and addressing some of the key debates that surround the use of the counter narrative techniques. I found the division of the counter narratives into factual or historical, ideological, economic, alternative or positive, and political particularly enlightening and useful from a counter-extremism perspective.

A key aim of the book is to identify and evaluate the power of far-right narratives as a phenomenon in themselves. One of the most useful elements is the author's analytical framework that can be utilised by practitioners and scholars to help analyse far-right counter narrative interventions – a total of 23 groups and 21 counter narrative campaigns are examined throughout. Chapters two, three and four describe the prevalent far-right extremist groups operating in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. To date, the counter extremism field has tended to focus on online radicalisation, ignoring the significance of offline contact in radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes, so the author's emphasis on offline interventions and counter narratives underlies the uniqueness of its contribution to the field.

The author's methodology utilises the results of previous research carried out in conjunction with the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right, Academic Consulting Services, and Hedayah as a spring board for a joint pilot study, *Building a Successful Radical Right Counter-Narrative Campaign: A How to Guide* (2020), which provides guidelines and advice, and features a step-by-step process on how to develop effective radical right counter narratives from existing campaigns, tailored to neutralise both overarching and region-specific violent right-wing extremist narratives. The project also provides guidance on what ethical considerations need to be taken into account when assessing the effectiveness of counter-narratives.

The first part of the under-review study consists of ethnographic focus group testing of far-right counter narrative content with a representative sub-set of sympathetic audiences to ascertain how they would react to different subject matter. The second phase of the study centres on the development of new and more robust counter narrative evaluation that uses a combination of surveys and social media data to track the scale of the impact of counter narratives on the attitudes of recipients in real time. Contributing to the originality of the research was its focus on the visual power of counter-narratives, specifically the use of memes and videos as a valuable way to demonstrate ideological motives and why different audiences might engage with contrasting content. The benefits of employing imagery in countering extremism is that images can portray both a comprehensive and focussed view of groups' and individuals' engagement, representing both the bigger picture and a sense of coherence within the social collective from which they originate. The reactions of the focus groups also provide a valid indication of which types of counter narratives could be most effective and

why. These different methodological approaches enable the author to provide important evidence as to which memes would be best presented to influence wider and different target audiences.

The importance of counter narrative initiatives lies in their potential ability to forestall extremist activity before propaganda can inspire individuals or groups to act. However, despite their global appeal in the face of the technological sophistication displayed by propagandists and the political preference for short-term measures, there is little empirical research to support claims that counter narratives in isolation are effective in reducing the threat of violent extremism (Glazzard 2017; Rosand & Winterbotham, 2019). The author addresses this deficiency by providing clear evidence that effective counter narrative campaigns take into consideration the relative drivers of far-right violent extremism, identify the target audiences, have clear goals and objectives, and determine the most effective messages. These findings will help a broader drive towards a more rigorous and robust methodology by underpinning a blueprint that could be applied to other groups, geographies, and various social media platforms, and the book concludes with a set of policy recommendations to ensure the effectiveness of counter-narratives against the global far right.

The major shortcoming of the book is that it is clearly written for an audience with a prior knowledge of the different factions of the far right and the complexities surrounding radicalisations processes and potential conversion to extremism. For instance, it is well known within the counter extremism field that when defining the individuals, groups, and movements placed within the "far right" umbrella, it is important for authors to set out the criteria used to consider who or what is deemed to be "radical" and "extreme", particularly as the book is targeted at both practitioners and academics.

Overall, the book provides an in-depth account of how counter narratives can work in a broad variety of countries against different factions of far-right ideology. The author masterfully succeeds in enhancing the reader's understanding of the current landscape of the violent far-right and provides evidence of an essential tool to help counter propaganda, a resource which can be utilised by policy makers, academics, practitioners and law enforcement. The writing is clear and impactful, an advantage in an academic book that will be of interest to readers of this journal, not only scholars in the fields of counter terrorism, but also those interested in the complex relationship between extremism, radicalisation and technology.

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