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THE MEDIA, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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Abstract

The role of communication in human society cannot be overemphasized. The media which is the conduit for information dissemination is a critical player in issues of conflict, conflict resolution and peacebuilding as the nature of media reportage is capable of destabilizing any state. A more dynamic role of the media in contemporary times is strategic communication which is employed by both state and non-state actors in projecting set goals. The international system in this era of globalization is grappling with series of threats and challenges amongst which is terrorism, insurgency and violent extremism which has led to loss of lives, humanitarian Crisis and economic crisis. In a bid to counter-terrorism, nations have adopted several measures either kinetic or non-kinetic. Strategic communication is one important measure or strategy utilized by states in countering terrorism. Hence this paper attempts to interrogate the role of the media and strategic communication in countering violent extremism. It argues that, in this era of globalization vis-à-vis emergence of social media, strategic communication is not just the exclusive preserve of states as nonstate actors like terrorist organizations also use it for recruitment, radicalization, promotion of radical ideology, attrition amongst others. This is desk research which relies basically on secondary sources of data and qualitative analysis. The findings of this paper indicates that the successes of violent extremist organizations particularly in terms of recruitment and radicalization is attributed to the use of strategic communication. The paper also argued that states have not efficiently and effectively utilized the media for strategic communication and counter violent extremism. This paper therefore argues that violent extremism is promoted using narratives that indoctrinates the vulnerable. Hence the state requires strategic communication to counter existing natives. In the final analysis it recommends the need for the integration of the media and Community Based Organizations and Civil society Organization in countering extremist narratives through advocacy and strategic communication.

Keywords: Media, Strategic Communication, Terrorism, Violent Extremism, Counter-Violent Extremism, Ideology, Radicalization

Introduction

Violent extremism (VE) represents a complex, dynamic, and evolving threat to global peace and security, particularly across Europe. The landscape of this threat is constantly shifting, influenced by the emergence of new forms of extremism, such as accelerationism, the incel movement, anti-government extremism, and eco-extremism. These forms are further exacerbated by geopolitical events, such as the ongoing war in Israel and Gaza, and amplified by a rapidly evolving digital environment (Chalk, 2024). This context fosters a "cycle of influence," wherein extremist ideas penetrate mainstream media, normalize radical perspectives, and drive polarization within communities, ultimately promoting violence and undermining democratic institutions (Chalk, 2024). While traditional security-based counter-terrorism (CT) measures have focused on disrupting

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extremist groups, there is broad international consensus that these kinetic approaches alone are insufficient to address the underlying drivers and complex dynamics of radicalization and recruitment (Chalk, 2024; OSCE, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017; EU P/CVE Stories). Consequently, a more comprehensive, nuanced, and internationally coordinated approach is essential, with strategic communication emerging as a vital, non-kinetic pillar in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) (Chalk, 2024; Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017).

In this context, strategic communication involves a systematic and sustained series of coherent activities designed to understand target audiences, identify effective communication channels, and deliver information to influence perceptions and behaviors in alignment with policy objectives (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019). It encompasses not only formal messages but also the actions of the communicator, recognizing that "actions communicate" as powerfully as words (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023). In P/CVE, strategic communication transcends mere persuasion, aiming to build resilience, foster social cohesion, and address the root causes of division, prejudice, and identity-based violence (Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). This approach underscores a broader "whole-of-society" perspective, recognizing that effective P/CVE requires the active participation of diverse governmental and non-governmental actors, including civil society organizations (CSOs), youth, women, community and religious leaders, educators, researchers, and, critically, the media and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) companies (CVE Ghana; OSCE, 2018; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017).

The media's role in this evolving threat is central and multifaceted, serving both as a tool for extremist groups and as a crucial avenue for strategic counter-extremism responses. Violent extremist groups are highly adept at exploiting the internet and social media for recruitment and propaganda (Amit et al., 2021; Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). They leverage digital tools such as Telegram, TikTok, and artificial intelligence to create and disseminate content, engage audiences, and facilitate recruitment (Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). For example, the war in Israel and Gaza has demonstrated how extremist content, including historical texts such as Osama bin Laden's *Letter to America*, can go viral, normalizing extremist perspectives and spreading new extremist sensitivities across mainstream and social media platforms (Chalk, 2024; Harwell & Bisset, 2023). This digital sophistication highlights a significant "digital capacity gap" between extremist actors' exploitation of online platforms and the ability of policymakers, practitioners, and CSOs to respond effectively using the latest digital technologies (Amit et al., 2021; Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023)

Concept and Components of Strategic Communication

Strategic communication, in the context of countering violent extremism (CVE), is a systematic and sustained series of coherent activities aimed at influencing perceptions and behaviors in line with policy objectives (Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Tatham, 2009). It is not merely about delivering messages but encompasses both "words and deeds," acknowledging that actions communicate as much as, or perhaps even more than, what is said (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). In the context of P/CVE, strategic communication plays a vital role in combating terrorist groups and is considered central to any successful, long-term counter-terrorism campaign (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Paul, 2011).

Key aspects of strategic communication include:

- 1) **Purpose and Influence:** The core objective is to impart information that will appeal to and affect the views of target groups (Mustaqeem et al., 2019). It aims to convince others to think and act in ways compatible with strategic objectives, with persuasion considered the essence of strategic communication (Hallahan et al., 2007; Mustaqeem et al., 2019).
- 2) **Strategic and Effects-Driven:** Strategic communication is defined as a course of action that integrates "ends, ways, and means to meet policy objectives" and requires a comprehensive strategic analysis of the problem with corresponding strategic responses (Chalk, 2024). This approach focuses on determining the strategic effects that violent extremist groups seek to achieve, thereby shaping appropriate responses (Chalk, 2024).
- 3) **Multi-Layered and Integrated:** Effective strategic communication campaigns typically adopt a multi-layered approach, deploying diverse messages across various target audience segments and utilizing all relevant communication channels. This messaging must be harmonized with strategic policy and politico-military actions (Ingram, 2016, cited in Mustaqeem et al., 2019). It should be integrated into all stages of P/CVE strategies, from situation analysis to implementation and monitoring (OSCE, 2020).
- 4) **Audience-Centric:** A fundamental aspect is understanding target audiences and identifying effective conduits for communication (Laity, 2010, cited in Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Tatham, 2009). This includes tailoring content to specific audiences (Chalk, 2024).
- 5) **Coordination and Cohesion:** Strategic communication is viewed as a central government concern and a "whole government unifier," requiring coordination, synchronization, and measurement of communication effectiveness across various implementation platforms (Brownlow, 2013, cited in Cornish, 2011; Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017).
- 6) **Beyond Simple Messaging:** Strategic communication is more than merely prohibiting or blocking content; it requires a comprehensive methodology that addresses underlying drivers of division and societal pressure (Mustaqeem et al., 2019). Laity (2010, cited in Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023) further emphasizes that it is not merely about producing policies and then declaring them but about the proper use of information through unifying, result-oriented actions.
- 7) **Evolving Nature:** The concept has evolved from its traditional military context of signaling intent to allies and adversaries (Cornish, 2011, cited in Mustaqeem et al., 2019) to a broader application within foreign policy and counter-radicalization efforts (Brownlow, 2013, cited in Mustaqeem et al., 2019). In P/CVE, it represents a non-coercive approach to reduce involvement in terrorism (Amit et al., 2021).

Concept of Violent Extremism

Violent extremism (VE) is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that, despite its widespread recognition as a significant global threat, lacks a universally agreed-upon definition (Amit et al., 2021; CVE Ghana; OSCE, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017). Understanding its meaning requires examining its characteristics, motivations, and distinctions from related concepts such as radicalization and terrorism. At its core, violent extremism generally refers to acts of violence that are justified by, or associated with, an extremist religious, social, or political ideology (Amit et al., 2021; CVE Ghana; OSCE, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017). The concept of violent extremism is broader than terrorism, as it encompasses any form of violence motivated by extremist beliefs (Ferguson, 2016; OSCE, 2020). It includes the beliefs and actions of individuals who support,

promote, or use ideologically motivated violence to achieve socio-economic, political, ethnic, or religious objectives (Ferguson, 2016; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017). The term "violent extremism" is preferred in many contexts over "terrorism" to avoid conflation that could justify overly broad counter-terrorism measures against conduct that should not qualify as terrorist acts (OSCE, 2020). However, the meanings of these terms can vary depending on ethnic, religious, political, social, and ideological factors.

Extremist Exploitation of Media and Communications

Violent extremist ideas, commentary, and concepts filter into mainstream social and news media, normalizing extremist perspectives and popularizing both new and historic extremist sensitivities (Chalk, 2024; Ferguson, 2016). Extremist content, including images and messages, becomes extensively shared online and in traditional media (Chalk, 2024). Once normalized and proliferated, violent extremists escalate and accelerate even more extreme communications. This appears as narratives justifying ancient prejudices, specific extremist interpretations of events, or explicit defenses of extremist propositions circulating in media or online (Chalk, 2024).

Extremist efforts intensify by tailoring content to specific audiences and adding, where possible, implied or explicit calls to action, such as calls to attack specific targets (Burke, 2023; Chalk, 2024; Dilanien et al., 2023). Social media platforms are widely used for creating interactive spaces, disseminating violent content, identifying potential participants, and producing false information (Amit et al., 2021). Extremist groups demonstrate significant sophistication in their use of both old and new media tools (Mustaqeem et al., 2019). They exploit the internet and social media for radicalization and recruitment, utilizing platforms to inspire and mobilize support, wage psychological warfare, incite and coordinate attacks, and raise funds (OSCE, 2018; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). Their propaganda considers these media platforms to be as important as lethal weapons on the battlefield (OSCE, 2018). Terrorists use personal narratives, stories, and first-hand reports that go viral to attract attention and amplify their perceived power. They can even "hijack a Twitter storm" by posting propaganda with trending hashtags to increase visibility. Once a vulnerable individual is identified, recruiters often guide them to more secure, unregulated messaging applications, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, for deeper engagement (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

The internet also significantly accelerates radicalization and increases opportunities for self-radicalization (EU P/CVE Stories; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). The media's power to shape narratives and influence emotions is central to the extremist goal of achieving five strategic effects: to polarize, isolate, target, recruit, and operationalize individuals into violent action (Chalk, 2024). Biased news reporting can inadvertently aid polarization by promoting intolerance and hatred within communities (OSCE, 2020).

Strategic Communication in the Context of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Strategic communication, in the context of countering violent extremism (CVE), is a systematic and sustained series of coherent activities designed to influence perceptions and behaviors in line with policy objectives (Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Tatham, 2010). It goes beyond mere formal messages, as "actions communicate" as much as, or perhaps even more than, what is said (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Paul, 2011). This approach is non-coercive, focusing on non-kinetic measures to reduce involvement in terrorism (Amit et al., 2021; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). The core objective of strategic communication in P/CVE is to deliver information that appeals to target groups, aiming to convince them to think and act in ways compatible with strategic objectives (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019). It is considered

central to any successful, long-term counter-terrorism campaign (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Paul, 2011).

Key Aspects and Effects of Strategic Communication in Countering Violent Extremism

Strategic communication defines a course of action that integrates "ends, ways, and means to meet policy objectives" (Chalk, 2024). This requires a comprehensive strategic analysis of the problem and a corresponding set of responses. Rather than solely focusing on extremist narratives, this approach examines the strategic effects that violent extremist groups seek to achieve for radicalization and recruitment (Chalk, 2024). By understanding these effects, responses can be shaped to prevent the radicalization and recruitment process from succeeding (Chalk, 2024). Effective strategic communication involves a systematic understanding of target audiences and the identification of effective communication channels (Laity, 2010, cited in Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Tatham, 2010). Messages are tailored to specific audiences, recognizing that diverse individuals and communities including key influencers, vulnerable populations, and the broader public must be understood to achieve impact (Chalk, 2024; Güler, 2012). Campaigns are more likely to succeed if they are based on a multi-layered approach, deploying diverse messages that leverage various target audience drives, use all relevant means of communication, and harmonize messaging with strategic policy and actions (Ingram, 2016, cited in Mustaqeem et al., 2019).

Strategic communication is viewed as a central government concern and a "whole government unifier" (Brownlow, 2013; Cheong, 2018). It requires coordination and synchronization of communication across all implementation platforms (Mustaqeem et al., 2019; Policy Framework Nigeria). The development of a strategic communication team, as part of a Counter Violent Extremism program, is recommended to analyze extremist messages and formulate customized counter-messages for target audiences (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023). Strategic communication is not simply about prohibiting or blocking content; it requires a comprehensive methodology that addresses the underlying drivers of pressure and division within societies (Mustaqeem et al., 2019). It should aim to frame conversations about events and their interpretation before extremist communications can contextualize them to polarize communities (Chalk, 2024). This proactive approach articulates unifying narratives, such as the need to protect all communities from harm, regardless of ethnicity or religion (Chalk, 2024).

These are actions designed to directly deconstruct, discredit, and demystify violent extremist messages by challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings, or by highlighting contradictions (Briggs & Feve, 2013; Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023). However, traditional counter-narratives can be reactive and confrontational, risking rejection by target audiences (Amit et al., 2021; Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). Some studies suggest they may have limited impact on countering violent extremism in certain contexts (Naman, 2019). These messages provide a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, aiming to deconstruct extremist views by explaining the benefits of religious peace and harmony or focusing on community history (Amit et al., 2021; Silverman et al., 2016). Messages endorsed by young people or religious leaders are often more impactful than those from state authorities (Amit et al., 2021; OSCE, 2020). The entertainment industry can play a key role in producing and spreading these positive narratives.

Strategic Use of Communication Channels is another medium. This includes traditional media such as radio, television, and print journalism, which can reach remote populations (Chalk, 2024; Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are also crucial for amplifying campaigns and countering extremist ideas (Amit et al., 2021; Policy

Framework Nigeria). The choice of channel must be familiar to the target audience to ensure messages reach the right people at the right time (Philips & Dyke, 2012). Equipping vulnerable youth with skills to question online content, discern credibility, and navigate misinformation is vital (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). This includes teaching responsible online and offline behavior as part of "digital citizenship" (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

Participative Communication is an important approach. This approach moves away from top-down persuasion, instead seeking to develop the systems and resources of communities to build resilience (Freear & Glazzard, 2021). It involves empowering young people to express themselves and develop agency through their own stories and communicative practices, fostering collective identity, and using mechanisms such as civic media literacy, communications for social change, conflict-sensitive journalism, and narrative therapy. This "relational" approach focuses on building communication and media capacity, promoting self-expression, and fostering dialogue rather than simply delivering persuasive messages (Freear & Glazzard, 2021). For strategic communication to be effective, significant capacity gaps must be addressed, particularly the "digital capacity gap," where P/CVE actors lack the knowledge and resources to keep pace with extremist exploitation of digital platforms (Chalk, 2024). A "local capacity gap" also exists, hindering civil society organizations from reaching vulnerable individuals offline and online (Chalk, 2024). Any strategic communication program must be ethically justified, considering its impact on civil liberties, proportionality, and securing widespread support, while avoiding the stigmatization of communities (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024).

Broader Media and Communication Strategies for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE)

- 1) **Whole-of-Society Approach:** This approach actively involves the media, journalists, ICT, and social media companies as key stakeholders in P/CVE efforts (OSCE, 2018, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria; UNDP-RAND; UNIDIR, 2022). Their participation is crucial for fostering trust, widening ownership of P/CVERLT policies, and providing feedback on their impact (OSCE, 2020). Governments are encouraged to partner with these diverse stakeholders to conceptualize, develop, and implement P/CVERLT policies, integrating strategic communication into all stages (OSCE, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria).
- 2) **Positive and Alternative Narratives:** Rather than solely deploying "counter-narratives" that directly challenge extremist messages which can be reactive and confrontational, risking rejection by target audiences "alternative narratives" or positive messages are often more effective (Amit et al., 2021; Ferguson, 2016; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). These messages explain the benefits of religious peace and harmony or focus on community history and are more impactful when endorsed by young people or religious leaders rather than state authorities (Amit et al., 2021; OSCE, 2020). The entertainment industry, including filmmakers, artists, musicians, writers, and drama groups, can play a key role in producing and disseminating positive messages through both offline and online mediums (Policy Framework Nigeria). Radio and television dramas, in particular, have a strong evidence base for affecting social change by addressing issues of identity, reconciliation, and tolerance, thus influencing public attitudes and behavior (Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021).
- 3) **Digital Resilience and Media Literacy:** Equipping vulnerable youth with skills to critically question online content, discern credibility, and navigate misinformation is crucial for preventing online radicalization (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). The formal education sector has a

significant role in integrating these skills into curricula, promoting responsible online and offline behavior as part of "digital citizenship" (UNESCO, 2017; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

- 4) **Proactive Technology Utilization:** P/CVE strategies can proactively leverage technologies such as AI and mobile applications. Examples include the "Redirect Method," which redirects users searching for extremist content to videos disproving extremist ideologies, and mobile apps like "Against Violent Extremism (AVE)," which connect former extremists and survivors to counter extremist narratives (Amit et al., 2021; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).
- 5) **Participative Communication:** An alternative to top-down, persuasive strategic communications is a participative approach that develops systems and resources for communities to build their own resilience (Freear & Glazzard, 2021). This approach involves empowering young people as communicators, fostering collective identity, and using mechanisms such as civic media literacy, communications for social change, conflict-sensitive journalism, and narrative therapy (Freear & Glazzard, 2021). This relational approach focuses on building communication and media capacity, promoting self-expression, and fostering dialogue rather than simply delivering persuasive messages (Freear & Glazzard, 2021).
- 6) **Engaging "Formers":** Individuals who have disengaged from violent extremism ("formers") can play a credible role in raising awareness, communicating counter-narratives, and supporting rehabilitation efforts due to their first-hand experience, often through media platforms (Ferguson, 2016; OSCE, 2020).
- 7) **Rapid Response Strategies:** In situations threatening identity-based violence, rapid reaction media and communication strategies can dispel rumors or appeal for calm (Ferguson, 2016). Establishing trusted institutional accounts can help spread reliable news in times of crisis, limiting the potential for misinformation (UNDP-RAND).
- 8) **Ethical Considerations and Responsible Reporting:** Any P/CVE communication program must be ethically justified, considering its impact on civil liberties and proportionality, while securing widespread support and avoiding stigmatization of communities (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). Journalists have a responsibility to report objectively, avoid sensationalism, and not reinforce stereotypes, especially when covering sensitive issues related to violent extremism (Ferguson, 2016; OSCE, 2020). Training for journalists on conflict-sensitive reporting and P/CVERLT principles is essential to prevent indirectly promoting extremist content or stigmatizing communities (OSCE, 2020).

Challenges and Capacity Gaps in Media Engagement

The use of strategic communications and the media in countering violent extremism (CVE) faces multiple challenges and significant capacity gaps. These issues are exacerbated by the evolving nature of extremist threats, the accelerating digital environment, and persistent limitations in implementation and evaluation (Chalk, 2024; OSCE, 2020).

Conceptual and Methodological Challenges in Strategic Communication

- 1) **Lack of Universal Definitions and Conceptual Clarity:** There is no universal consensus regarding what constitutes preventing or countering violent extremism, or what forms these interventions should take (McCants & Watts, 2012). The absence of agreed definitions of key terms often leads to "conflicting or counterproductive programmes" that are difficult to evaluate (McCants & Watts, 2012, cited in CVE Ghana). Terms such as "CVE," "PVE," and "P/CVE" are often used interchangeably, leading to confusion about scope and objectives (OSCE, 2020; Review of Educational Initiatives).

- 2) **Simplistic and Outdated Communication Models:** Many counter-narrative interventions rely on simplistic and outdated models of human communication, such as the "magic bullet theory," which assumes a uniform, immediate, direct, and powerful effect on populations (Esser, 2008, cited in Freear & Glazzard, 2021; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). This linear transmission model often fails to account for the complex social, expressive, and performative aspects of communication (Freear & Glazzard, 2021).
- 3) **Difficulty in Measuring Impact and Effectiveness:** Evaluating the effectiveness of strategic communications interventions, especially counter-narratives, is notoriously difficult (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024; Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021; Review of Educational Initiatives). It is challenging to attribute success to a single factor, isolate and measure the impact of preventative media and communication strategies, and establish a direct causal link between engagement with VE content and participation in VE activities (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024; Ferguson, 2016; Review of Educational Initiatives). Small shifts in complex environments may represent big successes, but these are hard to measure (Review of Educational Initiatives).
- 4) **Risk of Counterproductive Outcomes:** Poorly planned or implemented communication actions can inadvertently exacerbate problems (Freear & Glazzard, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2018, cited in Freear & Glazzard, 2021). Campaigns directly countering extremist messages may provide terrorists a platform to make their arguments more public, drawing attention rather than detracting from them (Bell, 2015, cited in Zeiger & Gyte; Zeiger & Gyte). Media coverage of detention facilities in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib reportedly reduced support for American actions (Schmid, 2014, cited in Zeiger & Gyte; Zeiger & Gyte).
- 5) **Focus on Symptoms vs. Root Causes:** Traditional counter-terrorism efforts often target symptoms rather than the underlying drivers of violent extremism (CVE Ghana; OSCE, 2020). Some online CVE interventions adopt a "slender approach," targeting specific ideologies or groups without adequately addressing contextual, social-psychological, and radicalization factors (Amit et al., 2021).

Capacity Gaps in Digital and Local Environments

A critical strategic digital deficit exists between violent extremists' advanced exploitation of the internet and social media and the ability of policymakers, practitioners, and civil society organizations (CSOs) to adopt the latest digital technologies (Amit et al., 2021; Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte). Extremists are highly adept at adopting and adapting new digital technologies—including Telegram, TikTok, and AI tools to create and disseminate content that engages and energizes audiences (Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte). P/CVE actors often lack the knowledge, skills, capacity, and resources to keep pace with these rapidly changing trends, leaving them "significantly behind the curve" (Amit et al., 2021; Chalk, 2024; Zeiger & Gyte). Many local youth groups are not present on or using the same digital platforms as the populations they aim to reach (Chalk, 2024). A deficit exists between violent extremists' ability to reach young and/or vulnerable people offline and the capacity of CSOs to offer support or intervene (Chalk, 2024). Local groups need support to get online, create content, deliver interventions, and sustain their activities (Chalk, 2024). Historically, civil society communications were important in countering ISIS but have declined, leading to a "worrying decline in the adoption of new technology" by pro-social and civil society actors (Chalk, 2024). Many P/CVE programs focus on urban populations, neglecting rural areas where extremists may be more active (Amit et al., 2021).

Even with goodwill, effective partnerships are often hindered by a lack of awareness and operational skills among CSOs and government entities. CSOs may not know how to contribute to P/CVERLT efforts, and capacity-building in this area is often neglected by donors (OSCE, 2020)

Challenges in Media Engagement and Narrative Strategies

Violent extremist groups consistently demonstrate sophistication in their use of both old and new media tools (Mustaqeem et al., 2019). They exploit the power and unrivaled outreach opportunities of social media platforms to inspire, recruit, mobilize support, wage psychological warfare, incite and coordinate attacks, conduct trainings, and raise funds (OSCE, 2020; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). They leverage personal narratives, stories, and first-hand reports to attract attention and multiply their perceived power (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). Media projects and communication campaigns have less impact if perceived as being linked to a political agenda (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). Narratives are most successful when audiences can identify with or recognize aspects relevant to their own lives, emphasizing the importance of trust (Ferguson, 2016). Messaging endorsed by young people or religious leaders is likely to have a greater impact than messages from state authorities or international organizations (Amit et al., 2021; OSCE, 2020).

While counter-narratives are designed to deconstruct and discredit extremist messages, they can be reactive, confrontational, and risk rejection by target audiences (Amit et al., 2021; Ferguson, 2016; Freear & Glazzard, 2021). Debates exist regarding their usefulness, with some asserting that potential adverse effects may outweigh expected benefits (Gielen, 2017, cited in Amit et al., 2021; Weine et al., 2017, cited in Amit et al., 2021). Some studies have found no significant relationship between counter-narratives and countering violent extremism (Naman, 2019, cited in Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023). Restricting extremist content on the internet is difficult, expensive, and often ineffective, as blocked content is likely to reappear on other sites (Amit et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2016, cited in Amit et al., 2021; Macnair & Frank, 2017, cited in Amit et al., 2021; OSCE, 2020). There is often a lack of clear understanding regarding what constitutes "extremist content" (Amit et al., 2021; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). Content filtering can push extremist networks into "darker corners" of the web, making them even harder to monitor (OSCE, 2020). Moreover, policymakers often misunderstand how internet and social media companies operate, limiting their responses and potentially causing unintended infringements of human rights (Zeiger & Gyte, 2023).

The research landscape related to media and communication strategies in CVE is fragmented (Ferguson, 2016). Different sectors, disciplines, and areas of expertise often fail to communicate and share lessons learned (Ferguson, 2016). The overwhelming focus on contemporary violent Islamist extremism frequently neglects other forms of extremism, such as right-wing extremism, and overlooks lessons from other identity-based crises (Ferguson, 2016). Any CVE project must be ethically justified, considering its impact on civil liberties, proportionality in minimizing harm and achieving objectives, the least infringing policy, and securing widespread support (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024). Policies can lead to negative consequences, such as profiling and stigmatization (Aryaeinejad & Scherer, 2024). Using "securitized" language or explicitly labeling P/CVERLT efforts as such can jeopardize local credibility and the physical safety of civil society actors, making them reluctant to engage (OSCE, 2018, 2020). Traditional media channels can also antagonize and stigmatize young people from marginalized backgrounds (Freear & Glazzard, 2021).

Evaluating PVE initiatives is challenging due to limited political support, insufficient resources, and few data points in complex environments (Policy Framework Nigeria; Review of Educational Initiatives). There is limited funding and support for initiatives that foster genuine dialogue between

governments and civil society (OSCE, 2020). While a local approach is crucial, general assumptions and proven education theories of change may not be relevant in conflict contexts or complex environments, where additional variables can disrupt traditional change pathways (Herrington, 2015, cited in Review of Educational Initiatives). These interwoven challenges highlight the need for a sophisticated, adaptive, and collaborative approach that addresses both technical and socio-political dimensions of strategic communication and media engagement in countering violent extremism.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations for Media Strategy

In essence, new strategic communication approaches must embrace the pervasive influence of media, shifting from reactive, persuasion-based tactics to proactive, effects-driven, and participative models. These models emphasize unifying narratives, robust digital and local civil society capacity, and strategic leveraging of technology and diverse community voices to address the complex and evolving threat of violent extremism.

- 1) **Safeguarding as a Policy Response:** Governments should broaden their response beyond "prevention" to actively "protect" and "safeguard" communities from violent extremist influence (Chalk, 2024). This includes promoting unifying and inclusive narratives that frame events to prevent polarization, such as "protecting communities from all forms of violence," thereby de-politicizing and de-stigmatizing communities (Chalk, 2024).
- 2) **Build New Civil Society and Media Capacity:** Governments must rapidly build sustainable civil society capacity to match and overcome violent extremist influence online and offline (Chalk, 2024). This involves equipping, resourcing, and training community partners, including CSOs, youth groups, and faith-based organizations, to support counter-recruitment efforts and foster cohesion, trust, and resilience (Chalk, 2024; Policy Framework Nigeria, 2017). Governments should also address the digital gap by enhancing CSO and frontline practitioner capabilities with the latest digital technologies (Chalk, 2024).
- 3) **Strategic Communication Teams:** Establishing strategic communication teams within P/CVE programs is recommended to analyze extremist messages, identify their social, psychological, and theological roots, and formulate customized counter-messages for target audiences (Giami et al., 2023). These teams ensure coordination and synchronization of communication across all platforms (Policy Framework Nigeria).
- 4) **Expand Communication Infrastructure:** Expanding traditional media infrastructure (radio and TV) can reach vulnerable populations in remote areas, as radio is more impactful where internet access is limited (Effect of Strategic Communications, 2023; Giami et al., 2023). Strategies should be diversified across media platforms and languages, tailoring messages to local contexts for relatability (Mustaqeem et al., 2019; UNDP-RAND; Giami et al., 2023).
- 5) **Partnerships with Tech Industry:** Collaboration with social media companies and IT firms is crucial to combat online extremism, remove illegal content, and develop localized preventive solutions (Chalk, 2024; OSCE, 2020; Policy Framework Nigeria; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). Tech companies should support research on internet misuse and empower victims to share their experiences online (OSCE, 2020).
- 6) **Training and Education:** Investment in media literacy programs and training for journalists and educators is vital to empower individuals to critically assess online content and foster responsible reporting on violent extremism (OSCE, 2020; Review of Educational Initiatives, 2017; Zeiger & Gyte, 2023). Journalists and media associations can train civil society actors to

develop and disseminate impactful alternative and counter-narratives, information campaigns, and culturally sensitive P/CVERLT materials (OSCE, 2018).

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