



CREATING VISUAL ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

GUIDELINE FOR PROFESSIONALS

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1 Introduction

ORPHEUS Project

This guide is provided as a part of the ORPHEUS project and follows the goal of developing means for online and offline prevention of political violence with young people and their educators as central actors. According to the ORPHEUS project:

The threat of radicalisation and all types of political violence is a significant and rising societal concern. Experts describe the youth at risk as solitary adolescents estranged from family, friends, and traditional social institutions. This social alienation makes them receptive to grooming. Policymakers and field workers acknowledge the need to engage with young people more effectively.

This guide aims at helping educators and young people to create and promote media expressing societal concerns of youth in a way that protects them from online grooming to violent extremism. The guide was created based on a thorough review of empirical research and relevant theories to provide strong and scientifically supported advice.

Because violent extremist groups and narratives operate across national borders the themes and models presented in the guide tend to be universal and not focused on one particular issue or ideology. Although the models presented in the guide are universal, they were selected due to their relevance for rapidly evolving online media attracting young people.

Purpose: For Whom and for What Is This Guide?

The goal of this guide is to help content creators design media presentations or highlight existing visual narratives fulfilling the criteria of effective alternative or counter-narratives to violent extremist narratives. Descriptions in the literature of what an alternative narrative for the prevention of violent extremism entails are unspecific and theoretical. This guide aims at translating the theory into practice by giving specific examples of possible alternative narratives. The principles introduced in this guide can fit the needs of different target groups and different radical narratives.

The target audience of this guide is young content creators and members of organizations engaged in supporting them who are interested in providing and sharing narratives to prevent violent extremism. In an age where digital social media are often blamed for increasing polarisation and raising extremism, there is an un-doubtful need for support for social media creators willing to counteract these trends.

These creators need to be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to engage and express themselves not only true to their convictions but also in a way that can have preventive value. Without consideration, well-intended contributions often can facilitate extremism or be perceived as espousing mainstream lies lacking any legitimacy by individuals who are at risk of being attracted by extremist narratives. The users of the guide will gain competence and confidence in identifying content or crafting new content potentially building resilience against attractive narratives leading to violent extremism.

Structure of the Guide

The guide can be used as a self-standing tool for evaluating and creating alternatives to violent extremist narratives because it contains all necessary definitions and theoretical background, as well as practical examples and guidelines. It has been developed based on an analysis of a sample of existing popular video material on social media, fulfilling criteria of alternative narratives to violent extremism.

The general introduction and description of this pamphlet are followed by a background section providing necessary definitions of the key terms which are mentioned to prevent semantic confusion down the way.

The next part of the background section presents key common features of narratives promoting violent extremism: their common structure, what makes them attractive, and which elements are particularly responsible for promoting violence. This part is needed to provide an understanding of why certain content might be particularly effective in preventing violent extremism.

The core section of the guide provides theoretical and practical guidance for finding and developing alternative narratives. It is divided into three parts and starts by presenting a general persuasive communication model, and its implications for violent extremism prevention.

Following this, we present specific categories of content that might have preventive value for reducing the attractiveness of violent extremism. The content categories are supported by concrete illustrative excerpts of YouTube videos containing this type of content. A description of the background of the selected video material is also included in this section.

The last part of this guide discusses the structure commonly found in the presented alternative narrative videos. At the end of this manual, a reference list can be found, which can be consulted for further reading.

2 Background

Definitions

1. Narratives

A narrative can be defined as “any cohesive and coherent account of events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers, or resolutions are provided” (1).

2. Radicalization and Extremism

Understanding how narratives are constructed to promote extremism and radicalization requires a definition of the terms radicalization and extremism. Radicalization can be defined as a process “through which people become increasingly motivated to use violent means against members of an out-group or symbolic targets to achieve behavioural change and political goals.” (2). Similarly, extremism is the holding of exclusive thoughts that “don’t allow for the possibility of differences” and that are aimed to be imposed on others by violent means (3). It is important to note that in our understanding of terms radicalization and extremism they are not a function of the content of an ideology or the degree to which an ideology differs from the mainstream, but are defined by the justification of violent means (4).

Extremist narratives are not tied to any specific ideology. Almost any movement became the inspiration for violent extremist narratives in contemporary times (5). For instance, religiously inspired radicalisation can take the form of Islamism (Islamic State; Al-Qaeda) (6) and various cults (7); Extremism that is rooted in ethnocultural and identarian ideologies can be related to movements such as separatism (8) (9) (10), nationalism (10), xenophobia (11), racism and white supremacy (12) (13).

Furthermore, there is a wide range of political ideas inspiring extremism reaching from the far left (14), environmentalism and animal rights (15), to the far right (16) and anti-abortion movements (13) on the other side of the spectrum. This list is by no means exhaustive. Moreover, many of the aforementioned ideologies can cross-pollinate and co-inspire various extremist groups.

When talking about alternatives to violent extremist or radical narratives, one must clearly distinguish between the ideologies contained in it and the narrative itself. An ideology is a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” and contains no information about the structural presentation of these beliefs (17).

What unifies all the ideologies involved in extremist narratives is the justification of violence. We will now define alternative and counter-narratives, after which we will come back to talking about the structural elements of extremist narratives.

3. Alternative and Counter-Narratives against Radicalization

Counter-narratives and alternative narratives can be described as “a system of stories that hang together to provide a coherent view of the world with the explicit purpose of combating violent extremist narratives and eliciting legal and non-violent activities in support of individuals, groups, or movements, which support that worldview.” (18). However, there are some important differences between both.

Counter-Narratives

Counter-narratives directly falsify certain aspects and present incongruities of the violent extremist narratives (1). They seek to directly address a violent narrative after it has been delivered to an intended audience, making counter-narratives a reactive type of messaging (18). Testimonials of former radicals, the uncovering of false information or half-truths contained in violent extremist narratives, and alternative interpretations of axioms (e.g., Jihad as a struggle for self-perfection) might be featured in counter-narratives. However, counter-narratives are limited in several ways. Some of the major limitations of counter-narratives include:

- a) Counter-narratives always respond to the specific content of the violent extremist narrative and are reactive (18). Thus, they rely on the existence and understanding of a violent extremist narrative.
- b) Counter-narratives directly address the violent extremist narrative and might even use their propaganda material. Thus, they risk drawing more attention to the violent extremist narrative (19).
- c) Counter-narratives work best as inoculation for people not yet engaged in violent extremist narratives and are likely to be entirely rejected by those engaging in the targeted violent extremist narrative (20) (21).
- d) Counter-narratives can backfire. Well-meant counter-narratives intended to counter radicalization inspired by one specific ideology, can promote radicalization for groups not being their intended target. Because counter-narratives might unintentionally expose individuals to extremist propaganda, they might provoke negative belief reinforcement, and set off cumulative extremism dynamics, or trigger backlashes with people of the general public (22).

Considering these challenges and limitations affecting the counter-narrative approach, this guide will mainly focus on alternative narratives.

Alternative Narratives

Alternative narratives do not target specific violent extremist narratives or ideologies directly and thus are less likely to be affected by the limitations of the counter-narratives. Rather than directly attacking, falsifying, or countering aspects of the violent extremist narrative, alternative narratives aim at replacing the elements of the violent extremist narrative which make them attractive. Furthermore, alternative narratives are primarily positively framed and highlight what “we are for rather than what we are against” (23). For instance, presenting and promoting a faith-based form of citizen involvement and civic engagement among youth can form an alternative narrative inoculating them against violent narratives that imply a person cannot reconcile western citizen and religious Muslim loyalties (18). Moreover, the said alternative might empower the youth and demonstrate that religious rights and freedoms can be exerted and effectively secured without resorting to violence. Thus, by not being reactive and not directly addressing a violent extremist narrative, alternative narratives have the power to proactively promote non-violent attitudes and behaviours.

Violent Extremist Narratives

1. Common Structure

Narratives are used to deliver extremist ideas, which facilitates the radicalization process and promotes acceptance of violence. Violent extremist narratives commonly follow an arcing structure, such as the classic narrative arc (24). At the beginning of the arc stands a political or societal grievance which a specific group presents. Next, violence is presented as the driving force that is needed to resolve a conflict, overcome the grievance, and arrive at a utopian state that is the end point of the radical narrative. Thus, the justification of violence as an acceptable and effective way for addressing grievances, exerting influence to create change, or protecting an endangered status quo, is at the core of the violent extremists’ narratives (24) (25).

2. How Do Extremist Narratives Promote Violence?

Radical narratives might promote violence because they:

- a) Justify the use of violence. Violent extremist narratives promote violence by presenting it as a necessary means for protecting the group. Additionally, they highlight the effectiveness of violence in achieving political goals (25). To legitimize their ideology, the violent extremist narrative might contextualize violent conflict in the historical past and/or employ religious motives to justify their grievances, political goals, and violent means (25). These strategies portray violence as necessary, effective, and legitimate.
- b) Use **‘us’ versus ‘them’ thinking**. Violent extremist narratives address a group's grievances by blaming them on an out-group that is portrayed as responsible for the suffering of the in-group. Thus, the in-group takes the victim's position that is being threatened by the out-group (25). The perceived evil nature of the opponent and the perceived disagreements or threats are often intensified in the violent extremist narrative through the use of war analogy, references to historical battles, post-oppression, or antecedent heroes (25) (26). This does not only increase in-group cohesion but also increases the perceived need to use violence to protect the in-group from the threat of the out-group. Furthermore, if violent extremist narratives conform with historical, religious, or political stories that the audience is familiar with or believes in, individuals might be more likely to identify with the radical narrative (27). Through the identification of individuals with the in-group, they might adopt the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ division portrayed by the violent extremist narrative and become more eager to use violence against out-group members.
- c) **Dehumanize the enemies**. Violent extremist narratives use stereotypes to describe and refer to members of the out-group (13). A stereotypical portrayal of the people outside of the individual's group might lead to them being perceived as less humane than other humans or fellow group members. Dehumanizing increases people's willingness to behave violently towards the groups being stereotyped (13).
The aforementioned elements of violent extremist narratives complement each other to promote an extremist worldview and the use of violence.

3. What Makes Violent Extremist Narratives Attractive?

Individuals might be attracted to violent extremist narratives because they:

- a) **Provide affiliation and belonging.** Individuals might derive a sense of belonging from affiliation with a large group (28). Individuals can feel connected and identify with a group and their grievances even if they do not personally belong to this group or share experiences with them (29). Additionally, individuals might find acceptance for their own possibly extremist ideas or experience of grievances within a radical narrative (16), making them feel validated.
- b) **Provide meaning and certainty.** Violent extremist narratives often present a simple and coherent worldview that provides answers to existential questions, which might help to eliminate the uncertainty. Individuals that require a lot of certainty and clarity might thus feel more attracted to the violent extremist narratives than individuals who have a higher tolerance for ambiguity (30).
- c) **Improve self-perception and offer success.** Radical narratives offer opportunities for self-sacrifice for a higher cause and the opportunity to matter. Sacrifice can install feelings of intense significance in the individuals supporting the violent extremist narrative (31). People might feel motivated to self-sacrifice for their ideology because they expect to be praised as heroes for it (32). Thus, radical narratives can improve an individual's self-perception by making them feel significant. Individuals high in their need to be noticed and to matter might be more attracted to violent extremist narratives than individuals that do not experience this drive as intensely. Violent extremist narratives might also improve an individual's self-perception by providing an external explanation for personal failure (13) (25). Through the adoption of a violent extremist narrative, the personal frustration can be projected on an external source, which might be a specific ethnic, racial, cultural, religious, or social group. Thus, the individual does not have to take responsibility for their failure (33). By increasing the perceived significance of the self and preventing the need to take responsibility for personal failure, an individual's self-esteem, or overall opinion of themselves, might be boosted.
- d) **Offer moral superiority.** Violent extremist narratives install the belief that the group's beliefs, attitudes, values, and morals are superior and more correct than the standards of people outside of this group (33) (34). In situations in which individuals that identify with a violent extremist group experience deprivation, the perception of threat to the existence and well-being of the group is increased, which in turn hardens the perceived moral superiority over the out-group members.

Summary - Background

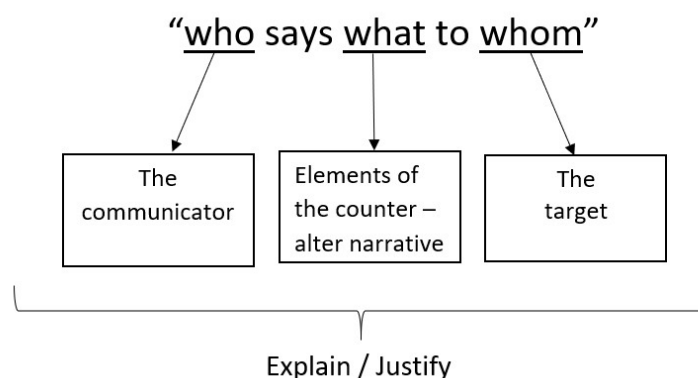
- A narrative is a story with a beginning, middle, and end, that has a plot driven by the actions and conflicts of the characters included.
- Violent extremism describes the motivation to use violence against members of an out-group to achieve political goals and/or behavioural change and can be inspired by many different ideologies and political ideas.
- Narratives can be used by violent extremist groups to promote their ideology and violence. In violent extremist narratives violence is presented as a necessary, acceptable, and effective way of overcoming hardships and grievances, protecting the in-group, and achieving political goals. Individuals might be attracted to violent extremist narratives because they provide a sense of belonging, acceptance, and validation, or offer answers to existential questions, eliminate uncertainty, improve self-perception by providing external explanation for personal failure and opportunities to matter, and install the perception of moral superiority.
- Alternative and counter-narratives aim at combating violent extremist narratives and eliciting legal and non-violent reactions instead. Counter-narratives react to a specific violent extremist narrative by directly addressing and falsifying certain aspects of it, which poses some challenges and limitations for its effectiveness in preventing violent extremism, such as necessity to keep up with specific content of extremist narratives.

Alternative narratives are less likely to be affected by the limitations. Because they are not reactive, they do not directly address points in a violent extremist narrative. They instead aim to provide positively framed messages which address the elements of violent extremist narratives that make the extremist narratives attractive. For instance, alternative narratives often demonstrate positive, effective, and non-violent ways of resolving issues motivating violent extremists.

3 Developing Alternative Narratives

Communication Model - Defining Features of Alternative Narratives

Model of Communication of a Narrative (35)



According to Laswell (35), a persuasive narrative consists of several major elements or features that must be determined by the content creator. Thus, an alternative narrative needs to include and define the following features: who the anticipated audience or recipient of the story is (to whom); who the communicator is (who); and what elements and content to include (what). The content, the source, and the delivery of the narrative are the most important elements in the control of the creator (25). All features must be coherent and well-adjusted to the societal context and the target population to render the narrative successful (1) (25) (36).

1. Target Audience

A central question for content creators of alternative narratives should be: who is the target audience of the narrative and how might the narrative affect the audience? Because the narrative needs to resonate with the target audience, the intended audience determines the content, source, and delivery. Failure to match the narrative to the intended audience is the most common mistake in campaigns against violent extremism (37).

Adaption of the major elements of an alternative narrative to the target audience is necessary because the reception of an alternative narrative might vary with age, gender, grievance, violent extremist narrative attractive to the audience, contributing factors to radicalization process, and pre-existing commitment to a violent extremist ideology (36). Furthermore, the target audiences' interests, vulnerabilities, attitudes, behaviours, communication environment, and media consumption also determine how a message resonates with the target audience (38). Finally, narratives should be adapted to the cultural, historical, and geographical context of the target group (1).

Adapting the narrative to the target audience and determining how it might influence these individuals requires an in-depth understanding of this population (38) (39). Disregarding facts about the audience's background, priorities, vulnerabilities, and communication style can have major consequences. It can not only render the campaign ineffective but can also pose the risk of reinforcing violent extremism if, for example, stigmatisation of the target audience is perceived (37). Thus, merely collecting demographic information is not sufficient for anticipating the effects of the narrative on the target audience, and aiming at a full and in-depth understanding of the target audience is key.

Several factors that either cause a higher vulnerability to violent extremist narratives or increase their resilience to them have been identified in the literature and should be considered when assessing the target audience (40) (41). Factors that might protect against susceptibility to violent extremist narratives are "self-control, adherence to the law, acceptance of police legitimacy, illness, positive parenting behaviour, non-violent significant others, good school achievement, non-violent peers, contact to foreigners, and a basic attachment to society" (41). Contrarily, factors such as "identity issues, personal crises, history of criminality, exposure to extremism, grievances, unmet aspirations, and system failure" might increase an individual's vulnerability to violent extremist narratives (40). Campaigns should aim at strengthening and building resilience amongst the target audience while eliminating risk factors.

Ritzmann, Wouterse, and Verdegall (39) have created an overview of questions that can help content creators to get to know the target audience better:

- How many people are part of the target group?
- What are their key economic and demographic characteristics?
- How do they live (priorities, aspirations, consumer trends, political attitudes)?
- What are their rational, emotional, or hidden needs and what motivates them?
- What drives and triggers their actions?
- Who or what influences their opinions and actions?
- What are their thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the issue at hand?
- How are they getting their information (place, media, messenger, receptiveness)?

Consulting with people that are part of the target audience and teaming up with the local communities is necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of the target audience and ensure that the narrative is credible (38) (39) (42). A member of the intended target audience must assess whether the message will resonate with the audience as intended (38) (39). Only if the target group considers the narrative as attractive and the messenger as credible can the alternative narrative have its hoped-for effect (18) (39) (43). Including representatives of the target audience can also help to avoid stigmatization of specific communities, which could jeopardize the campaign (38) (42). Market-testing the narrative with different segments of the target audience in an iterative process is recommended (37).

A tool that can help with the identification and analysis of the needs, attitudes, and values of a specific population is the statistical analysis technique called audience segmentation (39). It can help to break down the larger population according to their needs so that messages can be more personalised to the specific sub-populations. Based on the understanding of the target audience, an explicit *Theory of Change* can be developed (39). In this *Theory of Change*, the cause of the violent extremism risk in the local context is identified and the intended change and outcomes of specific interventions are defined (39).

In addition to the intended audience of the narrative, the alternative narrative might also reach people that it did not intend to address: the unintended audience. This unintended audience includes everyone who might consume the narrative but at whom it was neither directed nor tailored. Thus, the content creator must also consider how the alternative narrative might affect the unintended audience to assess and prevent the potential threats the alternative narrative might pose for different individuals or groups of people. In the worst cases, a narrative intended to prevent violent extremism introduces violence and extremism to an audience, who was indifferent to it before the campaign. To avoid this threat, audiences from various groups and communities can be consulted when planning the campaign, to decrease the likelihood of antagonizing anyone (42). Furthermore, an advertisement can be hyper-targeted at specific groups, to avoid reaching unintended consumers (39).

2. Content

The content element of a narrative refers to the message that it aims to convey to the target audience. It answers the question: what is the message of the narrative? Content creators must consider what they want to convey as the central message of their narrative. In section '3.2.2. Potential Contents of Alternative Narratives' possible contents of an alternative narrative are presented in detail. A point to remember when selecting the content/message of the alternative narrative is that messages are best processed and remembered if they violate some expectations as compared to violating many or no expectations at all (24). Thus, the alternative narrative should try to balance content that violates existing violent radical beliefs of the target audiences with presenting ideas that might be intuitive to them.

3. Modality

Related to the content of the alternative narrative is how the content is expressed: its modality. While modality could be understood as implicit in the content, it is discussed separately here for clarity. This element answers the question: how is the message conveyed? How the message is conveyed determines how convincing and engaging the narrative is. This might include considerations of the degree of emotionality of the narrative. When it comes to engagement, emotions are believed to be more important than evidence (37). The use of highly emotional, intense, or dramatic content might increase the persuasiveness of a message (18). Emotionality might be increased for example through the portrayal of a character's emotions (e.g., desperation, worthlessness, isolation, rejections, humiliation) towards the experience of a grievance. While emotionality can increase persuasiveness, a message that has a logical and sensual appeal might be most effective (23).

It has also been shown that multimedia methods can increase the engagement with and the persuasiveness of narrative because they can increase the sensual appeal of a message (25). However, professionalism and production quality are vital in determining how convincing a message is (37). Thus, the content creator must consider which mediums to use and how much to invest in the production of a convincing and engaging narrative.

4. Source or Messenger

Similarly, important to the content of the alternative narrative is the source of delivery or the messenger. It is important to determine: who delivers the alternative narrative? Perceived liking and identification, trustworthiness, and authenticity, as well the expertise of the messenger help the audience to accept the message and promote attitude and behaviour change with the audience (18) (39). These messenger properties are often interconnected.

Likeable and Possible to Identify with

Audiences of online media platforms often develop a parasocial relationship with the person delivering the message. As a result, audience members might feel connected, identify with, and perceive media personalities as friends, despite messengers not being aware of the existence of the individual audience members or having very limited interaction with them. For instance, 40% of millennial YouTube subscribers say their favourite creator understands them better than their friends (44). If the alternative narrative allows the audience to develop parasocial relationships with the messenger, the audience might develop a liking towards them, which might also increase the persuasiveness of the narrative and trust in the messenger. Liking might be promoted if similarities between the audience and the messenger are perceived.

Furthermore, if the audience perceives themselves to be similar to the messenger, identification might be promoted. Through the identification with the messenger of the narrative, an individual takes their perspective and gets closer to the narrative events, resulting in an easier adoption of the messenger's attitudes and beliefs (1).

Trustworthy and Authentic

A messenger must be perceived as trustworthy by the target population. If the source of the message does not seem trustworthy, it risks being rejected, regardless of the argumentation quality (43). The person delivering the message might be perceived as more trustworthy, credible, and authentic if they are associated with the target audience e.g., a fellow group member (18) (38). Proximity to the target audience plays a vital role. In addition, having a local messenger might also promote the audience's identification with and liking of the messenger (1).

Who is perceived as a trustworthy messenger can also vary between cultures (1). Individuals from authoritarian cultures who appreciate leadership might be inclined to trust ideological leaders and high-status individuals, while people from individualistic cultures with an anti-authoritative climate feel less trusting towards these messengers. Thus, the choice of the messenger should match the level of appreciation of authority and leadership of the target audience.

Expert

Next to proximity, the perception of expertise can also strengthen the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the messenger. Expertise in this case does not have to mean formal credentials. First-hand experience is often even more convincing. For example, testimonials of victims or former perpetrators might be just as convincing as those of academics, officials, or institutions representatives, and are often more relatable.

According to these factors, the reports of the Radicalization Awareness Network identified different types of potentially credible messengers (42):

- Government
- Civil society
- Religious leaders
- Institutions
- Communities
- Formers
- Victims

There are several limitations to using the government to deliver an alternative narrative. The perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the government are often compromised because it might be lacking trust and legitimacy (42). Thus, having an alternative narrative delivered by the government is not recommended. However, government funding and engagement is needed to support the efforts of civil society, communities, or institutions.

Involving young people in the creation of alternative narratives can be particularly beneficial. However, it might be more effective to have young people generate content related to social cohesion and political activism in a more general sense, rather than on violent extremism specifically, as they might feel reluctant to work on these issues. The content produced by young people might resonate well with their peers and thus have a preventive effect (37).

Regardless of the choice of messenger, it is crucial to have members of the target audience assess whether the messenger is indeed perceived as likeable, trustworthy, credible, and/or authentic (39). Introducing the messenger, their background, and experiences in enough detail, allows the audience to build up trust towards the messenger (25). Describing the developments of the messenger from an early age and/or over a long-time span and presenting personal details about their lives, can promote an impression of transparency and predictability. The display of the messenger's emotions can increase approachability and empathy (38), which might help the audience accept the messenger and the message.

5. Dissemination

Alternative narratives should be delivered to the networks in which the target group is active (23). Because currently most radicalization takes place online and because extremist propaganda on mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has been on the rise, dissemination should be focused on the online environment (23) (25) (45). Thus, alternative narratives could be delivered to existing Facebook groups or YouTube channels. The ideal online platform allows for wide accessibility of the content (25), while simultaneously being focused enough to appeal to the specific target group (23).

Online dissemination might not be sufficient in preventing radicalization. Online prevention efforts might be most effective if they are integrated into a larger system bridging the online and offline environment (36) (45). Online efforts might be combined with educational or community intervention programs that build on the message of the online alternative narrative to unlock their full potential. Thus, the main challenge for the dissemination is to choose and combine the right channels for online and face to face distribution (42).

Summary - Defining Features of Alternative Narratives

- A narrative consists of five important features that must be determined by the content creator: target audience, content, modality, messenger, and dissemination.
- All the other features of the narrative must be matched and adapted to the needs and preferences of the target audience, which requires an in-depth understanding of this population. Content creators are advised to team up with members of the target audience and local communities to ensure that the narrative is perceived by the target audience as it was intended.
- The most important content to consider is the central message of the narrative.
- The modality of a narrative describes how a message is conveyed and aims at increasing the engagement and appeal of a narrative, including considerations of the degree of emotionality or the use of multimedia.
- The properties of the person delivering the message influence whether it will be accepted or rejected by the target audience. Six main messenger properties were identified, that might promote acceptance of the message: likability, possibility to identify with, trustworthiness, authenticity, credibility, and expertise. According to these properties, different types of possible messengers can come from civil society, religious leaders, institutions, communities, formers, or victims.
- It is important to choose the right channels for dissemination and to deliver the narratives to the networks in which the target audience is active. Because most radicalization takes place online on mainstream platforms, dissemination might focus on the online environment. However, online prevention efforts are most effective if paired with offline educational or community intervention programs.

Content - Displacing Attractiveness of Violent Extremist Narratives

1. Alternative Narrative Video Examples

In the following sections, possible common contents of alternative narratives are presented. To make this content tangible the points are illustrated with fragments of alternative narrative videos. These example fragments were drawn from eight YouTube videos, which all relate to the personal story of one individual.

All the videos are presented in the English language and feature protagonists with diverse backgrounds. The videos were published between 19.07.2011 (*Bhuiyan*) and 15.09.2020 (*Salvatto*) and vary between 08:48 minutes (*Bhuiyan*) and 54:27 minutes (*Salvatto*) in length.

The smallest reach of the video was 811 views (*Salvatto*), while the largest reach was twenty-one million views (*Mozes*). The other videos had between approximately 23.000 and 615.000 views.

The reactions to the videos, in terms of the likes to dislikes ratio, were mainly positive. None of the selected videos were substantially controversial or polarising. Six of the videos had 95 per cent positive reactions (likes) as compared to less than five per cent negative responses (dislike) (*Ebrahin*, *Bhuiyan*, *Mozes*, *Salvatto*, *Rangel* and *Odigwe*). The other two videos **received** 86 and 89 per cent positive reactions respectively (*Michaelis* and *Elworthy*). The content and characteristics of the included videos are summarized in the table below.

Table 1 Description of Alternative Narrative Videos

Messenger	Popularity	Content
Zak Ebrahin - Son of an Islamic State terrorist who learned to condemn his father's actions and beliefs through his own experiences	Views: 3.256.371 Likes: 95.611 Dislikes: 2.168	<i>Ebrahin's</i> story shows that being exposed to violent extremism through the family does not mean one will become a violent extremist. At the heart of his narrative is the message that everyone can write their own story. In his narrative, <i>Ebrahin</i> talks about his upbringing by a father, who was a member of the Islamic State and committed a terrorist attack. While <i>Ebrahin</i> believed in his father's ideology when he was a child, he started to question his teachings as a teenager. Through his participation in a national Youth Convention and his work at an amusement park, <i>Ebrahin</i> was exposed to a diversity of people including gay and Jewish individuals. These experiences helped him to unlearn and condemn his father's teachings and understand that the quality of a person's character is not determined by arbitrary characteristics.
Rais Bhuiyan - Victim of a violent attack by a White Supremacist who forgave the attacker and started a campaign to save his life	Views: 20.452 Likes: 142 Dislikes: 3 + Views: 5.688 Likes: 143 Dislikes: 0	The story of Bhuiyan shows that forgiveness, empathy, connection, and kindness are powerful tools for eliminating hatred and creating a merciful world. Bhuiyan survived being shot in the face by a White Supremacist attacker, who claimed to hunt Arabs. As a result of the attack, Bhuiyan not only suffered serious injuries but was also faced with a variety of different struggles. Nevertheless, he decided to forgive his attacker and started a campaign to save him from the death penalty. Ultimately the attacker changed his mind about his racist motives and the use of violence and started to collaborate with <i>Bhuiyan</i> on promoting peace. Regardless of Bhuiyan's efforts, his attacker was sentenced to death, but the positive message of forgiveness, connection, empathy, and kindness remained.

<p>Eva Mozes - Victim of Nazi twin experiments in Auschwitz who forgave all Nazis and became an advocate for forgiveness and peace</p>	<p>Views: 21.085.192 Likes: 732.951 Dislikes: 11.549</p>	<p>The teaching of <i>Mozes'</i> narrative is that forgiveness can be a strong tool for empowering yourself and rising above the pain inflicted by others. <i>Mozes</i> was brought into a Nazi concentration camp (Auschwitz) as a young child where she was subjected to medical twin experiments. Unable to shed the emotional pain of her abuse, she started to fight for justice for the victims of Auschwitz and searched for answers about what happened to her. After talking to a Nazi doctor about her experiences, <i>Mozes</i> decided to forgive all Nazis. The act of forgiveness helped her to move on with her life. She became an advocate for forgiveness and built a museum dedicated to the victims of the Auschwitz twin experiments.</p>
<p>Scilla Elworthy - A peacebuilder who collected effective non-violent strategies for fighting political violence and oppression</p>	<p>Views: 613.818 Likes: 6.140 Dislikes: 731</p>	<p>At the core of <i>Elworthy's</i> narrative is the claim that changing the world around you starts by changing yourself and your response to fear and anger. <i>Elworthy's</i> narrative started when she was a child witnessing the suffering and dying of children on television. She experienced the need to help them and wanted to find an answer to the question of how to deal with extreme violence effectively without using force in return. By educating herself and working as a peacebuilder she was able to collect non-violent methods for dealing with political violence, oppression, and extremism. According to <i>Elworthy</i>, change needs to come from the inside and developing self-knowledge and self-control is key for growing a dialogue for change and eliminating violence.</p>
<p>Mateo Salvatto - Young entrepreneur from Argentina who founded a successful company that helps disabled people</p>	<p>Views: 811 Likes: 35 Dislikes: 0</p>	<p><i>Salvatto's</i> narrative shows that carrying social responsibility and caring for others is not only honourable but can also build the foundation of a success story. <i>Salvatto</i> grew up with deaf people in Argentina where he witnessed the struggles of disabled people. From a young age, he had been interested in technology and participated in a robotics club in high school. Together with other members of this club, he won the International Robotics Championship, which made him realize the power of the technology he had learned.</p>

		<p>Wanting to employ his skills for helping others, Salvatto started to develop an app to help deaf people communicate better. What started as a small-scale project, grew into a successful company that helps disabled people around the world and has won awards for social innovations.</p>
<p>Arno Michaelis – Former White Supremacist engaged in violence, who left the scene and became an activist for non-violence</p>	<p>Views: 70.084 Likes: 108 Dislikes: 18</p>	<p>The narrative of Michaelis illustrates that outgrowing and changing violent extremist attitudes, behaviours, and lifestyles is possible even for someone deeply involved and engaged in a violent extremist narrative or ideology. In his narrative, he describes himself as having been attracted to violence and being a bully since he was a child. After the exposure to White Supremacist music, he entered their scene. Michaelis became a group leader and head singer of a White Supremacist band and committed many violent attacks in the name of his ideology. However, when his daughter was born, he became motivated to leave the scene because he feared that death or prison was going to take him away from her. When a former group member of Michaelis committed a terrorist attack on a Hindu church, it sparked the wish to redress his past.</p> <p>Michaelis offered his support to the victims of the attack and started to work as an activist for peace to prevent radicalization.</p>

<p>Sammy Rangel – Former gang leader who became an activist for personal growth and peace</p>	<p>Views: 301.193 Likes: 6244 Dislikes: 121</p>	<p>Rangel's narrative promotes the message of self-empowerment. His narrative illustrates that despite a difficult past and the experience of suffering, one does not have to be a victim of the past. The past does not define the future and one holds the power to change their own stories. When growing up, Rangel was abused by his mother and decided to run away from home at the age of eleven. Being homeless and on the streets, he started taking drugs, having sex, joining gangs, and acting violently. For the crimes and violent offences, he committed as a gang member, he soon had to go to prison. Through Rangel's involvement in a prison riot, he gained respect in his gang and became a leader. When he was released from prison, he became more violent, which soon led to his return to prison. Through the participation in therapy, he realized the pain he had caused the people around him and decided to reconcile and redress his past.</p>
<p>Ekene Odigwe – Radio host promoting media literacy and fact-checking</p>	<p>Views: 4.976 Likes: 82 Dislikes: 4</p>	<p>Odigwe's narrative highlights the success of the protagonist through responsible behaviour and the importance of media literacy and fact-checking for fighting information manipulation. Through the Nimbo mass clash of 2016, Odigwe witnessed the destructive effects of media manipulation. In his narrative, he talks about growing up without much knowledge of modern media. Only when studying to become a radio moderator did he learn about the media, how to become media literate, and how to decide between true and false information. He used his job at the radio to collect stories, fact-check them, and bring this information to the audience and the authorities to successfully oppose the effects of media corruption.</p>

*(Recorded on 10.03.2020)

2. Potential Contents of Alternative Narratives

As these examples of alternative narratives have already suggested, there is a long list of possible elements/contents of alternative narratives. For instance, messages of self-empowerment, self-emancipation, peace, forgiveness, social responsibility, promotion of positive identities, helping and protecting the community, success, change, etc. In the following sections possible alternative narrative contents are discussed in more detail:

Promote Critical, Rational, and Nuanced Thinking and Media Literacy

a) *Promote nuanced, factual, and reasonable views on issues to eliminate black-and-white thinking.*

An alternative narrative can include content that promotes a nuanced, factual, and reasonable view on issues to eliminate black-and-white thinking. The term black-and-white thinking is used to describe the tendency of people to see things in extremes. An example of black-and-white or binary thinking might be to label people exclusively as either 'good' and 'bad' while disregarding in-between options or ambiguities. In extremist narratives, these labels might be attached to people in accordance with arbitrary characteristics such as race or religion. Black-and-white thinking might reduce psychological barriers to violence and should thus be opposed in the alternative narratives by introducing grey areas (1) (13) (18). By offering insights into grey areas, the willingness to use violence might be reduced, which makes targeting binary thinking an essential part of effective alternative narratives. A variety of different strategies can be employed for the elimination of black and white thinking and promotion of grey areas:

1. A strategy for eliminating black-and-white thinking might be to promote themes of diversity and show that attitudes, identities, and behaviours can be diverse, changeable, unconventional, and unpredictable. Because portraying diversity in alternative narratives creates a heterogeneous and rich worldview, it opposes the concept of binary division and might replace dualistic thinking. Thus, alternative narratives which show that diversity and change are possible and desirable, might promote flexibility and openness in the audience, which can oppose or prevent black and white thinking.

The example of *Bhuiyan's* TedTalk ([8:28 to 10:22](#) and [12:58 to 13:19](#)) illustrates how an alternative narrative might promote diversity, unconventionality, and change. In his narrative, *Bhuiyan* forms a diverse coalition to reach his unconventional goal of saving his attacker from death row, which makes his attacker change his mind about his violent extremist ideology. His narrative leaves no opportunities for using black-and-white categories to judge the situation and promotes themes of connection and change instead.

Another example of a narrative that promotes unconventionality is the story of *Mozes* ([10:00 to 11:23](#) and [13:35 to 14:21](#)). In her narrative, she explains how she dealt with her grievance of being the victim of Nazi experiments in World War II by forgiving her offenders. The portrayal of unconventional or unpredictable solutions or behaviours, as seen in both alternative narratives, might promote thinking outside of the box, considering the situation from new perspectives, breaking open black-and-white thinking patterns and might ultimately help the audience to move beyond rigid categorization.

2. Another strategy for eliminating black-and-white thinking might be for alternative narratives to portray the complexity of a certain situation and/or show that categories do not have to be mutually exclusive. An example of this can be found in the narrative of *Elworthy* presented as a TedTalk ([10:05 to 10:57](#)), in which she discusses why people from Afghanistan join the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda. By discussing the roots of a problem, issue, or situation, it becomes more complex and nuanced, making it difficult to use black-and-white thinking for judging a situation. Her narrative also illustrates that categories are not mutually exclusive and that different things can be true at the same time. In another sequence of her narrative video, *Elworthy* ([7:18 to 8:29](#)) explains that anger, while damaging in some situations, might be useful in others. Thus, labelling anger as either 'good' or 'bad' becomes impossible. Showing that mutually exclusive categories are not sufficient in describing something, in this case, anger, highlights the limitations of binary thinking and points out the necessity of moving beyond those categories.

3. Alternative narratives can also target binary thinking by promoting an understanding of people's cognition and tendencies to apply mutually exclusive and/or extreme categories. This can be achieved by for example discussing in the alternative narrative why a character engaged in black-and-white thinking. An understanding of the character's reasons for employing black-and-white categorization should be promoted without legitimizing it.

The narrative of *Michaelis* ([01:10 to 02:09](#)) provides an example of how an understanding can be promoted without justifying it. The narrative presents a protagonist who was a White Supremacist and used his racist ideology to justify his violent behaviour. During the narrative, he reflects on his thoughts and behaviours and states that it was a strategy of him to keep him numb enough and flee from the confrontation with his issues. Thus, the narrative showed that the racist and binary attitudes were the result of personal problems and insufficiencies. Increasing the understanding of the psychology behind binary thinking might help the audience to reflect on their intentions behind their thoughts and actions.

a) *Promote critical thinking.*

Black-and-white or binary thinking cannot only be *replaced* and resolved, as was illustrated above, but it can also be countered.

1. A strategy for countering black-and-white thinking might be to point out incongruences and flaws in these thinking patterns. An example of this can be found in the narrative of *Bhuiyan* ([06:54 to 07:33](#)), in which the limitations and flaws of the binary categorization according to racist characteristics by one of the characters is presented. In his narrative, it is shown that *Bhuiyan's* attacker who claimed to hunt Arabs because of his racist motives, did not shoot one Middle Eastern person but only a South Asian man. By showing that the attacker was unable to distinguish between Arabs and South Asians, his narrative proves that distinguishing people based on race is not only morally wrong but also impossible and pointless. Highlighting the flaws of binary categorization might inspire the audience to think more critically about these patterns in the future.

2. Another strategy for countering binary patterns might be the highlighting and contrasting of discrepancies between these thinking patterns and real-world experiences, which is exemplified in the narrative of *Ebrahim* ([04:50 to 05:53](#)). The protagonist in this narrative had negative preconceptions about people from the Jewish and gay communities. Positive personal experiences, such as befriending a Jewish child or working with gay people, which clashed with his previous beliefs, made him change his thinking. By showing that binary thinking patterns are not in line with real-life experiences, alternative narratives might cause the audience to think more critically about their preconceptions and interactions with other people.

b) *Promote critical information consumption and media literacy.*

During their lifetime, individuals might be confronted with much false information and misleading narratives. Thus, individuals do not only need to acquire the skill of critically evaluating black-and-white or binary patterns, but they also need to learn how to evaluate and question a wide range of information (46). Alternative narratives can facilitate these processes by promoting media literacy and highlighting its importance, drawing awareness to the issue of media manipulation, and introducing techniques that the audience can use to become a more critical information consumer. The narrative of *Odigwe* ([00:00 to 09:08](#)) is an example of a narrative that promotes information literacy and fact-checking. His narrative shows the destructive consequences of media manipulation and how he used fact-checking and responsible media reporting to deescalate a conflict caused by false information. Thus, it highlights the importance of the issue while simultaneously offering solutions.

Promote Individual Empowerment

a) Show individual empowerment.

The content of alternative narratives can also focus on empowering the audience. One way of promoting the empowerment of the audience is to show the self-empowerment and personal growth of the protagonist in the alternative narrative. The protagonist can be shown to overcome challenges and hardships through strength, work, and commitment to non-violent means instead of passively accepting a victimhood position or turning violent. Seeing the protagonist succeed might increase the audience's beliefs in their ability to overcome their own challenges in non-violent ways. Additionally, presenting different strategies that the protagonists apply for addressing their hardships might inspire the audience to use similar strategies for their situations. All of the eight alternative narrative videos included in this guide can serve as examples for this point because they all include an element of growth and self-empowerment.

b) Validate the experience of grievances before showing solutions.

Similarly to violent extremist narratives, the starting point of the alternative narratives can be a grievance or hardship as experienced by the protagonist. By acknowledging and validating the experiences of various grievances in the alternative narratives, they might legitimize the experience of grievances in general and contribute to an open conversation about them (13) (25). If the alternative narratives also show the negative emotional experiences of the protagonists concerning their grievances, the audience might not only feel that their grievances are valid but might also feel affirmed in their emotional experiences.

The grievances that can be portrayed in the alternative narratives might include personal and/or other's grievances. Personal grievances result from wrongs or hardships experienced by the protagonists themselves. Examples can be the experience of physical, emotional, or sexual violence within the family, as is shown in the narrative of *Rangel* ([00:16 to 07:25](#)). Other personal grievances might include being the victim of political oppression (see *Mozes* [00:21 to 05:26](#)), being the victim of a violent extremist attack (see *Bhuiyan* [01:37 to 02:46](#)), or experiencing personal failure or insufficiencies (see *Michaelis* [05:48 to 06:20](#)). In contrast to personal grievances, others' grievances describe grievances of another group that are unrelated to the protagonists' hardships, but that the protagonist empathizes with. Here the protagonist might witness the suffering of another group and experience the wish to help them. Examples of protagonists adopting other's grievances can be found in the narratives of *Salvatto* ([15:05 to 16:48](#)) and *Elworthy* ([01:03 to 01:51](#)).

These main grievances as experienced by the protagonists might be shown to be accompanied by a variety of different hardships. These more minor hardships might be more relatable to the audience because they more closely resemble their everyday experiences. Thus, acknowledging the importance of smaller hardships or grievances in addition to the main ones might help the audience to feel validated about a variety of their hardships and/or grievances. An example of an accompanying hardship could be the mistreatment by or missing support of institutions following the experience of the initial grievance. This is exemplified by the narrative of *Bhuiyan* ([06:38 to 06:51](#)).

c) *Overcome the hardships.*

Next to an acknowledgement of the grievances, the alternative narratives might feature some of the following non-violent and law-conforming strategies used by the protagonists to overcome their hardships:

1. One possible strategy that might be shown to be employed by the protagonist to empower themselves and to address their grievance, is focusing on the positives of their hardships. Protagonists might be shown to reframe their negative experiences into opportunities for growth, as is illustrated by the narrative of *Rangel* ([19:30 to 20:56](#)). The protagonist of this narrative uses his experiences of abuse and violence as an opportunity for self-empowerment and helps people in similar situations by telling his story. Instead of portraying him as a victim, the narrative shows that survivors of abuse are resilient, compassionate and might change the world for the better. Another example is the narrative of *Bhuiyan* ([01:39 to 01:57](#) and [12:29 to 12:48](#)), in which the protagonist sees the attack on his life as a possibility to work towards a more empathetic, forgiving, and merciful world, by forgiving his offender. This example shows that not only the focus on the positives or growth but also forgiveness can be a strategy for dealing with grievances peacefully.
2. Another strategy that might be presented in the alternative narratives might be the active search for and finding of answers to questions related to the protagonist's grievances. The narratives might show that understanding their problems can empower the protagonists and enable them to take further action. In the narrative of *Elworthy* ([00:15 to 01:57](#)), the protagonist wants to prevent political violence and oppression without using force in return. Actively searching for answers and seeking education helps her to answer her question and in turn enables her to address her grievance.
3. An additional strategy illustrated in alternative narratives could be the reliance on religious faith, as is presented in the TV report version of *Bhuiyan's* narrative ([05:05 to 05:54](#)). It shows that the protagonist's Muslim faith helped him to gain the strength for surviving the violent attack.

4. Alternative narratives can also highlight intra- or interpersonal resources that the protagonists rely on or use to overcome their grievances and empower themselves. These might include seeking external support, receiving formal training, or building on other intrapersonal resources. The narrative of *Elworthy* ([01:03 to 1:57](#)) highlights that the protagonist received support from her parents and partook in training courses and formal education for learning how to prevent political violence peacefully. These resources were shown to bring her closer to the goal of fighting oppression and violence. Furthermore, her narrative highlights the importance of intrapersonal resources and self-knowledge ([03:42 to 04:34](#)), by discussing that the own response to violence is the key to fighting oppression. The presented strategies can serve as inspiration for non-violent ways in which the protagonist might be shown to empower themselves and to address their grievances. However, this list is non-exhaustive and there are many other possible strategies for addressing grievances that can be presented in the alternative narratives.

5. In addition to presenting strategies for achieving personal growth and empowerment, alternative narratives might show that overcoming hardships in non-violent manners is desirable, by highlighting the positive outcomes and benefits for the protagonists. Narratives might thus show that the protagonists gain a sense of power and pride from overcoming their challenges in a non-violent way. Others might show that they receive public recognition and respect. An example of a narrative in which the protagonist becomes successful and receives public recognition because of his efforts for the community, is the story of Salvatto ([17:49 to 18:36](#)). The protagonist of this narrative received different awards and public recognition for creating an app to support the communication of disabled people. Furthermore, the narrative highlights that he was able to grow a successful company out of his activism.

An alternative narrative might also show that activism for a good cause can lead to an increased sense of belonging, as was the case in the narrative of *Mozes* ([36:55 to 37:54](#)). Her narrative illustrated that, through her grievances and fight for justice for the victims of the twin experiments in Auschwitz during WWII, she became an important and valued member of the community. If alternative narratives highlight the benefits of actively and non-violently addressing grievances, the audience might feel motivated to become active themselves and inspired to use similar strategies. In conclusion, alternative narratives might empower the audience by validating their experiences and emotions and encouraging them to talk about them and to take peaceful actions.

Demonstrate Legitimate and Effective Alternatives to Violence

a) *Highlight democratic influence.*

An important component of alternative narratives is to present peaceful, humanitarian, and legal strategies for exerting a democratic influence (18) (25). While the strategies presented in the last section are aimed at hardships and grievances on a personal level, alternative narratives can also present strategies that help address the presented grievances on a political, community, or societal level. Thus, alternative narratives can show the effectiveness of non-violent means for achieving large scale change.

Two narratives that illustrate how the protagonists address their grievances on a societal level to change the root cause of their grievance on a larger scale are the stories of *Michaelis* ([10:01 to 10:34](#)) and *Bhuiyan* ([12:42 to 13:20](#)). At the end of his narrative, *Michaelis* explains that he founded a solution-driven service-learning program to help people address their grievances and the issues they are passionate about to prevent racially motivated hate and violence. Similarly to this narrative, *Bhuiyan's* narrative shows that the protagonist founded a non-profit organization to fight hatred and ignorance.

Because these narratives show that the societal root cause of the protagonist's grievances can be addressed through different non-violent strategies and activism, they highlight the communal, democratic, and public power that each individual holds. By seeing the protagonists in the narratives succeed in their missions to address their grievances on a community, societal, or political level, the audience might feel inspired and empowered to tap into their power of exerting democratic influence themselves.

b) *Increase confidence in the ability to exert political control and achieve change.*

Alternative narratives can help the audience to increase their confidence in their ability to exert democratic influence and achieve large scale change by targeting their beliefs that their actions can impact communal, societal, and/or political processes. As a result, the audience might feel like engaging in civic duties is worthwhile (political self-efficacy). Alternative narratives might achieve this by facilitating the perception of effectiveness and legitimacy of the non-violent strategies for exerting a democratic influence (25).

In her narrative, *Elworthy* ([04:30 to 05:40](#) and [11:00 to 12:59](#)), established the effectiveness of peaceful resistance by giving examples of a situation in which peaceful behaviour was potent in de-escalating a potentially violent situation and changing political structures. She refers to examples of well-known situations and countries in which non-violent resistance was successfully employed to transform an oppressive system into a democracy.

The ability to achieve large scale change through the adoption of social responsibility is illustrated in the narrative of *Salvatto* ([44:30 to 45:40](#)).

Even though the protagonist of this narrative had few resources to help him reach his goal of helping people with disability communicate better through his app, he was shown to be successful in his mission. Because this narrative highlights the ordinariness of the protagonist, it conveys that everyone regardless of their situation can achieve the change they desire. By showing that achieving large scale change is possible, the audience might feel less hopeless and more confident about changing their grievances for the better. Pointing out the effectiveness of non-violent strategies for achieving this change, might inspire people to use similar strategies when attempting to address their issues.

c) *Identify violence as a negative strategy.*

While alternative narratives mainly focus on presenting peaceful and law-conforming methods for addressing grievances, exerting democratic influence, and achieving change, they can additionally portray violence as a negative, harmful, unattractive, and ineffective strategy. For example, the ineffectiveness of violence for addressing grievances is highlighted in the narratives of *Bhuiyan* ([00:47 to 01:34](#)) and *Elworthy* ([07:53 to 08:19](#)). Alternative narratives might also highlight the harm that violence has caused the victims, as is the case in the narrative of *Ebrahim* ([08:19 to 08:51](#)). By focusing on the experience of the victims of terrorism in his narrative, the hurt that is caused by the violence is brought to the fore.

Alternative narratives can also focus on the negative consequences or harm of engagement in violence for the perpetrator. Two examples of narratives in which the protagonist has acted violently in their past are the narratives of *Michaelis* ([06:38 to 06:50](#)) and *Rangel* ([14:28 to 15:27](#)). The negative consequences of the protagonist's engagement in violence, which were highlighted in these narratives, included feeling insignificant, experiencing pain, anger, and desperation, and being faced with death and/or prison. In addition to highlighting the negatives for the perpetrator themselves, *Michaelis* ([07:44 to 08:32](#)) and *Rangel* ([15:54 to 19:21](#)) also went through a process in which they realized the harm they had done to their victims. The portrayal of the ineffectiveness and negatives of engagement in violence in the alternative narratives might discourage the audience from employing violence as a strategy for addressing their grievances, exerting influence, and achieving change in their personal lives.

Promote Common Non-Divisive Identities

a) *Promote the perception of common humanity.* Violent extremist narratives commonly apply identarian division to create an 'us' versus 'them' perception. To dissolve or replace this identarian division, alternative narratives can re-categorize individuals into common groups. Dissolving 'us' versus 'them' thinking might eliminate the feeling of threat, the possibility of assigning blame, and the need to employ violence as a means for protecting oneself (13) (25) (28).

Different methods for dissolving group-based thinking and promoting the perception of common humanity can be employed in the alternative narratives. For example, alternative narratives can promote themes of forgiveness, empathy, mutual respect, acceptance of differences, learning from one another, working together, supporting others, connecting with others, and taking social responsibility regardless of arbitrary differences. These themes feed the audience's perception of connection over separation and common humanity over group-based thinking. By acknowledging the value and universal rights of every person regardless of their origin, race, gender, religion, culture, or ethnic background, alternative narratives also support the human rights framework. Examples of alternative narratives in which connection to other people regardless of differences in ethnicity, religion, or sexuality is promoted can be found in the narratives of *Ebrahim* ([05:28 to 07:02](#)), *Bhuiyan* ([11:06 to 14:07](#)) and *Elworthy* ([08:07 to 08:31](#)).

b) *Dissolve group-based thinking.* Strategies for dissolving 'us' versus 'them' thinking in alternative narratives can be diverse. They might try to humanize the subjects of violent extremist narratives or people from the out-group (18), to increase the perception of empathy and eliminate the perception of threat. This can be achieved by focusing on the vulnerable aspects of these populations and highlighting their position as victims. Two examples of alternative narratives, in which the perspective of the victims of violent extremism is highlighted, are the stories of *Bhuiyan* ([01:37 to 02:44](#)) and *Ebrahim* ([08:19 to 08:34](#)). *Bhuiyan's* narrative features a protagonist, who was a victim of a violent racist attack and puts the role as a victim in the foreground. In the narrative of *Ebrahim*, the protagonist was not a victim of terrorism but states that he wants to help the victims of terrorism by speaking out against violence. These two examples show that alternative narratives can highlight the victim's perspective and promote empathy with the subjects of violent extremist narratives whether the protagonist is part of the victim population or not.

c) *Highlight similarities and commonalities between in- and out-group members.* Alternative narratives might also dissolve group-based thinking by highlighting similarities *and* commonalities between people of different groups, as was exemplified in the narrative of *Ebrahim* ([01:31 to 01:38](#)). One of the main messages of his narrative is that people should take time to interact with one another to realize that they want the same things out of life. A connecting factor between people can also be a common threat. For example, in his narrative, *Bhuiyan* ([14:10 to 15:04](#)) identifies human suffering as a common enemy that humanity must fight together.

d) *Show collaboration between opposed group members.* Other strategies for dissolving group-based thinking might be to show that the characters in the alternative narrative who might belong to opposing groups can ultimately join forces, work together, and/or change who they identify as. This was illustrated in the narrative of *Michaelis* ([08:20 to 11:14](#)), in which the protagonist turned from being a violent racist, to fighting extremism and racism and supporting people who he had perceived as the enemy in his past. A similar example is the narrative of *Bhuiyan* ([09:48 to 10:07](#)) in which the victim of a violent racist attack and the attacker overcome their differences, get to know each other and work together on a common goal. The promotion of a common humanity perception and the elimination of 'us' versus 'them' thinking can help the audience feel less threatened by the out-group and makes it harder for them to act violently towards these groups.

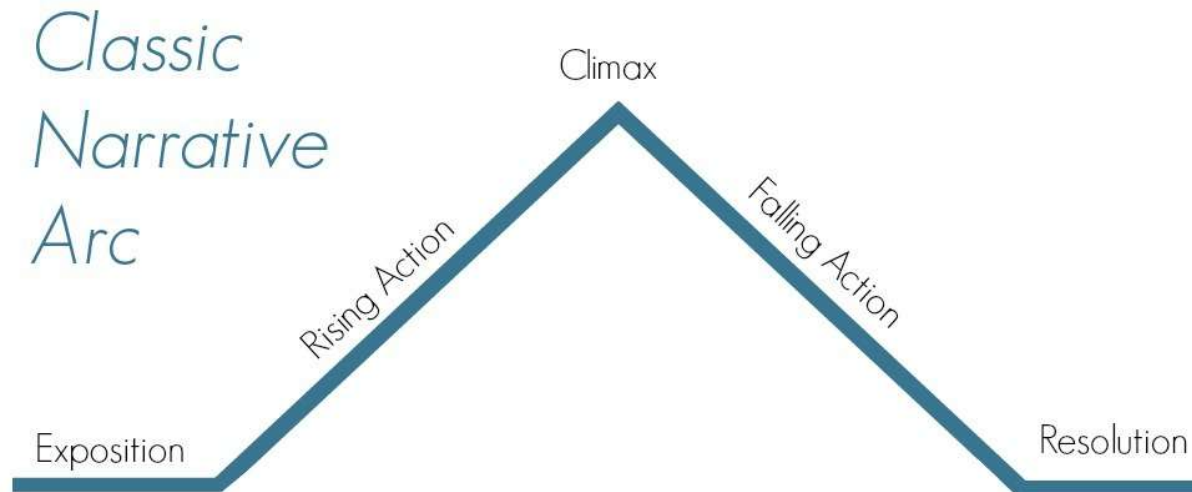
The next chapter to the guide will move away from possible contents, to investigate a possible way to structure alternative narratives.

Summary – Possible Contents of Alternative Narratives

- In this section, four main categories of possible contents of alternative narratives, which might be effective in replacing the attractiveness of violent extremist narratives, were introduced.
- Alternative narratives can focus their content on eliminating black-and-white thinking by promoting critical, rational, and nuanced thinking, media literacy, and critical information consumption.
- They can also aim their content at promoting individual empowerment by presenting the empowerment of the protagonist, validating the audience's experience of grievances, and introducing effective non-violent strategies for addressing the hardships.
- The presented strategies should not only be shown to help the protagonist overcome their grievances on a personal level but also to achieve larger scale communal, societal, or political change and exert democratic influence through peaceful efforts. This might increase the audience's confidence to exert political control and achieve large scale change themselves.
- Lastly, alternative narratives content can dissolve an identitarian division and promote common non-divisive identities by highlighting similarities between people and a common humanity perception.
- In conclusion, the main aim of alternative narrative content is to empower, inspire, and motivate the audience to work together on addressing grievances peacefully on all levels.

Possible Structure of Alternative Narratives

There are many ways to organize and present a narrative. Narrative sequences might be defined by the temporal order of the included events, which form the plotline. However, the temporal order can be broken up for dramatic effects such as foreshadowing or surprising. The content creator must choose a structure that is suitable for the previously mentioned defining features, possible content elements, and goal of a narrative. A classical choice is a three-act narrative (Aristotle), which divides a story into a beginning or set-up, a middle or conflict, and an end or resolution. Another classical choice is the or the five-act structure of Freytag, who separates the narrative into setup, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution stage (47).



Cheryl Brumley's 'Stepping out of the academic box'
Geographical Society Annual Conference, 2014

To date, the core categories used to divide a visual narrative are called the establisher, initial, prolongation, peak, and release (48), which is very similar to Freytag's five-act structure. The scene of the narrative is set up in the establisher, while the tension of the narrative arc is initiated in the initial stage. The medial state of extension is found in the prolongation and the height of tension is titled the peak. Finally, the release of tension is described as the in the release part (47) (48).

The classic narrative arc is only one possible way of constructing a narrative. Other forms of structuring visual narratives are described by various theories of narratives: Japanese theatre (49), Theory of Japanese discourse (50), Story Grammars (51) (52) (53) (54), Discourse Theory (55) or American Psychological Association (APA) formatting. In this section, the construction of an alternative narrative arc according to the classical narrative arc is illustrated (48). Keep in mind that the classical narrative arc is only one possible narrative structure to be used for alternative narratives and that other structures might be just as appealing or effective. As the classical narrative arc constitutes five elements, the structure of an alternative narrative will be described in five steps in the following.

1. Establisher

The establisher stage focuses on setting the stage and providing background information for the development of the narrative. Thus, the alternative narrative might start by introducing the messenger and/or protagonist, other characters, and the setting. Additionally, the narrative might introduce the main conflict of the narrative, by presenting a specific personal or other's grievance. In-group and out-group division according to arbitrary characteristics such as race, religion, or binary thinking patterns concerning violence and/or extremism, might also be presented as a source of conflict or resentment.

2. Initial

It is common to present a key trigger that escalates the conflict in the initial element of a narrative, which initiates the tension of the arc. In an alternative narrative, this might be achieved by showing the protagonist's initial reaction to the presented conflict or grievance and/or their initial attempts to resolve it. The protagonist's reactions can be diverse and might either be peaceful and law-conform or angry and violent. Thus, the protagonist might be shown to react with compassion, empathy, optimism, or by interpreting the grievance as an opportunity for growth and change. Contrarily, they might also be shown to experience feelings of anger, assign blame, or use violence as an attempt to solve the conflict.

3. Prolongation and Peak

In the prolongation stage, the medial state of extension, the protagonist's process and struggles of overcoming their grievances might be elaborated on. The goal of the alternative narrative at this stage might be to introduce ways and strategies that the protagonist applies to deal with their grievance. If the protagonist's initial reaction was angry or violent, the alternative narrative describes how they learned to reject violence and/or extremism before retreating to peaceful strategies. Negative consequences of engaging in violence or ineffectiveness of violence for achieving change might be highlighted at this point. The alternative narrative might climax at the point where the protagonist discovers and/or commits to the peaceful means for addressing their grievances. During the initial, prolongation, and peak stages, group-based and binary thinking might be addressed, dissolved, or restructured to favour the perception of a nuanced, factual, and reasonable view on issues and common humanity.

4. Release

The release marks the end of the narrative in which the outcome of the situation/conflict becomes apparent. An alternative narrative can present the resolution of the conflict/grievance with the help of non-violent strategies in the release stage. The final element of an alternative narrative might point out how the events of the story have changed the situation and/or the protagonist for the better and present the fruits of the protagonist's toils. Commonly, the learnings/teachings from the narrative are summarized, explicitly stated, and might include an appeal to the audience.

This alternative message might include elements of forgiveness, empathy, mutual respect, acceptance, connection, common humanity, social responsibility, self-empowerment, and commitment to non-violence. In the final part, some alternative narratives might also focus on the achievements, accomplishments, or public recognition that the protagonist received concerning their activism and contributions to society.

5. Structure of Alternative Narratives - Example

This section illustrates how an alternative narrative that follows the five stages of the classical narrative arc can look like at the example alternative narrative video (TED Talk) of [Bhuiyan](#).

a) *Establisher*. The alternative narrative video starts with *Bhuiyan* addressing the audience and asking them what they would do if they were shot by a stranger for no apparent reason and survived. By directly addressing the audience, *Bhuiyan* is introducing the situation, conflict, and grievance and engages the audience emotionally because they are asked to put themselves in the position. After the audience answered with a show of hands, he explains that reacting with revenge and anger towards this conflict is not helpful because it causes more harm. Thus, his narrative clearly defines and introduces the main conflict from the start, without giving any details about the protagonist, characters, or setting yet.

Bhuiyan introduces these aspects by stating that he had experienced being the victim of a violent extremist attack and starts to describe his life story. The background of the protagonist/messenger is established when he talks about having been a pilot in Bangladesh, who immigrated to the United States of America to pursue higher education and follow the American dream. Next, he states that soon his American dream turned into an American nightmare, indicating that a description of his grievance is going to follow. He describes dramatically, emotionally, and in detail how the attack took place. Even though this aspect of the narrative already introduces tension, it is still part of the establisher stage because it provides information about the main conflict, grievance, and setting of the narrative.

b) *Initial*. The initial stage of this narrative starts once the immediate attack situation is over and the protagonist is transported to a hospital, where he woke up to the voice of a nurse, where the protagonist's initial reaction towards the attack became apparent. He describes waking up in the hospital as one of the most beautiful moments of his life because he feels thankful to have survived. While the initial element in this narrative is short, it shows that the protagonist faces the conflict peacefully and with compassion.

c) *Prolongation*. The prolongation stage, which elaborates on the struggles of overcoming the grievances, starts when *Bhuiyan* states that the joy of surviving did not last long. In this phase of the narrative, which he describes as the second part of his American nightmare, the protagonist faces a variety of problems because of the attack. He describes losing sight in one eye, his home, his job, his fiancé, and the feeling of security and struggling with debt from the medical bills and the declining health of his father.

The narrative slowly moves towards the peak when *Bhuiyan* describes the actions he took to deal with his grievance. He first describes the intentions and background of his attacker, who was sentenced to death, in more detail, to then introduce the campaign he started to save the life of his attacker. To prevent violence and the killing of humans, in particular his attacker, the protagonist collaborated with several institutions and companies and got in touch with his attacker himself. Thus, the prolongation element includes the description of the protagonist's struggles and peaceful efforts to save human lives and promote peace.

d) *Peak*. The peak of the narrative is reached when *Bhuiyan's* tells that his attacker changed his mind about his racist motives and the use of violence and started to cooperate with the protagonist on promoting peace. According to *Bhuiyan*, his attacker was touched by the efforts and the diverse collation *Bhuiyan* formed to save him from the death penalty. The attacker thanked *Bhuiyan* and the Muslim community for their support, stated that *Bhuiyan's* message of forgiveness has helped him to become a better and more content person, and condemned his acts of violence. The peak of this narrative describes the point at which both parties/characters commit to non-violence.

e) *Release*. In the release stage, the outcome of the situation becomes apparent. Regardless of *Bhuiyan's* efforts, his attacker was sentenced to death. However, the positive message of forgiveness remains. Before his execution, the attacker publicly called out for an end to hatred and violence.

In the final part of the narrative, *Bhuiyan* summarizes the teachings of this story to the main message. He speaks out for forgiveness, connection, empathy, and kindness and links this message back to the audience by stating that the challenges in everyday life can be overcome if everyone was a little more kind, empathetic, and forgiving. Furthermore, he identifies ignorance and hate as the common enemy, which all humans must fight together. The appeal to the audience is followed by a quote of Mahatma Gandhi, that he uses to summarize his story and his loss again, and to highlight that the attack helped him to see the possibility of a more peaceful and empathetic world.

Lastly, the narrative highlights how the life of the protagonist has changed through the events of the narrative. Because he was a victim of a violent racist attack, he became an activist for peace and dedicated his life to his non-profit organization 'World Without Hate' to prevent ignorance, violence, and hatred, and to promote connection and peace.

At the end of the narrative, he addresses the audience the last time by stating that he believes that everyone wants a more just and forgiving world and that this change starts with every single person taking action themselves to help others. Finally, he closes the speech with a quote of the German theologian Martin Luther.

The example of *Bhuiyan's* alternative narrative shows that while some narrative stages or elements might be stretched, pronounced, or shortened, the general five-stage structure of the classical narrative arc can be identified. This structure creates an arc of tension that might contribute to the appeal and potential effectiveness of the alternative narrative. However, the classical narrative arc is only one possible way of structuring an alternative narrative and other structures might be just as appealing or effective as this one.

Summary – Possible Structure of Alternative Narratives

- The classical narrative arc or the five-act structure as one possible way to structure an alternative narrative, that might contribute to the appeal and potential effectiveness of alternative narratives. According to the five-act structure of visual narratives, the arc of tension is separated into five elements: establisher, initial, prolongation, peak, and release.
- In the establisher stage, background information is provided, and characters and their grievances, which serve as a source of conflict, are introduced.
- The initial element starts when a key trigger that escalates the conflict is introduced. The alternative narratives present the protagonist's initial emotional and behavioural reaction towards the grievance and their initial attempts to resolve it, which might be either peaceful or violent.
- The medial state of extension or prolongation shows the protagonist's struggle of overcoming their grievances by using a variety of different strategies.
- An alternative narrative that follows the five-act structure reaches the peak of tension when the protagonist discovers and/or commits to non-violent strategies for addressing their grievances.
- The release or the end of the narrative is marked by the presentation of the outcome of the conflict. The protagonist was able to overcome their grievance with the help of non-violent strategies. The fruits of the protagonist's toils might be presented here and the learnings from the story are summarized including elements of forgiveness, empathy, mutual respect, acceptance, connection, social responsibility, self-empowerment, and commitment to non-violence.

4 Afterword

Alternative narratives distributed via social media might be a viable means for violent extremism prevention. This guide outlined the most important aspects needed to identify and assess, as well as possibly develop, online alternative narratives for a diversity of target audiences. While this guide focuses on online dissemination, it is important to also highlight that combining online and offline efforts might still be the most potent approach to violent extremism prevention. However, the creation of online campaigns might still be a good starting point, because it requires much fewer resources and no direct access to the local target communities. Creating or promoting alternative narratives online is possible for everyone because most platforms are publicly accessible to anyone. In addition to that, the use of social media might be attractive to and addresses the communication preferences of young people specifically. So, utilizing the nature of these social media could facilitate youth engagement and participation in the online campaigns, which might potentially promote offline political participation at a later stage.

Many narratives which fulfill the criteria of effective alternative narratives already exist on social media platforms such as YouTube. They can be utilized, promoted, and directed to vulnerable target audiences to prevent the adoption of violent extremism. Identifying and utilizing existing narratives and encouraging youth creators rather than drafting an alternative narrative artificially, builds onto an organic and authentic process, that might boost the trustworthiness and persuasiveness of the message. In this guide, alternative narratives have been discussed from the perspective of violent extremism prevention. However, due to their positive nature, presented alternative narratives are valuable in their own right beside the preventive benefits. Thus, it is desirable to identify existing body of alternative narratives on social media add to it and promote these narratives among youth.



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