Radicalisation: The Battle of Narratives and Counter-narratives

Synopsis

Fighting against extremist narratives is tricky as traditional warfare cannot offer any success. Alternative counter-narratives are promoted by governments and policy advocacy institutes in this regard. In order to better design counter-narrative strategies, a strong coordination among various stakeholders is needed.

Introduction

The concept of narratives and counter-narratives is now being discussed in the field of extremism and countering violent extremism. What do actually narratives and counter-narrative mean and how are they disseminated? Counter-narratives are considered as important tools to combat terrorist narratives. The need to counter terrorist narratives seems more relevant now as the ISIS has been heavily concentrating on internet outlets especially social networking sites as sophisticated platforms to disseminate their propaganda and narratives.

Narrative and how it is spread

Narratives are stories, visuals, or ideologies that are distributed among people to justify violence or to provoke them to commit violence, in order to achieve certain goals. The narrative has a global presence due to recent huge increase in internet users especially in social networking sites. Narratives are based on ideologies which in turn arise from culture, religion, politics, and society and spread against the western ideologies like democracy, capitalism and consumerism. Narratives are responsive to the emerging situation worldwide and transform with time and place to gain wider reach and formality.

The objectives of narratives are to recruit people by misleading and confusing them. Narratives are spread to defame and break-down the establishment so that people lose their trust on them and switch to alternative radical means.

What are the methods that are followed to spread narratives? Due to recent technological revolution, narratives are spread mainly online. ISIS has championed in the area. It circulates graphic propaganda videos where they call global Muslims to join Jihad and so-called caliphate. Local and international grievances are publicized through videos. In Bangladesh, the activists of Hijb-ut-Tahrir are often seen to distribute leaflets that contain contents against the western democracy and values. Religious gatherings like Jumma prayer, waj (Islamic gathering where teachings of Islam are discussed by Islamic scholars), etc are the critical places where hate-speeches and communal rhetoric are discussed. In Bangladesh, the discussions within female study circles are believed to be the reasons behind female radicalisation which is revealed in recent large number of arrests of female militants. Narratives may also spread through human movement. Workers from developing countries go to Middle Eastern countries for jobs; they get exposed to more conservative practices of Islam there and get in touch with different religious leaders. This makes them more susceptible to radicalisation and indoctrination abroad. Once they return home, they take back those ideologies with them and further disseminate extremist narratives to their countrymen.

It is believed that the success of ISIS to attract a large number of foreign fighters has been possible due to its extensive social media campaign. The reach of the recruiting effort has been multiplied by a great number of activists on social media with 24-hour online presence. Young generation's exposure to online outlets makes them more vulnerable to radicalisation.

Counter-narrative and how it should be developed

Governments worldwide are trying to make counter-terrorism strategy. One component of this strategy is developing counter-narratives which will act as antithetical to extremist narratives. Positive narratives are one kind where contents are shared that promote peace, humanity, and tolerance. For example, a simple story is sometimes very powerful to inspire humanity and tolerance. Religious counter-narratives are spread to counter religious extremist narratives in which alternative explanations of the verses from Quran and Hadith are disseminated. Stories with humor and sarcasm can also play an important role to fight against extremist narratives.

Counter-narrative programs aim at challenging extremist messages and attempt to discredit them, pointing out logical fallacies and factual incorrectness—using tools such as humor or an appeal to higher values.

While making counter-narratives there should be coordination between content creators, social media companies, and private sector. If not designed properly, counter-narratives may backfire. Think-tanks and institutes working in the field should conduct or utilize in-depth research on the interests and behaviors of target audiences.

Counter-narratives should be structured keeping in mind the differences of target audiences. Online campaigns are not adequate. It should be implemented along with offline campaigns or events.

Counter-narrative strategy for Bangladesh

Counter-narrative development should be multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral. It should have both online and offline components targeting people from all walks of life. Counter-narratives should be structured to fit to the local context, culture and target audience. For this, while making policies, the opinions from people of grass-roots should be incorporated. Development of counter narratives in Bangladesh should recognize the challenges between adapting Islam to local cultures and contexts versus following a form of Islam heavily influenced by interpretations within different parts of the world. Organizations working on counter narratives should consider providing platforms for frank and open discussions on issues of interest to the community. Family and familial ties are important in the context of Bangladesh, and persuasive counter narratives can be developed through family relationships. Counter narratives should be formed and delivered in a way that will improve people's tolerance and respect for ethnic and religious minorities, and treatment of women in the society. Identifying credible messengers are important for countering the appeal of psychological and emotional factors for individuals to join violent extremism. Countering narratives should also be developed keeping the diaspora communities of Bangladesh in mind. There should be a 360 degree approach to disseminating counter-narrative messages by engaging all stakeholders involved from various dimensions.

Conclusion

Creating online counter-narratives is now being considered as important tool to fight against terrorist propaganda but there still remains both a lack of understanding of how this would occur, and how such narratives could be effectively disseminated. So the challenge persists on how effectively counter-narratives are made to counter extremism worldwide.

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