Targeting vulnerable audiences to radicalism and extremism in Europe: the approach from the "ReThink: Before Act" project

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Abstract:
Using media innovation as tool to enhance inclusion has been one of cornerstones of the "**ReThink Before Act**" project, particularly, by promoting alterative narratives to Far-right extremism and Islamic extremism in European countries. Media can support and leverage democracies, but it can also deteriorate and even undermine democracies, as recent History has been demonstrating – again.

Aligned to the theme societal innovations, the "**ReThink Before Act: Alternative Narratives to Violent Extremism**" project represents an innovative initiative in the European context, by producing and disseminating seven communication campaigns, with a strong focus on video production and social media dissemination, plus organizing local events with targeted communities.

Preventing **vulnerable audiences** from starting a process of radicalization by offering resilience and critical thinking mechanisms is the main objective of this project, which also aims to convince those already engaged within a process of radicalization to abandon it or dissuade them from going further by providing an alternative narrative that deconstructs extremist rhetoric.

Funded by the Internal Security Fund Police (ISFP) Program of the European Union, the ReThink project is leaded by Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias (Portugal), in partnership with the University of Uppsala (Sweden) and the ONGs Cesie (Italy), CAPRI (France), Patrir (Romania) and Subjective Values Foundation (Hungary). This initiative started in November 2018, and it will be concluded until October 2020.

The ReThink project gathered a transdisciplinary task-force, composed by communication strategists and activists, communication science researchers, storytellers, visual artists, designers and social media experts from Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias (ULHT), with support from all the other partners.

To start, the project team started by conducting a literature review on communication campaigns and case studies related with Far-Right Extremism and Islamic Extremism, since five of the seven campaigns specifically addressed these issues. The communication strategy briefings for each one of the seven campaigns took these findings into account, to refine the scope which was already defined in the plan. The campaigns strategy and followed the GAMMMA+ model (RAN, 2017), namely, for definition of Goals, Audience, Message, Messenger, Media and Action.

The project kick-off meeting was held 26 and 27 November 2018, at ULHT, Lisbon, with representatives of all partners, plus external invited guests. After the kick-off meeting, a multidisciplinary team of filmmakers, photographers, designers and web designers from ULHT was brought together for this special endeavor. Since the main content for each campaign is a package of short films (3 to 6 films per each), the decision was to assign the responsibility of the creative concept and overall development of these videos to six director-scriptwriters from ULHT, from the Cinema and Animation departments who are also researchers at the university's Centre for Research in Applied Communication, Culture, and New Technologies (CICANT).

The project also has on-board four professors from the photography department, as well as two

sound design specialists who are lecturers at university. The design team was first supervised by professors in this department, who have identified students to participate in this project: one of the design graduate student would take over the graphics design for six of the seven campaigns. Finally, for website development, to simplify and streamline the process, the decision was to assign this task to ULHT web communication department. The designer and web designers also working jointly for the production of the website and social media banners and other visual materials.

A first and major step in building his transdisciplinary task-force was the setting-up a general production-team meeting, held 8 February 2020 at ULHT main cinema studio, for the diverse members of the production teams to be fully briefed about the project, including the overall framework, presentation of similar projects, and the full calendar. This working day finished in the afternoon with a debate with special external guests, coming from the Islamic Community, as well as representatives from the Police Force and journalists specialized in covering fake news and disinformation.

After this internal meeting, the production of the campaigns contents formally started - in summary, the ReThink project is composed by the following seven communication campaigns:
- **"Peer2Peer Communication"**, launched 26 June 2019,
- **"Critical Thinking Tools"**, launched 17 July 2019,
- **"Narratives of Global Islam"**, launched 11 September 2019,
- **"The True Face of Extremism"**, launched 11 November 2019,
- **"Conspiracy Theories",** launched 17 December 2019,
- **"What is to be part of a Far-Right Violent Group"**, launched 27 January 2020,
- **"Community Heroes"**, to be launched 25 March 2020.

Regarding dissemination, the ReThink project is mostly using online channels, with a strong focus on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. YouTube is also part of this media mix, which included a general project website and dedicated multi-language websites for each campaign. Online communication is complemented with offline activities, such as debates and presentations, in schools or community centers in the respective partner countries. The project has specific key performance indicators to achieve, such as reach, videos views and likes, which are being continuously monitorized by the social media team and strategy team, who provides full reports when each campaigns reaches its end.

ReThink is being further expanded with a second project – "**Community Engagement Against Radicalisation" (2019-2021),** whose objective is to systematize a practical model of community and civic engagement that can enhance civil society's skills and capacity to prevent and counter radicalization, by developing digital toolkits to disseminate in the local communities. Both projects aim to contribute towards building a safe, sustainable and promising future: in this presentation, main results and findings are to be shared and discussed, particularly addressing the issues of identifying and targeting vulnerable audiences to extremism in Europe.

References:
Ritzmann, A. & Menes, M. (2017) RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+). RAN Issue Paper.