

THE NEW FRONTLINE

**THE WORLD OF
COMMUNICATIONS
IS THE NEW
FRONTLINE IN
THE BATTLE
AGAINST VIOLENT
EXTREMISM**



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Hedayah was created in response to the growing desire from members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the wider international community for the establishment of an independent, multilateral center devoted to dialogue and communications, capacity building programs, research and analysis to counter violent extremism in all of its forms and manifestations.

During the ministerial-level launch of the GCTF in New York in September 2011, the UAE offered to serve as the host of the International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism. In December 2012 Hedayah was inaugurated with its headquarters in Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Hedayah aims to be the premier international center for expertise and experience by promoting understanding and sharing good practice to effectively serve as the true global center to counter violent extremism.





The New Frontline.

1

Part

In recent years, modern terrorist organizations - from Daesh to neo-Nazis - have radically transformed how and what they communicate.

Across the world, terrorist and extremist groups of all backgrounds and ideologies increasingly use propaganda to influence populations and win people over to their cause.

On the internet, mediums such as video, social media and messaging platforms are used to gather new supporters and inspire people to commit violence. And elsewhere, terrorists stage attacks that are designed to capture the interest of the media, to terrorize populations, and to provoke a political response.

None of this is accidental. Every one of these things is part of a deliberate plan to advance an agenda and deliver an effect.

This is the world of strategic communications - where tactics such as public relations, social media, community activities and traditional marketing work together to create change based on a clear plan and a detailed understanding of the audience in question.

Recently, violent extremist groups of all kinds have become experts at using this approach against governments, communities and countries across the globe.

This makes the world of communications the new frontline in the fight against violent extremism.

How governments can respond.

To respond to this new threat, governments must develop an understanding of the power of strategic communications and put it at the heart of their own approach to tackling violent extremism.

This means fully integrating strategic communications into the process of developing a National Action Plan.

Ever since the United Nations passed a resolution in July 2016 calling on governments to develop National Action Plans to prevent violent extremism, countries across the world have been using this process to guide their efforts to push back against extremists. National Action Plans do this by helping governments address the drivers of violent extremism as part of a preventative approach.

Given that strategic communications increasingly play a vital role in promoting and encouraging violent extremism, the National Action Plan process provides a critical opportunity for governments to integrate strategic communications planning into their own response.

This document sets out the nature of the communications challenge governments face and provides a framework that will help them take the fight to the violent extremists where it matters: on the new frontline.



NO
LA VIOLENZA

#Terrorism
Has no
Religion!

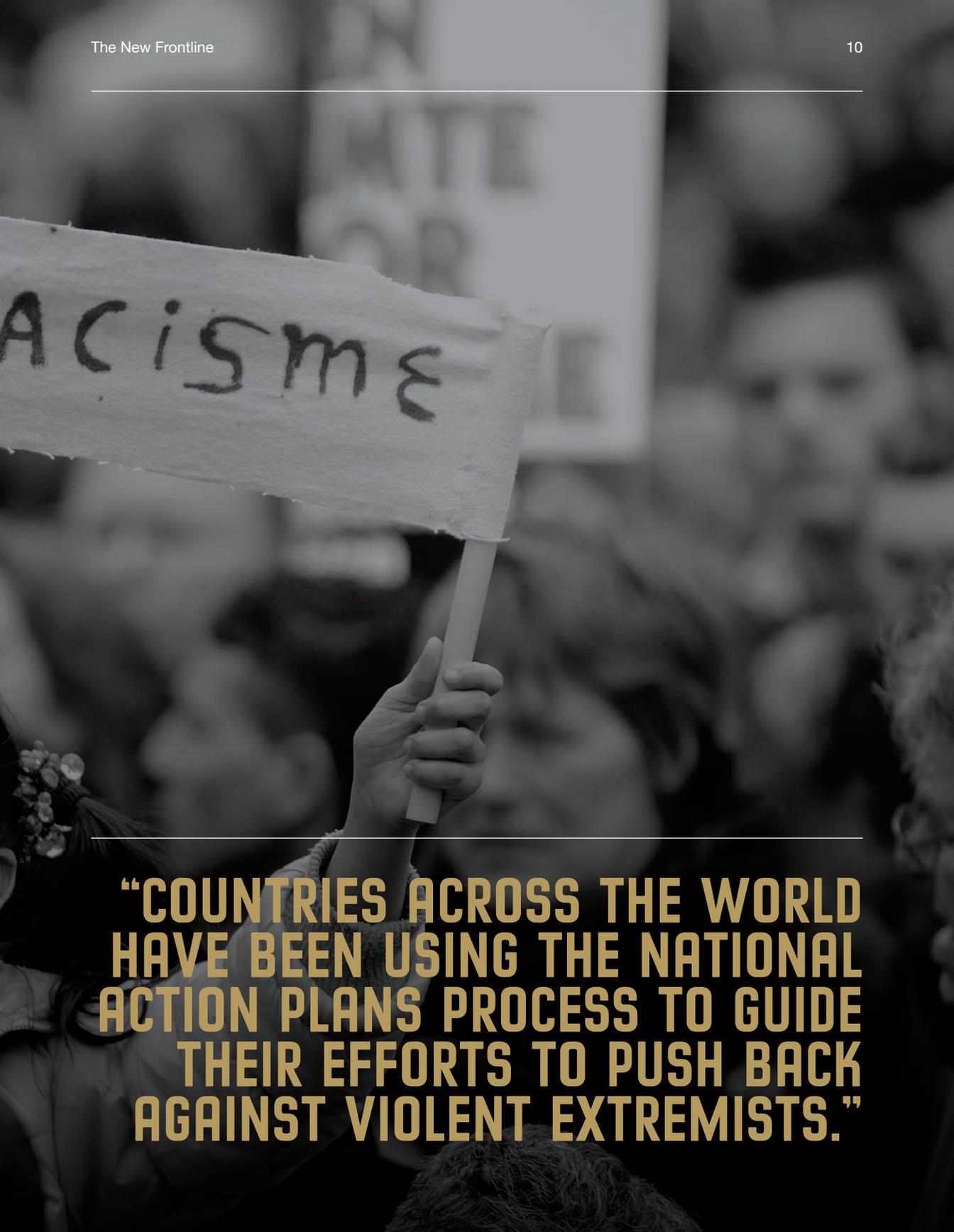
L' ISLAM È PACE !!
ISLAM IS PEACE !!

PACIFIC ISLANDS
FORUM SECRETARIAT

DIESEL

DIESEL



A black and white photograph of a protest. A person in the foreground is holding a sign that says "ACISME". The background is filled with a crowd of people, some holding other signs, though they are out of focus. The overall tone is serious and focused on social or political activism.

ACISME

“COUNTRIES ACROSS THE WORLD HAVE BEEN USING THE NATIONAL ACTION PLANS PROCESS TO GUIDE THEIR EFFORTS TO PUSH BACK AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISTS.”

Understanding the Problem.

2

Part

How terrorist communications have evolved.

While terrorist and extremist groups have always sought to use propaganda, Daesh - also known as ISIS or Islamic State - changed the rules of the game.

In the time before Daesh, most terrorist communications were of poor quality, often using very direct and simple approaches.

Many of these communications drew heavily on religious or sermon-like narratives delivered by a single person straight to camera.

They were often sober or had low-quality production value. From the early 2000's Al-Qaeda videos used grainy footage and had poor sound mixing.

Prior to Daesh, terrorist groups depended on TV, print and radio for their communications with limited use of social media.

They often followed a centralized communications structure with groups tightly controlling their propaganda, only allowing a few authorized group members to issue official communications.

But Daesh changed the purpose, format and content of terrorist communications - and other groups have followed their lead.

Use of emotions.

Daesh have pioneered the use of emotionally-driven narratives to lure young recruits.

Daesh communications do not seek just to educate or instruct, but rather to change how young people think and feel.

They do this by using a variety of emotional levers to draw targets further into their cause.

By portraying an action-packed, glamorous image of the Daesh lifestyle, the group's videos and social media posts elicit visceral, intense emotional reactions.

The goal is to inspire new recruits who do not merely think joining Daesh is a good idea, but who feel an overwhelming passion that compels them to join.

Inspired by pop culture.

Daesh videos are filmed using slick editing, first-person camera angles and intense soundtracks – a far cry from the somber, dreary terrorist videos of earlier groups.

Daesh has even gone so far as to create videos that are directly inspired by Hollywood and popular video games.

For example, to appeal to teenage boys in Syria, the group disseminated pro-Daesh graphics designed to look exactly like a “Call of Duty” poster.

Daesh also created a YouTube video that is a frame-by-frame recreation of an action sequence from the movie “American Sniper” and has made similar videos featuring copies of scenes from The Matrix and other Hollywood films.

Social media strategy.

Daesh not only introduced new styles and content, it also revolutionized the way terrorist groups deliver their communications through the prolific use of social media.

For example, at one stage ISIS supporters are thought to have operated around 46,000 Twitter accounts, according to a study by the Brookings Institute (The ISIS Twitter Census, March 2015).

Daesh does not rely on a single social media platform, but instead employs a network of thousands of 'fan-boy' networks and hundreds of 'ambassador accounts'.

They are increasingly using open and new encrypted platforms to disseminate its messaging.

Many of the people behind recent "lone wolf" attacks have been radicalised through content they watched online.

For example, Sayfullo Saipov, the man accused of killing 8 people with a truck in a terror attack in late 2017, was found with over 90 Daesh videos on his mobile phone.

Responsive communications.

Terrorist and extremist groups have also discovered how to respond to events more powerfully through the use of social media platforms.

This allows them to exploit the social media posts issued by groups with competing ideologies, in order to raise support for their own cause.

For example, far-right group tweets are often immediately retweeted by Islamist organizations to mobilize their own supporters.

Immediately after the Grenfell Tower fire in London, social media handles belonging to both Daesh and far-right groups began issuing inflammatory accusations directed at each other and then used each other's incendiary tweets to draw sympathy and mobilize their supporters.

Understanding the audience.

Daesh recognized the importance of developing deep a understanding of its target audience.

In the last two years the group developed customized messaging tailored for different audiences.

For example, Daesh used communications aggressively to target women.

These communications did not merely encourage women to become “Jihadi brides” as earlier groups did. They also defined an empowering role for women within the so-called Caliphate by showing how they could play an active part in building the state, attracting new recruits, or even dying for the cause.

A new standard in terrorist communications.

Daesh’s example inspired other terrorist groups to follow suit by producing their own sophisticated propaganda. A newly confident Al-Qaida and other groups are focusing on communications now more than ever before, inspiring pockets of insurgency and terrorist activity across the world.

Inspired by Daesh’s approach, far-right and nationalist groups now use their own social media campaigns to build new support by playing on the grievances people have regarding a range of complex issues such as immigration, integration, globalisation and inequality.

We have witnessed a paradigm shift in the quality and sophistication of terrorist communications in the last three years - and while governments have improved their ability to take on and defeat terrorist groups militarily, the challenge now is to do the same using the power of communications as well.



A Guide to Action: The 3D Approach.

Part

3

To help governments put effective ‘strategic communications’ at the heart of their approach to tackling violent extremism, Hedayah has developed the 3D Approach as a simple guide to action.

The 3D Approach recognizes the paradigm shift in the quality and sophistication of terrorist communications and provides a structure to help governments produce the best solutions in response.

The 3D Approach means doing two things:

- taking a ‘3D view’ of the problem, and
- adopting a ‘3D plan’ in response.

The 3D Approach lays out the principles to guide thinking followed by the practical steps to develop an effective communications strategy that is equal to the task ahead.

Adopting the 3D Approach will help governments produce compelling communications strategies that complement their broader National Action Plan.



“UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY IS TRYING TO REACH IS ESSENTIAL – NOT JUST WHO THEY ARE, BUT WHAT THEY THINK AND FEEL AND WHY THEY THINK AND FEEL IT.”

The 3D View.

4

Part

The 3D View sets out the principles to follow before getting into the mechanics of the plan itself.

Consider every angle.

The 3D view recognizes that issues of terrorism and extremism are complex and that it's important to look at those issues from every angle before deciding how and when to intervene.

That makes effective planning the key to effective communications.

It is important to invest time and resources in an extensive process of research that considers every possible angle of the problem ahead.

Only then is it possible to begin to develop a clear understanding of the communications approach needed to address it.

See things from the right perspective.

Successful communication means always seeing the problem and solution from the perspective of the audience.

Understanding the people that a strategic communications strategy is trying to reach is essential – not just who they are, but what they think and feel and, more importantly, why they think and feel it.

The results of this process can often surprise.

It is important to challenge the assumptions throughout the planning and delivery process.

Assumptions made at the start of the project may not be relevant at the end, so it is important to be prepared to change at all times.

Retain focus.

No matter how complex the issues are, it is important to retain focus on the single change that is desired.

Start with a clear objective.

An objective sets out the change the communication wants to achieve.

Once a clear objective has been set, it is time to set out the effects that will help to achieve it.

Don't confuse outcomes and effects. The outcome is the overall goal the communication strategy wants to achieve. Effects are things that a piece of communications makes someone think or feel that helps to deliver that outcome.

It is important to understand how these components work together in order to be successful and deliver the required change. Developing a clear 'Theory of Change' - setting out the action, the reason for it, the anticipated response and the ultimate consequence - can help.

Ensure the strategy has depth.

Ensure the communications activity has depth by using a range of content and channels to engage the audience. Social media communications have transformed how messages are absorbed. Content is more creative and is communicated over more channels than ever.

Platforms can include social media, TV, SMS, magazines, billboards and many other diverse forms of communication.

In the modern communications environment it is important to ensure strategies are multifaceted and work across multiple platforms.

Communications must be made engaging by adopting a range of creative approaches to each communications opportunity.

Make the right connections.

Governments cannot take the fight to extremists all by themselves. The scale of the challenge demands a whole of society response.

Governments are rarely the most effective communicators in this space.

They are not always trusted by the intended audience.

Civil society, however, has the credibility, reach and authenticity to communicate.

They often operate within the communities it is necessary to reach.

The innovation and digital quality of terrorist communication delivery is out-pacing government technological and creative efforts.

To truly level the playing field, government needs to collaborate with the private sector.

The best communications come from partnerships between governments, civil society and private sector organizations.

Investing time in making the right connections and building the right partnerships from the outset will strengthen your strategy.

**“SOCIAL MEDIA
COMMUNICATIONS
HAVE TRANSFORMED
HOW MESSAGES
ARE ABSORBED.”**

The 3D Plan.

5

Part

With the principles in place, the '3D Plan' is the mechanism that will help to develop a well-thought through communications strategy.

The plan has three phases: Define, Design and Deliver.

They are the three steps to a successful communications strategy.

DEFINE

01

This phase is about planning the communications activity by defining the problem, understanding the audience and setting out a proposed solution.

DESIGN

02

This phase is about developing the core creative idea, designing the content, identifying the right messengers and building a campaign plan that lays out what is going to happen and when.

DELIVER

03

This phase is about turning the plan into action, creating relevant and engaging content, and measuring impact.

Thoughtful research and honest goal-setting provide the foundation for successful communications. Start by clearly defining the problem and the desired change. Spend time identifying and learning about the target audience. Put in place a clear roadmap that will help move from the problem to the solution.

DEER

1. UNDERSTAND THE PROBLEM

2. SET THE OBJECTIVE

3. RESEARCH THE AUDIENCE

4. AGREE UPON THE STRATEGY



Understand the problem.

Spend time learning the issue that needs to be addressed and the context in which the strategy will operate.

Consult with experts and take advice from agencies, think tanks and academics. Use opinion research in the form of polling (quantitative research) and focus groups (qualitative research) to better grasp public views and attitudes to certain problems.

Explore the problem from the perspective of the target audience by developing an understanding of, not just what people think, but why they think and feel as they do.

Monitor social and traditional media to immerse yourself with the 'hot topics' that are resonating with people.

Pull all this together into a simple document – a 'problem set paper' – that summarizes an understanding of the issues.

Set the objective.

A shared understanding of the problem leads to the identification of what needs to change.

For any communication to be effective, it is important to start with a clear objective.

An example of a clear objective would be to "minimize the recruitment of young men and women to extremist causes".

The objective should be measurable, so think about what an independent process for measuring it would look like.

At the end of the communications activity, it should be possible to determine if the objective has been achieved or not.

Objectives define what success is. Without a clear understanding of this, there is a risk of time and resources being wasted.

Research the audience.

Once the success criteria has been defined, it is time to get to know the audience that needs to be reached.

Start by deciding the audience - recognizing that a strategy may have multiple audiences.

For example, there may be a primary target audience - the group of people whose attitudes or behaviors need to change - and a secondary target audience - the people that need to be reached to influence the primary target audience.

Each audience may use different channels and respond to different types of content. What works with one may not work with another.

Use primary research techniques in the form of polling, focus groups and social media analysis to get to know the audience.

At this stage, it is also recommended to identify where the key audiences typically get their information from. That will help to build a better plan to reach them.

Understanding what people think, as well as why they think it, is also critical.

Ask at all times, why is it that they think or feel the way they do?

These underlying drivers will be the 'triggers' that need to be used to bring about the required change.

**“UNDERSTANDING
WHAT PEOPLE THINK,
AS WELL AS WHY THEY
THINK IT, IS CRITICAL”**

Agree upon the strategy.

With a clear understanding of the problem, a firm objective and a deep understanding of the audience, it is time to develop a strategy that will deliver the change required.

This is the last stage of the ‘define’ phase of the communications process.

A strategy document should enable the reader to understand how all the communications components will meet the objective that has been set.

It should incorporate a defined ‘Theory of Change’ that sets out what effect the communications strategy should have and how it will deliver the overall objective that has been set.

A good strategy document will bring together all the elements of the ‘define’ phase.

By putting it in one place, anyone who reads it can quickly understand all parts of the communications plan.

The design phase develops a clear picture of what should be communicated and how.

Then a campaign plan should clearly map out all the parts of the proposed communication, including the channels that will be used to deliver communications.

It's also important to build the partnerships that will be necessary to bring this plan to life.

DESIGN

1. DEVELOP THE IDEA

2. MAKE AND TEST THE CONTENT

3. IDENTIFY THE MESSENGERS

4. BUILD THE PLAN

Develop the idea.

Once the strategy has been agreed upon, it is time to put it into action.

That means starting with the creative idea that will lie at the heart of the communications activity.

At this point, it will be necessary to produce the 'creative brief'.

A 'creative brief' is an important document that helps to translate the strategy into action. This is particularly important when engaging external partners in the communications activity. It will help them understand what they need to do.

In many ways, the creative brief should be a distilled version of the strategy document, containing only the critical information that someone who is not familiar with the thinking needs to know.

Selecting the information that is, or isn't, important to the creative process is a difficult task.

That's why writing a creative brief is one of the toughest parts of the process.

A typical creative brief should include:

- A short paragraph that outlines the problem.
- The core objective that sets out the change required.
- A definition of the target audience or audiences.
- What they currently think or feel.
- What they should think or feel.
- A one-line description of the core message that the strategy needs to communicate.
- The Theory of Change.
- The channels that might be used.

This will provide a creative team with the information they need to develop a campaign idea that can deliver the change.



Make and test the content.

With the core idea agreed upon, work with external creative and production partners can begin. They will guide the development of the specific products, whether films, radio products or digital material.

Trust experts to develop the creative materials and wording best suited for their channel. Work with them to develop the content and check it constantly against the framework outlined in the creative brief.

Ask at all times if the creative product will contribute to delivering the objective that has been agreed.

A detailed process of creative testing should be factored into the timelines. While a product may appear to work well, it is important to test its effectiveness with the target audience, or those close to the audience, whenever possible.

This can be done by convening focus groups, soliciting one to-one feedback from members of the target group, or even running small-scale pilot campaigns to test out the effect of communications on a very small sample size.

Allow time to make any changes necessary following the testing process before putting the plan into action.

**“PARTNERSHIPS
SHOULD BE AT
THE HEART OF
THE APPROACH.”**

Identify the messengers.

It is important to identify the right people to carry the message as governments are rarely the most credible voices to use.

The insight developed during the 'define' stage should guide this process. Decide who is most likely to resonate with the target audience and who has credibility. This could be family members, religious or community leaders, former extremists or civil society organizations.

Once the most appropriate credible messenger has been identified, a strong working relationship with them will need to be built. Partnerships should be at the heart of the approach. As well as building partnerships with credible messengers, take time to build relationships with external experts from the communications world and the private sector.

Build the plan.

With all of this in place, it is time to think carefully about how to build the communications plan. This is the last stage in the 'design' phase of the communications plan.

A good campaign plan should answer the following questions:

- How long will the campaign run for?
- When will the different elements of the campaign be released and in what sequence?
- How does that sequence help to build the overall message?
- How do the different types of content fit together to create a cohesive message?
- If there is a call to action, how can the target audience learn more information about what they should do next?
- What is the budget?

Ask where the audience will get their information from and who they listen to. Think about the way in which the messages are reinforced across different channels.

Every channel is different, so different content will need to be created for each one, remembering that the language, tone and format should be adapted for each specific channel.

The final phase is when all the research and planning is finally brought to life.

Use the campaign plan to coordinate the activity and ensure everything is working together as it should, but be prepared to change and adapt as necessary as events on the ground change.

Measuring the impact of the campaign is a key part of the delivery phase. It will help to develop more effective strategies in the future.

DELIVER

1. PRODUCE THE CONTENT

2. BE READY TO ADAPT

3. MEASURE THE IMPACT

4. LEARN THE LESSONS

Produce the content.

With the objectives set and the plan developed, it is time to deliver the communications.

Remember that it is important for a communications campaign to be run at a pace and scale that ensures it will make a difference.

This means maintaining a regular drumbeat of content that serves the overall strategic objective.

Products and messages should reinforce each other, so there needs to be a regular set of content that makes the overall campaign greater than the sum of its individual parts.

The campaign plan will help to coordinate this activity.

Be ready to adapt.

It is important to retain the strategic focus and not become distracted by events that occur along the way.

This means keeping a focus on the overall objective and the theory of change that has been developed, and not being driven off course as events occur.

Yet it is also important to understand how the context may change as the strategy progresses. The context that has been defined in the first phase may change as the communication begins to develop.

Take time to revisit the assumptions made in the 'define' phase and test them on a regular basis to see if anything needs to be adjusted.

Monitor the news, the internet and social media every day to understand how the communication strategy is being received by the audience.

The campaign plan should not be a rigid document but should be flexible enough to adapt to circumstances as they shift.

Build in a regular review process to constantly check the campaign against the other things that are going on so that changes can be made as necessary.

Measure the impact.

Assessing the impact of the strategy means rigorously evaluating whether it has achieved the overall objective.

The question is simple, is the strategy generating the change desired and therefore achieving the overall objective?

There are many tools available to measure reach and impact. These include using opinion research (both qualitative and quantitative analysis tools) online analysis techniques and other data gathering tools.

To prove that the content reached the right audience, it makes sense to collect social media statistics including followers, likes, tweets and retweets, mentions, interactions, clicks for a particular communications product. It might also be possible to count the number of times a link or piece of content is shared on social media; or make a manual assessment of the quality of the interactions or comments that a piece of content receives, particularly where the content is online.

To demonstrate the impact of a communications product, it is a good idea to solicit feedback using surveys or focus groups both qualitatively and quantitatively.

Qualitative research techniques often draw on focus groups. They are a particularly good way to test responses to content among members of the target audience or those close to them.

More quantitative research would focus on gathering more measurable data which tries to measure the attitudinal or behavioral change identified in a target audience because of the communication.

**“THE CAMPAIGN PLAN
SHOULD BE FLEXIBLE
ENOUGH TO ADAPT TO
CIRCUMSTANCES.”**

Learn the lessons.

As well as evaluating if the overall objective has been achieved, use this phase to understand what elements of the communications plan proved most effective and what elements or factors prevented success.

This can be done by asking some simple questions:

- Did the products reach the right audiences?
- How many people were exposed to the products?
- What response did the audience have to the products?
- Was there any anecdotal or digital feedback?

While there will always be a temptation to claim success, it is important to be honest about what worked and what didn't as this will help to design better, more effective campaigns in the future.

**“IT IS
IMPORTANT TO
BE HONEST.”**



Creative Starters.

6

Part

The 3D Approach aims to help governments develop effective communications strategies to complement their National Action Plans. By following this approach, governments may develop a range of strategic communications products that will help to push back against terrorists and violent extremists.

These may include:

- Entertainment Programs
- Family Mobilization Initiatives
- Public-Private Partnerships
- Online Programs

Entertainment programs.

Entertainment programs are an engaging way of communicating counter-violent extremism messaging. Programs such as soap operas – long-running series during which stories can be developed over time – are particularly popular in many parts of the world. They build significant audiences and help to communicate messages by building an emotional connection between the characters and the audience.

One long-running radio soap opera in Southern Africa has been effective at building community resilience to violent extremism, and the format is now being copied in other parts of the world. While requiring quite sophisticated skill-sets to put together, a soap opera may well be the kind of strategic communications idea that could be developed as part of a concerted National Action Plan process.

Family mobilization initiatives.

Some of the most effective communication ideas are those that encourage people to stage a physical intervention when and if they suspect someone is being drawn into violent extremism. Research shows that family members often provide the most effective interventions. It is therefore good to produce communication ideas that empower family members to be alert to the signs of radicalization and to intervene when necessary.

One effective program in Indonesia invested time in training mothers in particular to spot the signs of radicalization and extremism and to know how to intervene in the right way at the right time. Through a series of community workshops and practical exercises, they became aware of the scale and nature of the problem and the role they could play in addressing it. This was a structured communication program that left the mothers concerned feeling much better informed, and ready, willing and able to intervene when necessary.

Public-private partnerships.

As noted above, governments cannot do this on their own - but they do have the power to motivate and involve civil society and the private sector as part of a whole of society approach. This means building relationships between local communities and government agencies to build trust and local capacity to counter recruitment and radicalization into violence through activities such as meetings and structured conversations like “roundtable discussions” between community members, business and government agencies.

Governments might also consider arranging classes and workshops on civics and religious education to help inoculate individuals and entire communities against the lure of extremism, and they might work with civil society organizations to operate them.

These kind of “real life” examples are the kind of things that might be developed as part of the National Action Plan process.

Online programs.

With so much communication now consumed online, internet based programs can be particularly effective. They can also be relatively cost-effective to produce and can be easily measured for performance and effect.

Online programs might involve one-off products that might be produced to go viral – for example, the ‘I Want to Quit ISIS’ video featuring a series of comedians in South Asia that has been viewed more than a million times – or the creation of engaging characters that help to build a brand and an audience for a campaign. Average Mohamed – a series of humorous videos hosted on YouTube and their own website that aim to provide parents, children and others with talking points to counter the falsehoods of extremists, racists and others who promote intolerance – is a good example of this approach.



“SOME OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IDEAS ARE THOSE THAT ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO STAGE A PHYSICAL INTERVENTION WHEN AND IF THEY SUSPECT SOMEONE IS BEING DRAWN INTO VIOLENT EXTREMISM.”

