

# REPORT

ASPI

December 2013



## Fighting fire with fire Target audience responses to online anti-violence campaigns

Roslyn Richardson

Prepared by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute under contract to New South Wales Police Force and funded by Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC).



NSW Police Force





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## Executive summary

- This report documents young Muslim Sydneysiders' responses to a variety of online campaigns that promote non-violent political activism or aim to 'counter violent extremism' (CVE). In undertaking this study, which involved interviews with Muslim communities in Western Sydney—communities that have been targeted by both violent propaganda and government communication campaigns—two things became apparent. First, there's a pool of highly educated, discerning and media-savvy young people in these communities. Second, **rather than merely being an audience for government-sponsored communication campaigns, they're creating their own websites, YouTube clips, radio programs and Facebook groups.**
- Some of these websites and other initiatives directly challenge violent narratives while others provide avenues for non-violent political protest and expression. **The popularity and reach of this entirely community-generated web content significantly outshines the reach of any government-sponsored internet-based CVE strategies developed to date.**
- The young people responsible for these initiatives, some of whom are communication professionals, understand and to some extent share their target audiences' needs and wants. As journalism and marketing graduates, they also have the professional know-how to produce high quality and attention-grabbing campaigns. Furthermore, when they take the lead in creating these initiatives they generate more interest and praise from their target audiences than when they merely support government-sponsored programs.
- Outside of the online space, young people from across Sydney's Muslim communities engage in a range of activities that directly assist others to move away from violent and criminal paths. A number of the respondents in this study, for example, are volunteer youth mentors who assist young people identified by their schools, the justice system or both as 'vulnerable' (to criminalisation). These interventions in real life are augmented by their efforts through online forums to reach out to young people they identify as at risk.
- The efforts of these young volunteers both inside and outside the online space seem largely unknown beyond their immediate communities. Nevertheless their contribution in creating communities that are empowered and resilient to violent messaging may be considerable.

**The core recommendation of this report is: Where possible, government agencies should support existing popular community-driven anti-violence online campaigns rather than prioritising the development of new websites to counter violent narratives. Government agencies should directly engage with the young people involved in these popular initiatives and investigate ways to support them and their campaigns where possible.**

- While this study offers many findings that government agencies and communities might view with optimism, it also reveals that there are significant barriers that undermine young Muslim Sydneysiders' engagement with CVE communication campaigns and government agencies. These barriers are also likely to undermine government agencies' engagement with the young communication professionals who are currently producing a range of popular anti-violence campaigns. The report identifies and discusses these barriers. However, it is anticipated that from the large amount of data collected there will be subsequent publications describing some in greater detail.
- The most significant barrier identified in this study relates to the pervasive prejudice young Muslims report experiencing as a result of being Muslim and/or of Arab background. Many of the study's respondents rejected government-produced CVE websites because they felt such strategies perpetuate the stereotyping of Muslim communities as potentially threatening and deviant. From their perspective, Australia's CVE agenda fuels Islamophobia, making them more vulnerable to discrimination including verbal and physical attacks.

- The respondents also rejected the government's CVE agenda because they perceived government agencies as doing little to address social issues of greater importance to them. This includes the violent crime and socioeconomic disadvantage experienced by those living in their Western Sydney suburbs. In this respect, they believed that government agencies' engagement with them on CVE issues is largely self-serving and does little to address the 'real' violence they see afflicting their communities.
- Another significant barrier undermining young Muslim Sydneysiders' engagement with Australia's CVE agenda is their lack of trust in government agencies. Some perceive an irony when the Australian Government asks them to support campaigns denouncing violence when it is waging violent wars in other countries. Government CVE interventions in Muslim communities have also fuelled community paranoia and young Muslims' belief that they are under constant surveillance. As a result of a variety of issues affecting Muslim communities inside and outside Australia, the respondents perceived the Australian Government as not being 'on their side' and not representing their interests.
- While some respondents displayed a deep cynicism about the Australian Government and its CVE agenda, for moral and religious reasons many were devoted to assisting 'at risk' youth in their communities. The ASPI research team also found that even self-described 'radicals', 'conservatives' and those who decry Australia's counterterrorism policies, want to engage better with police and other government agencies. This report offers 13 recommendations to facilitate this engagement and enhance communication campaigns that challenge violence.
- However, this report also offers a warning that online communication strategies are unlikely to provide a solution for those at greatest risk of becoming involved in violent extremism. The respondents of this study, who included sheikhs involved in deradicalisation<sup>4</sup>work, argued that one-on-one intervention strategies are a far more effective way to reach and influence vulnerable individuals.
- **This study shows that it's difficult to motivate young people to view government-sponsored CVE websites; it's undoubtedly much more of a challenge to entice 'at risk' youth to visit such sites.**
- By focusing on Muslim youth this report potentially supports discourses that position Muslim Australians as a 'problem community' and security threat. The research team doesn't support such views and sees them as counterproductive to our aim of enhancing government agencies' interaction with young Muslims. In fact, this study shows that the securitisation of Muslim communities directly causes young Muslim Sydneysiders to reject CVE websites and shun interaction with government agencies.
- Nevertheless, some of our respondents expressed deep concern about groups and individuals in their communities sympathetic to using violence to achieve political-religious aims. Some believed it was important for their communities to develop online strategies to challenge violent narratives and provide more avenues for young people to express their views in a non-violent manner. In addition, some felt it was the correct role of government agencies to support communities in these endeavours.
- On the whole this report challenges approaches that only discuss Muslim youth as being highly vulnerable and in dire need of empowerment to resist violent propaganda. Instead, it shows that some have taken a lead role in challenging violent narratives and are empowering themselves. This report is intended for use by government agencies and communities to inform their future work in this area.
- Included as an appendix to this report is a separate ASPI study examining the online CVE strategies developed by five countries: UK, US, the Netherlands, Canada and Denmark.

## Key findings and recommendations

### Don't 'reinvent the wheel'

- Young Muslim Sydneysiders aren't merely an audience for online strategies that promote non-violence; they're also driving the production of such campaigns. This report highlights that such community-generated initiatives significantly outshine government-sponsored campaigns in their popularity and reach.
- Rather than reinventing the wheel in countering violent propaganda, government agencies should tap into initiatives and human resources that have a proven track record in challenging such narratives.

**Recommendation 1: Where possible, government agencies should support existing popular community-driven anti-violence online campaigns rather than prioritising the development of new websites to counter violent narratives. When new websites are required, target market research should inform all stages of their development (as discussed further below).**

**Government agencies should directly engage with the young people involved in popular initiatives and investigate ways to support them and their campaigns where possible. More detailed recommendations on this issue are made throughout this report.**

### Take a more targeted approach

- Some interviewees argued that government-funded CVE initiatives target 'the wrong people' and largely draw in the most highly educated and socially connected youth in their communities. However, some respondents said the most vulnerable members of their communities are poorly educated and only have contact with the small socio-religious groups to which they've withdrawn.
- This study shows that some communication campaigns have a limited reach. The government-backed and community-sponsored anti-violence campaigns examined in this study appealed most to our more highly educated respondents (university students and graduates). They tended not to be as popular among conservative communities or those without tertiary education.
- The research team also observed that government agencies appear to have developed strong relationships with only some segments of Sydney's Muslim communities. They appear to have weak relationships with more conservative organisations and people who work with 'fringe' groups. This limits the government's capacity to target and assist communities working with those most at risk.

**Recommendation 2: The Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC) should investigate whether government-funded CVE programs and communication strategies disproportionately involve only some sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities while ignoring people most at risk.**

### Don't just 'fight fire with fire': online campaigns are less important than face-to-face engagement

- Online communication campaigns are limited in the role they can play in CVE. While vulnerable individuals may be highly motivated to seek out violent narratives, they're unlikely to search for anti-violence campaigns with a similar level of enthusiasm, or at all.

- This study indicates that young audiences prefer to spend their time on the internet visiting websites they're already loyal to and that appeal to their interests. It appears difficult to draw such audiences away from their favourite sites to visit government-badged or newly created websites. It also remains extremely difficult to draw and retain their attention in a media saturated world.
- Many of the respondents, including young people, youth workers and community and religious leaders said they'd seen young people move away from violent and criminal paths as a result of face-to-face engagement strategies. In contrast, some argued that online CVE communication initiatives will do little on their own to challenge violent narratives.

**Recommendation 3: Online CVE communication campaigns should be implemented alongside face-to-face strategies that reinforce their messages. However, as this study focused predominantly on online strategies, the research team was unable to examine other types of CVE programs in detail.**

**A variety of community organisations deliver youth outreach programs targeting young people at risk of criminalisation. Some aim to steer young people away from a range of violent criminal activities and may play a greater role in CVE than online communication strategies. The ANZCTC should examine these programs in order to better understand their role in CVE and potentially encourage more organisations that run them to apply for government funding.**

## **Mend and develop relationships**

- Government agencies' interactions with young Muslims have a strong bearing on how these audiences interpret government-badged online communication campaigns. Specifically, some reject government-badged CVE websites because they believe government agencies treat them as a 'suspect community' and try to indoctrinate them with a preferred version of Islam.
- Some respondents' negative interactions with NSW Police officers underpinned their refusal to engage with the *secureNSW* website. This study suggests that it will be difficult for the NSW Police Force to entice young Muslim audiences to view police CVE websites if it doesn't first address their negative perceptions of its officers.
- Some respondents believed that they're being targeted and discriminated against by police on the basis of their ethnicity and religion. Some were incensed by the existence of the Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad (MEOCS) within the NSW Police Force. This study suggests that the existence of the MEOCS divides those of Arab descent from the broader Australian community and has the potential to reinforce the 'us versus them' mentality found in narratives promoting violence.

**Recommendation 4: The most effective way for the NSW Police Force to improve its relationships with young Muslim Sydneysiders is through face-to-face engagement. The NSW Police Force should commission further research examining the effectiveness of its current youth engagement strategies and investigate whether they can be improved. As it was outside the scope of our study, the ASPI research team couldn't evaluate these programs.**

**Recommendation 5: The NSW Police Force should assist young Muslim Sydneysiders to understand their right to complain about police officers' misconduct. This would address the frustration that some feel about their negative interactions with NSW Police. Specific recommendations as to how NSW Police can deliver this information are provided in the body of this report.**

**Recommendation 6: The NSW Police Force should examine what other names can be used for specialist police units in place of titles that focus on particular ethnic communities. A more neutral title should be adopted for the MEOCS and it could perhaps focus on a geographical area of Sydney rather than an ethnic group. For example, its new title could be the 'South Western Sydney Organised Crime Squad'.**



**Recommendation 7: The Resilient Communities website should provide information on the complaints process for people who feel aggrieved by their dealings with government agencies. It should include links to the websites of the Commonwealth and state ombudsmen's offices and the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security. This would address some people's perception and anger that police and intelligence agencies act with impunity. It also supports Australia's CVE strategy by assisting 'individuals and groups [to] choose non-violent expression of views'<sup>2</sup> and grievances.**

### **Don't assume that 'if you build it, they will come'. Instead, 'meet them where they're at'**

- Communication strategists shouldn't expect that their young Muslim target audiences will visit their websites even when such audiences like or are interested in these sites. Our respondents often waited for their favourite websites to come to them through Facebook feeds and email notifications.

**Recommendation 8: Young Muslim audiences are best targeted by bringing information to them through the website they appear to use most often: Facebook.**

- This study shows that even when young people are suspicious of government agencies and distrust the NSW Police, they still subscribe to NSW Police Facebook pages and trust their content.

**Recommendation 9: NSW Police Facebook pages are potentially important conduits through which government agencies can provide information to young Muslim audiences. Specifically, the NSW Police Force should use these pages to provide its audiences with links to easy-to-understand:**

- **information on Australia's counterterrorism legislation**
- **facts about young people's rights in relation to these laws**
- **information to correct community misconceptions about key issues, including the government's position on the current crisis in Syria.**

**Recommendation 10: When targeting young audiences through the websites they frequently use, government agencies should take a cautious approach. For a variety of reasons (discussed in this report) it would be inappropriate for government agencies to attempt to enter the highly popular Y Factor Facebook discussion page. It's better for government agencies to reach Y Factor's audience as guests on the group's radio program and to provide Y Factor with links to online factsheets that it could supply to its audiences.**

### **Research the approach**

- Ongoing target market research is an important element in the development and evaluation of any persuasive information campaign. Target audiences' needs, wants and interests aren't static and must be understood as they develop over time.
- This study suggests that target market research improves audience responses to government-badged CVE communication campaigns. Specifically, the respondents' more positive reactions to the *Resilient Communities* website, compared with the *secureNSW* site, appear to be traceable to decisions made as a result of audience research. While the former website was tested on its prospective audiences before its launch, the latter was not.

**Recommendation 11: Government and community groups should undertake target market research before, during and after they deliver CVE information campaigns.**

## Language matters

- Terms such as ‘terrorism’, ‘violent extremism’ and ‘moderate’ are used widely within government and academic literature but when used in CVE communication campaigns they’re likely to be counterproductive.
- Some young Muslims interpret any reference to ‘extremism’ on government websites as evidence that government agencies aim to indoctrinate them with the government’s preferred version of Islam.
- Some of these young people link the word ‘terrorism’ with negative representations of Muslim communities and the rise of Islamophobia. When government agencies use this term, such audiences believe it reinforces negative stereotypes about Muslims, which fuel verbal and physical attacks on their communities.
- The word ‘moderate’ is now used as an insult in Sydney’s Muslim communities and is directed towards people who are seen as ‘sell-outs’ or not ‘real’ Muslims.

### **Recommendation 12: Communication strategists should use the terms ‘terrorism’, ‘violent extremism’ and ‘moderate’ sparingly or not at all in campaigns targeted at young Muslim audiences.**

- Given that government agencies have examined ‘the role of language in countering terrorism’<sup>3</sup>, they’re no doubt aware of other terms that are likely to anger or upset these audiences. However, ‘terrorism’, ‘extremism’ and ‘moderate’ were the terms that our respondents most commonly viewed as offensive.

## Don’t take a ‘one size fits all’ approach

- Sydney’s Muslim communities represent highly segmented and diverse audiences. Government agencies can’t sponsor a small number of community organisations to develop CVE communication campaigns in the hope that such strategies will be broadly accepted.
- There are significant divisions within Sydney’s Muslim communities and some people will reject information campaigns created by organisations they don’t trust. This complicates government and community efforts to reach the very small number of ‘at risk’ youth in these communities.
- There’s unlikely to be one or even a few ‘credible messengers’ who will appeal to all segments of these audiences or all ‘at risk’ youth. Government agencies need to develop their relationships and work with multiple segments of these communities in order to assist them to help vulnerable groups.

### **Recommendation 13: The micro-grants scheme**

**The Building Community Resilience grants program should include a micro-grants scheme to deliver small amounts of funding to community-driven initiatives as required. The micro-grants scheme would be designed to:**

- **better enable a wider range of groups to access government funding**
- **equip community groups to address ‘flash points’ (crises) as they arise.**

**The current grants scheme may favour organisations whose staff have strong grant-writing skills when other groups, particularly those providing youth outreach services, may be more directly involved in CVE. While programs funded under the micro-grants scheme should be subjected to rigorous evaluation, the application process should be less bureaucratic and laborious than the larger grants program. This may open up government funding to a wider pool of applicants.**

**Under the current grants scheme, applicants can only apply for funding through an annual application process. However, community groups require funding to address crises as they arise. Micro-grants of between \$2,000 and \$10,000 could be delivered to support these types of activities as they are needed.**

## Introduction

The internet provides an important means through which violent extremist<sup>4</sup> groups disseminate their ideologies and fundraise for their activities as well as radicalise, recruit and train potential operatives<sup>5</sup>. Governments across the world have invested in a range of strategies to combat these groups' activities in the online space, including developing a variety of online communication campaigns to challenge violent propaganda<sup>6</sup>.

While governments support such strategies to undermine the appeal of violent narratives, there is very little understanding of how target audiences interpret these campaigns. As noted within existing literature on this topic,

‘the counter narrative issue has been the subject of surprisingly scant academic attention. Part of the problem is this is an issue with relatively little empirical work’<sup>7</sup>.

This report responds to this lack of empirical data. Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with 55 respondents, it provides insights into how young Muslim Sydneysiders respond to a range of online campaigns denouncing violence. To some extent the findings are specific to Sydney, however, as some mirror the conclusions of other studies involving young Muslim interviewees, they are likely to have broader relevance.

Young Muslim Australians are a target audience for both violent narratives and government-funded CVE initiatives. Groups such as al-Qaeda have labelled Australia ‘a legitimate target of attack’<sup>8</sup>, called on Muslims living in the West to strike Western targets and included images of Australian landmarks within their propaganda. Although al-Qaeda and its affiliates intend to project their message to a broad Muslim audience<sup>9</sup>, in Australia it appears that young Muslim men under 30 are more likely than other groups to act upon the violent messages to which they are exposed.

Not only are young Muslim men overrepresented among those convicted of terrorism-related offences in Australia<sup>10</sup> but there is evidence to suggest that those convicted of such offences have followed the advice promoted in violent propaganda. For example, police surveillance recordings reveal that the men arrested as a result of the Operation PENDENNIS raids in Sydney and Melbourne in 2005 followed instructions found in online propaganda in relation to hiding weapons and financing their operations<sup>11</sup>.

Although other types of extremist groups exist within Australia, the Australian Government considers that ‘the primary terrorist threat to Australia and Australian interests today comes from people who follow a distorted and militant interpretation of Islam that calls for violence as the answer to perceived grievances’<sup>12</sup>. Like other governments, the Australian Government funds various community groups, including Muslim organisations, to develop online narratives to challenge violent propaganda. In particular, it has provided funding for such purposes under its Building Community Resilience grants program<sup>13</sup>.

While little is known about how young Muslim Australians behave as audiences, there are a small number of studies<sup>14</sup> which discuss Muslim communities' opinions on Australia's counterterrorism agenda. This study builds on this existing primary research by demonstrating that such opinions have a strong bearing on these audiences' interpretations of CVE communication campaigns. However, this study doesn't just offer insights into such audience behaviour and opinions. It suggests that **studies on young Muslim audiences should acknowledge their important role as producers of online campaigns**.

**Within academic literature, young Muslims are often only discussed as being vulnerable or at risk of violent extremism.**

This is partly fuelled by the strong emphasis within counterterrorism research on violent extremists of the Islamic faith and the over-representation of young people within this group<sup>15</sup>. **In contrast, this research illustrates that as producers of anti-violence internet campaigns, young Muslims are potentially powerful agents for community empowerment and resilience.** While this study also suggests there are vulnerable young people in such communities, when researchers focus only on this group they risk ignoring the substantive role young people play in resisting violent narratives.

This report begins by briefly describing the methodological approach adopted in this study before outlining the respondents' interpretations of six of the online anti-violence campaigns examined in this project. The first two initiatives discussed—the *Silence*

is *Betrayal* video clip and the *Y Factor* radio program—are both community-developed and sponsored initiatives that promote non-violent political activism. Next, the report describes audience responses to two government-badged websites—*secureNSW* and *Resilient Communities*—both of which aim to counter violent narratives.

The last two websites discussed in this report are *Islamate* and *Youthink*, both of which were developed by organisations with funding under the Building Community Resilience grants scheme. The other websites and Youtube videos examined in this study included the *My Muslim Mates Are...* video<sup>16</sup> and Somali Podcast initiative<sup>17</sup>—both created by the NSW Community Relations Commission—the *Muslimvillage.com* website<sup>18</sup> and an interview with Sheikh Fiez Mohammed featured on this site<sup>19</sup>.

## Methods

### Recruitment of respondents

The respondents of this study included young Muslim Sydneysiders, Muslim community workers and leaders. Fifty-one of this study's 55 respondents provided demographic information to the research team. Forty-three respondents were male and at least 37 interviewees were aged between 18 and 30. Eleven were community and social workers who had experience in working with Muslim youth. Some of these community and social workers were themselves young Muslims under the age of 30. In addition, the research team interviewed three religious leaders (sheikhs).

The research team did not seek a sample of respondents that was representative of Sydney's Muslim youth. We expected that young Muslim Sydneysiders would be reluctant to participate in a study sponsored by the Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee (ANZCTC). This assumption proved to be correct making opportunistic recruitment strategies more appropriate for this study.

The research team also employed purposeful sampling techniques, prioritising the recruitment of young men of Lebanese ethnicity. It is important to capture the opinions of these young Lebanese Australians as they have arguably been more affected by Australia's counterterrorism laws than any other group. Twenty-five of the respondents identified as being of Lebanese ancestry, while the heritage of the remainder included 20 other ethnic groups.

As researchers note, young men of Lebanese descent are over-represented among those convicted of terrorism related offences in Australia<sup>20</sup>. Media reporting on the violent extremist threat to this country also often emphasises that this group is of greatest concern to Australian police and intelligence agencies<sup>21</sup>. Therefore it's important to understand (1) this group's behaviour as an audience of CVE communication campaigns and (2) how the media and likely police focus on their community affects this behaviour.

### Vulnerable audiences?

Our interviews suggest that it's highly unlikely we interviewed anyone at risk of involvement in violent extremist activities but we didn't aim to access only the most vulnerable audiences. CVE communication campaigns aren't designed for one purpose (deradicalisation) nor are they created with one audience in mind. Other researchers point to the fact that to challenge violent propaganda, a variety of counter narratives will need to be delivered to a range of target audiences<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, the government-produced Resilient Communities website is designed with CVE objectives but it mainly targets community leaders rather than vulnerable youth.

**Although we didn't interview 'at risk' youth, our understanding of this group's behaviour was informed by those who interact with them. The respondents of this study included sheikhs and others who are involved in deradicalisation work.**

A small number of our young respondents also talked about their efforts in internet chat rooms to reach out to young people who they feel are at risk. In addition, we talked to a small number of people who have contact with ‘fringe’ groups that have little interaction with the broader community.

Importantly, we interviewed a small number of representatives from organisations that media agencies have labelled ‘extremist’. In contrast to the media reporting on these so-called ‘firebrand’ sheikhs, we found them to be respectful, courteous and ultimately keen to contribute to this study because of their concerns about the radicalising effects of the internet. Thus while this report doesn’t include the views of ‘at risk’ youth, it still documents the opinions a variety of Muslim audiences that are targeted by CVE communication campaigns.

## Audience studies

Drawing on the reception studies<sup>23</sup> approach to audience research, the research team showed the respondents a variety of websites to understand how they interpret these materials<sup>24</sup>. These websites included government-badged sites, websites developed with government sponsorship as well as YouTube video clips and other internet-based materials that were wholly community funded and created. All of these websites and Youtube video clips were included in this study because they are designed either to counter violent propaganda or promote anti-violence messages.

A number of internet materials were included in the study because of their reputed popularity among young Muslim Sydneysiders including the *Y Factor*’s Facebook sites and the *Silence is Betrayal* video clip. While these materials aren’t designed to support CVE strategies, they promote peaceful types of protest and expression. The Australian Government assumes that such initiatives play a role in countering violent extremism, according to its CVE Strategy:

‘The threat to Australia of violent extremism is reduced as individuals and groups choose non-violent expression of views. Supporting individuals to choose non-violent forms of expression will reduce the threat of violent extremism to Australia. A reduced threat environment may encourage individuals to feel better able to engage in Australia’s democratic process and freely express their views and grievances in non-violent ways. These concepts are mutually reinforcing<sup>25</sup>.

This study tested these assumptions and sought to understand if and how such materials might undermine violent narratives.

The research interviews typically began with the research team asking the respondents about which of the selected websites they were familiar with. Full-colour screen grabs from each of the websites and YouTube clips were printed onto the interview questionnaire and shown to the participants. This prompted the respondents to talk about the websites that they had viewed prior to participating in the study. Then, using a tablet PC, the respondents browsed some of the websites while the research team asked them further questions.

There was insufficient time during the interviews for the respondents to view all of the internet materials examined in this study. The research team typically asked the respondents to select several websites that they were interested in viewing and then recommended they view other sites. The research team prioritised the testing of government and government-funded websites and asked most respondents to view such sites.

Through examining multiple websites this study offers an insight into how young Muslim audiences act as users and, to a lesser extent, producers of internet content. However, this report doesn’t provide a comprehensive insight into how the respondents interpreted each of the 10 websites and YouTube clips included in this study. Instead, this report offers considerable information on audience responses to the sites most often viewed and discussed: *Resilient Communities*, *secureNSW*, *Y Factor*, *Islamate* and *Silence is Betrayal*.

## Websites and internet-based materials examined

### Silence is Betrayal: Sydney flash mob for Syria

The research team included the *Silence is Betrayal* video<sup>26</sup> in this study not only because it promotes a non-violent form of political protest but because of its rumoured popularity. **In November 2013 the video had over 175,000 ‘views’ on YouTube. Significantly more people have watched this video than have viewed the others examined.** At the same time, for example, the Community Relations Commission’s *My Muslim Mates Are* YouTube video had received around 5,000 views. The most popular video on the *Islamate* website (sponsored under the Building Community Resilience grants program) had around 900 views and the interview with Sheikh Feiz on *Muslimvillage.com* had approximately 8,600 views.

It is difficult to measure how many viewers of the *Silence is Betrayal* video were Muslim and how many liked it. However, this video’s large number of views may suggest that campaigns created entirely by Muslim communities engage these communities more readily than government-sponsored communication strategies. Indeed, one video created by Sydney-based spoken-word artist Kamal Saleh has attracted over 1.8 million views on YouTube<sup>27</sup>. Another of his videos which responds to the *Innocence of Muslims* film has over 1.2 million views<sup>28</sup>. Although not an organiser of the *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob, Saleh was involved in the creation and promotion of its video.

This study didn’t examine Saleh’s other work because the Chief Researcher felt that some of his videos are likely to be divisive. For example, the highly popular *Why I Hate Religion But Love Jesus: Muslim Version*<sup>29</sup> challenges basic tenets of the Christian faith while another of his videos echoes the ‘us versus them’ (the Ummah versus Western governments) narrative<sup>30</sup> used by groups promoting violence. However, in hindsight, the decision not to examine more of Saleh’s work in this study was wrong; the role that his work may play in providing avenues for non-violent expression merits further investigation.

### **Silence is Betrayal Sydney flash mob for Syria: description**

**The *Silence is Betrayal* video documents a ‘flash mob’ staged at Sydney’s Darling Harbour in May 2012.** As described in one study, ‘in a flash mob, strangers come together in a public place, perform an unusual behaviour and randomly disperse’<sup>31</sup>. Flash mobs sometimes involve dance and/or a theatrical performance; they have been used by advertisers but the term ‘flash mob’ is also used to describe violent protests<sup>32</sup>. Although the flash mob phenomenon pre-dates the new media age, flash mobs have been transformed by new media technologies, including mobile phones and social media websites, which are now used for their organisation and broadcast.

The flash mob video presents a theatrical performance which acted as a protest against the war in Syria. The flash mob was a silent performance with the participants depicting scenes from the Syrian civil war. For most of the video the performers are essentially frozen in place, as if they are a three dimensional and living version of still photographs from the war.

Some of the actors portray soldiers with their hands pointing like guns and are positioned stomping on their cowering victims. Some of the other performers simply stand, dressed in black, with blank expressions, holding placards with slogans such as ‘130,000 refugees’, ‘open your eyes’, ‘free Syria’. As the actors hold their positions, the video shows members of the public and tourists taking photos of them as they perform. Although music wasn’t used during this silent protest, its use in the video appears to heighten the flash mob’s solemn tone.

Towards the end of the video, a group of the performers point their hands to resemble guns and jerk, as if firing their weapons. As they fire some of the other performers—their targets—kneel down, as if they were shot. As the performance ends, each of the actors stands silently pointing towards an overpass where a banner is unfurled stating ‘silence is betrayal # Syria’.

As numerous videos on YouTube illustrate, flash mobs have been used as a form of political protest in a variety of countries. It was as a result of viewing footage of flash mob protests in Canada that the organisers of the *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob in Sydney decided to use this form of protest to raise awareness of the situation in Syria<sup>33</sup>. Indeed there are a number of videos on YouTube under the *Silence is Betrayal* banner that feature flash mob performances that are unrelated to the Sydney-based group. During an episode of the *Y Factor* radio program (discussed in the next chapter), one of the flash mob's organisers described the aim of the protest in these words:

'It's just a movement of young people trying to raise awareness for justice in the world. The idea is simple, if we remain silent we betray our moral obligations to stand up against injustice and stand up for justice'.<sup>34</sup>

This young man then explained that the video's title is taken from a quote by Martin Luther King. King reportedly said in relation to the Vietnam War 'a time comes when silence is betrayal'<sup>35</sup>. As King was a champion of non-violent civil disobedience and the video depicts a non-violent political protest, it's important to understand whether its audiences interpret it in this way—whether they support non-violent forms of protest after viewing the video. This study sought to understand how such an initiative might function to undermine messages that promote violence.

## Motivated by promotion of non-violence

Some of this study's respondents were involved in organising the *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob and talked about their motivations for participating in it. One respondent stated that the protest was designed to provide young people with a means to express themselves in a non-violent manner:

'Roslyn:... So why did you get involved in that [the flash mob]? What attracted you to [it]...

Interviewee 1: Oh, I guess this is issue we were speaking about before, right: the Syria issue. So we were passionate about it. I think that was the first thing.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, it was really... it was about 11 months, I remember, into the conflict and nothing was really happening. And we sort of started the team to give the youth an avenue to voice their views not in a violent manner. You don't have to protest or you don't have to scream or anything, so we thought a silent flash mob is the best way to get a message across. And it was actually really good. We got a really good response from overseas as well.' (8 May, 7.05).

Another respondent explained that he became involved in the flash mob to raise public awareness of the situation in Syria—the protest's main purpose. For this respondent, the flash mob also appeared to present him with an opportunity to address his frustration at the disproportionate lack of Western media coverage on atrocities in the Middle East:

'Roslyn: So why did you decide that that was something to do? Why do that [become part of the flash mob]?

Interviewee: Because I felt Syria is getting such a lack of media coverage that people really needed to be aware of it. No one knows what's really happening in Syria as well as Iraq or as well as all those sort of countries. They're just sort of swept under the rug and left there, compared to—and I say this cautiously—like for instance, you get the Boston bombings and you see how much media coverage they've got.

I don't believe that the Boston bombings are any less important than what's happening in those countries, but if you put it on a scale sort of thing, I think there was three people that were killed in Boston, compared to how many have been killed in Syria? ...And those scenes don't even hit the media and that's what saddens me. They really do value an American life so much more than a Syrian life or something of that nature and that gets to me.' (30 April, 11.39).

Another respondent said that he became involved in the flash mob not only to increase public awareness of the Syrian conflict but also raise funds for charities that assist the Syrian people. This respondent felt that the flash mob achieved these objectives because the video received a high number of views on YouTube and raised money for the 'Postcards from Syria' charity.

**Conclusions: The *Silence is Betrayal* video demonstrates that young Muslim Sydneysiders aren't merely an audience for campaigns promoting non-violence. Audiences in a new media age are increasingly both consumers and producers of media content. Communication researchers refer to these audiences as 'prosumers' and 'producers' arguing that the clear division between media 'producer' and 'consumer' no longer applies in a digital age<sup>36</sup>. Young Muslim audiences are no exception to this trend. This study shows they are creating their own communication campaigns and promoting non-violent activism through YouTube videos, podcasts and Facebook discussion groups.**

**The *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob, however, was more than just a communication campaign to its participants. As some respondents described, it provided an avenue and indeed a physical means for them to express their frustrations in a non-violent manner.**

### **How the respondents heard about the flash mob**

Most of the respondents who had seen the *Silence is Betrayal* video viewed it because it was shared on Facebook. Some knew about it because their friends or relatives had been involved in the flash mob and had sent them a link to the video. In addition, as already described, some of the respondents knew about the flash mob because they had participated in it.

**Conclusions: The respondents of this study appeared to be more likely to watch, share and engage with information campaigns sent to them by friends and family. Social media sites and 'word of mouth' appear to be the best ways to distribute information to young Muslim audiences. Communication campaigns aimed at these audiences should be linked to social media sites including Facebook.**

**To tap into the people-to-people and social media networks that these audiences use, communication strategists should engage directly with young Muslims and involve them in the creation of government-sponsored anti-violence communication campaigns. Furthermore, government agencies should seek the advice of young Muslim communication professionals (journalists, advertisers and marketers) from across Australia.**

**Such young professionals are well placed to advise government agencies on the best ways to engage young Muslim audiences on CVE issues. They not only have the professional know-how to produce high-quality campaigns, they also understand these target audiences' needs, wants and favoured methods of communication. In addition, they can provide up-to-date information on these audiences' behaviour as it changes over time.**

### **Respondents' positive interpretations of the *Silence is Betrayal* video**

The respondents made few negative comments about the video. In praising it, some respondents appreciated the creativity of the performance and the use of a flash mob as a form of protest. One of the young respondents, for example, felt that a creative approach was likely to appeal to people of his generation:

'yes, it's certainly a new way of protesting. You know our generation likes things creative. So this is something that attracts me, like 'wow', it's cool... because things that are happening in the Muslim world obviously affect us but it depends how we express our frustration.' (9 May 14.09).

A youth worker also felt that the creative approach would make the video attractive to young people, including her 'tough' clients. She said that the video was likely to have a broad appeal because despite the fact that it documented a silent protest, it was still 'in your face' and 'hard hitting'.

'Interviewee: I saw that one [the *Silence is Betrayal* video], that was fantastic, these guys did an awesome job.

Roslyn: so what did you like about that?



I: I think it was relevant, it was done in such a creative way that young people across the board, I could see my tough clients, I could see my less angry clients, all just relating to it... they researched their approach well... I was really impressed by that.

R: So why do you think that your clients would be attracted to that?

I: Because it was raw, it wasn't soft, it was in your face... it was hard hitting but at the same time they didn't need to be angry or they didn't need to... shout or scream or anything... (13 May 2013).

One of the sheikhs interviewed for this study praised the flash mob because he felt it empowered Muslim youth and spoke to them in their 'language':

'Roslyn: So why do you think that that [the *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob] is so powerful?

Interviewee: Because it's the language of the youth. It was presented in a manner... it was created by the youth. The youth were empowered to do what they did, Mashallah... (1 May 1.18).

This respondent also suggested that the flash mob showed young people that they have a choice in how they react to the atrocities in Syria and directed them towards positive actions. He also argued that the video had a wide influence reaching audiences in the UK and US.

**Conclusions: Many of this study's respondents praised the *Silence is Betrayal* video and few made negative comments about it. However, this example doesn't demonstrate that communication campaigns promoting non-violence steer vulnerable audiences away from violent paths. On the whole, rather than changing their opinions, the video clip appeared to affirm the respondents' pre-existing support for non-violent forms of expression and protest.**

**This study demonstrates that it is difficult to truly understand how vulnerable audiences behave by only talking to people who know them. This is especially the case when these associates support non-violent forms of political expression. To understand how individuals at risk respond to campaigns promoting non-violence, researchers must interview these vulnerable groups. However, such research can carry considerable risks. We didn't interview some groups our respondents identified as at risk because these groups were sometimes already involved in violent criminal activities.**

## Broad appeal

This study supports the respondents' suggestion that the *Silence is Betrayal* video appeals to a broad section of Sydney's Muslim communities including those who have been labelled as 'extremist' in media reports. One of the respondents, who said that people 'in the community, would consider me as someone who is radical' (5 June 2013), stated that the video reached the 'so-called fringe group':

'...People heard about this [the video]. The so-called fringe group heard about this...so this was well known. Did it reach to uneducated Moey<sup>37</sup>? Yes, because Facebook brought it home and a lot of... everyone was sharing and sharing and sharing. So it got through there on Facebook and I think it was a really good thing and it got coverage and they did it well... they did it really really well'. (5 June 2013).

Another respondent, who is associated with an organisation that media agencies have denounced as 'extremist', praised the video for its creativity. He argued furthermore that this kind of protest was likely to be more effective than demonstrations where participants scream and shout:

'that was very creative... I think something like protests don't always achieve the desired results but something creative like that. Number one: it gains more exposure and number two: people might actually listen to what you have to say because of the manner [in] which you conducted it. People who shout and scream and go down the street no one really cares...' (26 August 11.50).

This respondent also lauded the video for providing a new option for ‘communicating our frustrations’:

‘I think it’s a great idea, in terms of Muslims being able to express themselves and at the same time the general community looking at it the way they view it in terms of what you are trying to achieve from a protest... something like this, it shows that we have different mediums for communicating our frustrations’ (26 August 11.50).

Other more ‘conservative’ respondents praised the video for addressing an issue that young people are currently concerned about (11 September 12.31).

**Conclusions: This study indicates that unlike the existing government-sponsored CVE communication strategies, the *Silence is Betrayal* video appeals to a broad section of Sydney’s Muslim communities. The widespread popularity of this community-driven initiative, especially compared with government-sponsored CVE websites, lends weight to the core recommendation of this study:**

**Where possible, government agencies should support existing popular community-driven anti-violence online campaigns rather than prioritising the development of new websites to counter violent narratives.**

**Rather than ‘reinventing the wheel’ in countering violent propaganda, government agencies should tap into the initiatives and human resources that have a proven track record in challenging such narratives.**

## Criticisms – it will do little to change opinions

Although some respondents strongly supported the *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob, others felt it would do little to influence the situation in Syria or quell divisions within Australia about this issue. Media agencies have reported, for example, that the conflict in Syria has fuelled violent clashes between Sydney’s Sunni and Shiite Muslims. One report stated that ‘some suburbs have ‘no-go zones’ as death threats and verbal stoushes escalate into firebombings, bashings and shootings<sup>38</sup>. This situation prompted one respondent to suggest that instead of a flash mob, efforts should be made to persuade these groups to leave their ‘troubles’ in Syria:

‘Yeah, well if they wanted to bring forth a story [about Syria] and make people understand what’s going on overseas, a flash mob is not gonna do it... because if you want to better Syria, I’m sorry but the shit that’s going on in Sydney, a flash mob is not gonna help it...

So why, instead of doing a flash mob, why didn’t they get certain, a lot of people from different sects and brought together and show people ‘hey, let’s leave Syria as Syria’... you know what, they could have achieved a lot more by bringing in awareness to ‘...let’s leave political and religious and tyrannies overseas. We don’t need it here... Why do we need to bring our troubles over here when we’ve living happily over here’ (29 April, 8.51).

Other respondents felt that the flash mob would do little to influence pro-Assad supporters. Nevertheless, the majority of those who discussed the video supported the flash mob even when they recognised its limitations in effecting change in Syria and Australia. As none of the respondents appeared to support the Assad regime, this study can’t comment on how its supporters may interpret this video.

**Overall conclusions: There’s a growing body of literature which provides recommendations on how governments can assist Muslim communities to develop CVE narratives. With an emphasis on ‘empowering’ these communities, this literature sometimes gives the impression that such communities wait for government support before developing these initiatives. However, other studies draw attention to the fact that Muslim communities often develop CVE-like programs without government support or prompting<sup>39</sup>.**

**The *Silence is Betrayal* flash mob and video exemplifies that young Muslim Sydneysiders aren't waiting on government agencies to 'empower' them. These young people are driving their own anti-violence initiatives which significantly outshine government-sponsored CVE strategies in terms of their popularity and reach.**

**This report suggests that government agencies should seek to directly engage with the young people involved in such popular initiatives and investigate ways to support them and their campaigns where possible. This report also supports the findings of other studies which suggest that government agencies should only fund such campaigns 'where this does not impact on the credibility of the product, campaign or message'<sup>340</sup>.**

**However, although they wish to assist vulnerable members of their communities these young people appear to take exception to a CVE agenda which often appears to construct them as a 'problem community'. To engage with these young Muslim Sydneysiders, government agencies will therefore need to be willing to discuss this and other issues of importance to them. Such issues are likely to include the socio-economic disadvantage and violent crime currently affecting their communities.**

## Y Factor

More respondents knew about and used the *Y Factor*'s Facebook discussion page than any other website examined in this study. The *Y Factor* is described on its Facebook page as:

'a radio program that provides a platform for Sydney's Muslim youth to access a breakdown of news, current affairs and issues that affect them... The program... allow[s] the Muslim youth to engage in [an] intelligent discussion of the contemporary news and issues both here in Australian society and abroad...'<sup>341</sup>.

The *Y Factor* radio program began in 2011 and is broadcast through community radio station 'The Voice of Islam' based in Lakemba. The group targets Muslim youth aged between 18 and 30<sup>342</sup>. Apart from broadcasting a weekly radio program, the group also has a YouTube channel and two Facebook pages. While one Facebook page is accessible to all internet users, *Y Factor*'s Facebook discussion forum is now a closed group to which potential participants must apply to join.

The research team selected the *Y Factor*'s internet-based products for analysis after various community sources advised us that the program is popular with young Muslim Sydneysiders. The study also examined *Y Factor* because the group tends to promote non-violent methods of political and social activism. As already described in this report, such activities align with Australia's CVE Strategy, which suggests that 'supporting individuals to choose non-violent forms of expression will reduce the threat of violent extremism to Australia'<sup>343</sup>. **While the *Y Factor* initiative is not designed to 'counter violent extremism' and some of its members strongly criticise Australia's CVE agenda, it was examined because of the role it might play in undermining messages that promote violence.**

### *Y Factor* radio program: description

The *Y Factor* radio program covers a wide range of topics with the team providing their views on local, national and international events including, for example, the 2013 federal election, the Edward Snowden scandal and the war in Syria. In addition, the group has invited a range of guests to speak on more general topics including mental health issues, 'sustainable eating' and the Higher School Certificate (HSC) 'experience'.

In many of the episodes the presenters and their guests provide advice that would seem valuable for their young target audiences. The HSC / careers episode, for example, aimed to 'let them [students] know that there are a lot of pathways that are possible for them after the HSC'<sup>344</sup>. In another episode, the team spoke with a psychologist and a youth worker who provided advice 'pertaining to young people, crime, mental health, belonging, as well as the struggles and challenges adolescents face on a day-to-day basis'<sup>345</sup>.

Given that scholars often cite ‘the need to belong’ among factors that make people vulnerable to violent narratives<sup>46</sup>, **such advice could assist the very small number<sup>47</sup> of individuals at risk in Sydney’s Muslim communities.**

Although *Y Factor* is not designed as a CVE initiative, many of its episodes are likely to help its young listeners learn about non-violent ways of expressing themselves. During one episode, for example, the presenters spoke with a trainer who has developed a variety of programs to assist young people to ‘break the cycle of violence’ and ‘express their anger in more positive and healthy ways<sup>48</sup>. In another episode, guest Siraj Wahhaj described his success in using non-violent activism to reduce drug-related crimes in Brooklyn, New York, where he is based<sup>49</sup>. He encouraged listeners to use such means to address their concerns about social ills.

### The importance of the discussion page

The *Y Factor*’s Facebook discussion group currently has around 2,000 members. To some extent the *Y Factor*’s discussion page mirrors the radio program in that both address a range of issues affecting Muslim communities living in Sydney and abroad. However, the discussion page covers a far more eclectic variety of topics ranging from a debate about how much religious scholars should be paid, to one user’s request for assistance regarding a stolen iPad. The *Y Factor*’s followers use the page for a variety of purposes including posting information about upcoming local events, provoking debate about religious matters and sharing videos and online articles.

On the whole, the discussion page appears to provide a platform for its users to trigger conversation and debate about issues of importance to them. Although the discussion page does not promote non-violent political and social activism to the same extent that the radio program appears to, its role in providing young people with an avenue for debate is still important. **Some respondents argued that structural and power relations within Sydney’s Muslim communities mean that there are few avenues for young Muslims to take up leadership roles and to focus community attention on their needs.** One respondent argued for example,

‘...for 20 years, the same people were rotating on the seats in the [name of Muslim community organisation] and [name of Islamic body] has still got the same people from 30 years ago. And the [name of a second Islamic body] has got the same people and there’s really no room to... no platform to speak on and to the community... So we’ve got a whole lot of young people with the capacity if they’re mentored to get up there and do stuff, but there’s no room at the top. There’s no room at the top of the moment’  
(24 April, 11.42).

**While the research team found no evidence that initiatives like *Y Factor* provide young Muslim Sydneysiders with the capacity to challenge such power structures, they do appear to provide avenues for expression that wouldn’t otherwise exist.** As one respondent described,

‘I think up until *Y Factor* came along, there probably weren’t many options. I think it’s true... the fact that social media is so big now, I mean, it’s such an easily accessible way of having young people engage with each other about issues that they wanna talk about. That’s probably provided that platform which didn’t exist before.’ (8 May 10.28).

However, the role that the discussion page may play in supporting Australia’s CVE agenda is not clear-cut. Although some users complain that the *Y Factor* team excessively moderates the discussion page, participants still express a myriad of opinions through the site. Some comments and posts appear to undermine Australia’s CVE Strategy. For example, one user promoted a conference which directly challenges the Attorney-General’s Department and ASIO’s ‘interference in the Muslim community’ through its grants programs, surveillance and creation of a ‘compliant leadership’<sup>51</sup>.

**Conclusions: More respondents knew about and used the *Y Factor*’s Facebook discussion page than any other website examined in this study. Although it was not developed as a CVE initiative, the *Y Factor* radio program has the potential to build community resilience to violent narratives by directly advising listeners about how they can participate in non-violent social activism. In addition, the *Y Factor* group appears to play an important role in providing young Muslim Sydneysiders with new avenues to express their opinions and draw attention to their concerns.**

**Government agencies that are concerned about the influence of violent narratives within Sydney's Muslim communities should view the promotion of young Muslim voices with optimism. As argued within existing research, a rise in political and social activism within communities 'renders violence unnecessary by offering individuals and groups open and legitimate outlets for their concerns, giving them a voice in the public arena and an opportunity to influence political and policy outcomes'<sup>52</sup>. However, the role that *Y Factor*'s discussion page might play in supporting Australia's CVE agenda is not clear-cut as some of its content challenges Australia's CVE strategy.**

## How the respondents use the *Y Factor*'s websites

Some respondents regularly visit the *Y Factor*'s discussion page. However, other respondents wait for it to come to them, only visiting the page when they see a post from it in their Facebook feed:

'Roslyn: But is it [the *Y Factor* discussion page] something that you would go on, say, on a daily basis or on a weekly basis or something?

Interviewee: Probably a few times a week. I don't actually go on it. I don't make an effort. If it pops up on my news feed. So either someone posts and then someone from my friends' list comments and then it'll show up. So whenever it shows up on my news feed, then I'll make the effort. Otherwise, I never make... I never go out of my way to actually open up the page and see what's happening.' (6 May 7.27).

The respondents also said that this is how they use other websites, suggesting that this may be typical of their internet use. Few respondents, for example, visit *Muslimvillage.com* on a regular basis and will only read articles from this site when, in the words of one respondent, '[editor] Ahmed Kilani spams me' (8 May, 7.05) via email.

While the respondents talked about accessing the *Y Factor* discussion page as a result of Facebook updates, many said they use Facebook on a regular basis and as a one-stop-shop for social networking and receiving information. More respondents talked about using this social networking site than any other website and many appeared to use it on a daily basis. The respondents' high use of Facebook mirrors the site's popularity among the broader Australian population. Nine million Australians reportedly use Facebook on a daily basis<sup>53</sup> making it Australia's second most popular website after Google<sup>54</sup>.

**Conclusions: Communication strategists should not expect their young Muslim target audiences to visit their websites even when such audiences like or are interested in these sites. Even the respondents who like the *Y Factor* and *Muslimvillage.com* for example, do not make an effort to visit these groups' websites. Instead, they wait for these websites to come to them through Facebook feeds and email notifications. This suggests that Young Muslim audiences are best targeted by bringing information to them through the website they appear to use most often: Facebook.**

## Visiting the discussion page but not listening to the radio program

Few respondents listened to the *Y Factor* radio program on a regular basis. Many said they only listen to the radio while driving. Given that the program is broadcast for only an hour per week, these respondents said that it was seldom playing when they were in the car. Some respondents said that they don't listen to radio at all. Others said they don't receive the frequency on which the *Y Factor* radio program is broadcast because, in the words of one interviewee, 'they're utilizing a community radio station that has a radius of like thirty centimetres' (24 April, 4.43). The respondents who did regularly listen to the program often heard it because their households frequently listen to the station on which the program is broadcast.

The *Y Factor* team recognises that some of their target audience has difficulty receiving their radio program. In order to broaden their listenership, *Y Factor* now promotes podcasts from the program through its Facebook pages. This would seem like a wise decision as the group appears to be tailoring their 'product' to meet the needs of their target audience. However, some respondents said that they would not listen to the podcasts because they are too long.

**Conclusions: Although the *Y Factor*'s discussion page was popular with this study's respondents, few listen to the radio program produced by the group. There are several things *Y Factor* can do to increase the size of their listenership. The group should, for example, follow the lead of larger radio stations and provide their audience with shorter podcasts (under 10 minutes). In addition, as some respondents were more attracted to YouTube video clips than radio, *Y Factor* could consider videotaping their radio program more often to try to appeal to such audiences.**

## Why the respondents like *Y Factor*

Many of this study's respondents liked the *Y Factor*'s discussion page for a variety of reasons. Some use it to find out about community news and events while others visit it to learn more about other people's opinions. Some respondents like that the discussion page touches on both serious and lighthearted topics while staying 'relevant' and up-to-date on current issues.

'So, it has the element of like a fun, new exciting thing happening and at the same time it's got an element of seriousness. So, I think they're good in that sense... You have the controversial side and then you have the fun and exciting side and you have the news side, then you have all the issues that are relevant and so there are so many different things happening' (24 April, 4.43).

Other respondents appreciate that *Y Factor* provides a forum where a large group of young Muslims can come together to share their views. One respondent, for example, suggested that the discussion page provides a space for young Muslims to share information on issues that are important to them including news that wouldn't usually be reported in the mainstream media.

'Roslyn: So what attracted you to the Facebook site?

Interviewee: I was invited to look by a friend and I saw a big group of Muslims pretty much and I thought yeah, cool...

R: So, what would be an example of something that might be good that you're attracted to [about the page]?

I: It could be that they have good reminders or motivational posts, things like that.

R: So reminders of?

I: Like religious reminders, things like that, or even just being a good person, stuff like that... Also... news that you wouldn't really have picked up. Say, someone might've found something like a piece of news that's going on somewhere in the world that you wouldn't have seen it anywhere else. So, it's kind of a good way to get information' (23 April, 5.23).

Another respondent liked the variety of topics covered on the *Y Factor* discussion page and enjoyed engaging in an 'insightful discussion' through the page.

'Roslyn:... So what do you like about the Facebook site then?

Interviewee:... because there's quite a large amount of members there, so usually there's a lot of really interesting discussions there, certain topics, so it's always good to check out what's going on. And it's –

R: And what kind of topics do you reckon are most interesting on that site?

I: It ranges from, say, Islamic knowledge to theories on interfaith. Yesterday, there was a thread on evolution and it was really interesting how they get information from different sources and you find a lot of things that you didn't know about. It's good. It's insightful discussion.

R: So is it a bit of an intellectual discussion?

I: Yeah. Mainly, yeah' (30 April 2.02).

Like this respondent, others enjoyed engaging in debate on the *Y Factor*'s discussion page. Some appreciated that the page provided them with an opportunity to share their knowledge on various topics and correct others' misconceptions.

**Conclusions: Many of this study's respondents like and regularly use the *Y Factor's* Facebook discussion page. The research team found that even respondents who do not like the page are still subscribed to it and receive regular updates from it via Facebook. This suggests that the page is an important conduit through which communication strategists can reach young Muslim audiences. However, this does not make the site an ideal medium through which government agencies can spread CVE information.**

**It is likely that the forum's users will be hostile to any overt government intrusion on the discussion page. Some users are already averse to the government's CVE agenda and will most likely target and 'troll' any government-badged post on the site. Furthermore, government messaging is likely to be jarring in a space created for young people to freely express their opinions and control the content. It would be better if government agencies provided information to the *Y Factor's* audience as guests on the radio program. The research team notes that NSW Police officers have been guests on the program on several occasions.**

### Criticisms and breakaway groups

Although many respondents liked the *Y Factor* and some were regular contributors to its Facebook discussion forum, others suggested that the conversation on the page isn't constructive. Some of the interviewees said they no longer contribute to the forum because of its argumentative nature:

Interviewee: people just rant, I guess. People just have a lot of time on their hands.

Roslyn: Cause it's quite political, isn't it? Is that what you're talking about?

Interviewee 1: Not really. They're just stupid comments.

Interviewee 2: It can become political, I think, at times. But generally just people go on there and just argue with each other for, you know, for the...

R: For the sake of it?

I1: For the sake of arguing.

I2: Honestly, I don't even bother anymore, to be honest. I used to sort of follow some posts but it's become ridiculous.' (8 May, 7.05).

Other respondents stated that there is little point in engaging in arguments on the discussion page because many users have fixed opinions that they will not change. As one respondent said 'you're not going to convert the masses or get them to see things from your point of view' (6 May, 7.27).

The respondents suggested that several 'breakaway' groups have formed partly as a result of audience dissatisfaction with the *Y Factor*. One of the respondents said that he preferred to visit one of these other online groups because it provided him with the opportunity to engage in a more intellectual argument online:

R: So what attracted you to this other group?

I: Like with *Y Factor* it's much more like sharing your first world problems sometimes... Whereas with Samarqand it's always straight to the point, you can have an intellectual [discussion]. Even though some of the people might not have the same point of view as you, when you argue with them they have references to back it up. Like it's much more intellectual than *YFactor*... There's not too many trolls and they don't start sharing silly things...' (9 May 14:09).

However, other respondents suggested that the 'trolls' are the ones creating the break-away groups:

‘... I mean, the group that had been causing all the controversy had set up another page, a Facebook page, themselves because they felt that the *Y Factor* wasn’t being serious enough [for them]... So they have broken away kinda thing, set this up and yeah, I guess that’s where the serious side happens. (24 April, 4.43).

**Conclusion: The *Y Factor* example may suggest that internet forums are limited in terms of the role they can play in reaching out to ‘at risk’ youth and challenging violent narratives. While the *Y Factor* discussion page was popular among the interviewees, some said the page was populated by ‘trolls’ and people wanting to ‘rant’. Consequently, some respondents have joined ‘breakaway’ internet forums. The *Y Factor* example shows that if users are unhappy with the discussion taking place on one internet forum, they will simply create or migrate to another. Indeed, some respondents said there was little point in engaging in arguments through internet forums as many users already have fixed opinions that they won’t change.**

### Criticism — it only appeals to one segment of the community

**Some respondents suggested that the *Y Factor*’s radio program and discussion page only appeal to the ‘university crowd’ and the group has a limited capacity to reach ‘at risk’ youth.** One respondent, who works for a youth outreach program suggested that the young people he works with do not know about the *Y Factor*:

Interviewee: ...to be honest I am not sure how exactly, how far and wide the reach is. It’s a certain type of demographic that they reach. The kids, the youth that we deal with, I wouldn’t say that they would necessarily listen to it

Roslyn: So you don’t think they go on *Y Factor* website?

Interviewee: Nah.

R: Do you think that they listen to the program?

I: Not really, I think it’s aimed more at maybe university students’ (respondent 1, 30 May, 18.00).

Another respondent echoed this view suggesting that the *Y Factor* team draws in people who are like them: university educated.

‘The impression I had was that usually young people go with a place that they identify with. And the young people who are there [on *Y Factor*]... they’re mostly university educated... So the community I know [and associate with] is generally reasonably well educated amongst the young people and not your shoot the kneecaps... kind of guys who I don’t think would be that interested in the *Y Factor*.’ (24 April, 11.42).

**Conclusions: This study supports the respondents’ suggestion that the *Y Factor* appeals most to highly educated young people. The research team found that our least educated respondents had not heard of the *Y Factor* whereas the respondents who regularly contribute to the discussion page were university students or graduates. However, we did not find that the program is exclusive and only appeals to the university educated; it’s just that it appears to most often reach and engage this group.**

### Conservative communities

**While the *Y Factor* appeared to appeal most to the more highly educated respondents of this study, it was less well received among more religiously conservative communities.** This study involved interviews with a small number of respondents (around 14) who identified as being from such communities. Although most of these respondents had heard of the *Y Factor*, they were not regular contributors to the discussion page and were not strong supporters of the group.

Some of these ‘conservative’ respondents did not engage with the *Y Factor*’s discussion page because they do not use Facebook or are sceptical about its value in effecting positive change:



'Interviewee: I don't participate in the discussions, I mainly go [on the *Y Factor* discussion page] just to advertise events...

Roslyn: And why is that, is it that the discussions don't interest you?

I: No, I just don't believe that Facebook is a conducive platform to actually getting any sort of results... [and] there's no moderation, there's no key goal or purpose' (26 August 11.50).

Another respondent described Facebook as 'Fitnabook'. 'Fitna' is an Arabic word which is used within the Qur'an to refer to a trial or temptation that can draw people into wrong-doing. Nevertheless, **the respondents from more conservative groups suggested that young people within their communities are still heavy users of Facebook, YouTube and other social media.** Some of these respondents said that they occasionally listen to the *Y Factor* radio program and visit the group's discussion page but overall the respondents from these communities demonstrate less interest in the *Y Factor* than other respondents.

**Overall conclusions: This study suggests that *Y Factor's* discussion page has a broad reach among Sydney's Muslim youth, attracting young people from various Muslim communities. However, it is favoured by the more highly educated and less 'conservative' segments of these audiences. Consequently while *Y Factor* provides several conduits through which government agencies might address young Muslim audiences, they will need to use other channels and modes of engagement to reach all segments.**

Although the *Y Factor* radio program has the potential to build community resilience to violent narratives, the group is unlikely to seek or accept CVE funding. Some of the *Y Factor* team worry that such funding comes with 'strings attached' while others argue that Australia's CVE agenda perpetuates negative stereotypes about their communities. Nevertheless, the *Y Factor* radio program appears to provide a valuable community service which may make the group eligible for other types of government funding. Specifically the group may be eligible for a grant under the Department of Immigration's Diversity and Social Cohesion Program<sup>55</sup> and should consider applying for this funding.

Alternatively, this report recommends that the Attorney-General's Department should develop a micro-grants scheme as part of its Building Community Resilience grants program. This micro-grants scheme could fund a radio marketing expert to provide advice to *Y Factor* on a one-off basis in order to help the group improve their reach among their primary target audience. Specifically, this expert could assist the group to improve the packaging of their podcasts so they can better distribute snippets of their program through their discussion forum.

#### The micro-grants scheme:

The Building Community Resilience grants program should include a micro-grants scheme to deliver small amounts of funds to community-driven initiatives as required. The micro-grants scheme would be designed to better (1) equip community groups to address 'flash points' (crises) as they arise, and (2) enable a wider range of groups to access government funding.

Under the current grants scheme applicants can only apply for funding through an annual application process. Government agencies could better equip communities to address crises as they occur. For example, a number of groups created YouTube video clips to prevent further violence after the so-called 'Sydney riots'. Micro-grants between \$2,000 and \$10,000 could be delivered to support these types of activities in the future as they are needed.

This study suggests that the current grants scheme may favour organisations whose staff have strong grant-writing skills when other groups, particularly those providing youth outreach services, may be more directly involved in CVE. Furthermore, some groups' lack of understanding about the grants process fuels their perception that the government favours and only funds certain organisations. In this way the grants program exacerbates resentment and existing divisions within Sydney's Muslim communities.

**While programs funded under the micro-grants scheme should be subjected to rigorous evaluation, the application process should be less bureaucratic and laborious than the larger grants program. Furthermore, the Attorney-General's Department and other agencies which assess these grants applications should provide more information to community groups on how their assessments are made. This should be done through a community forum which will enable potential recipients to ask questions so they can better navigate the application process.**

## Resilient Communities

The *Resilient Communities* website was launched in October 2011 by then federal Attorney-General Robert McClelland. According to the website, it 'provides information on what communities and the Australian Government are doing to build Resilient Communities that take action against violent extremism'<sup>56</sup>. The Attorney-General's Department, which maintains the site, states furthermore that the site 'provides a platform for sharing information with communities, encouraging non-violent expression of views and supporting efforts to reduce marginalisation'<sup>57</sup>.

Communities and academics contribute content to the website including through its blog and news sections; the other sections of the website mainly contain information produced by government sources. The website was included in this study because it's used as a medium through which the Australian Government distributes 'messages that challenge violent extremist ideologies including counter narratives'<sup>58</sup>.

### Resilient Communities site – more for community leaders than young audiences?

Some of the younger respondents weren't interested in viewing the *Resilient Communities* website. One respondent for example, seemed to dislike every aspect of the site:

'...honestly, just looking through it, it's dull. It's boring. I don't know where to go. There are pictures of old people everywhere. I'm not interested at all, to be honest... I hate smiling politicians. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. As soon as I see a smiling politician somewhere, I just move on'. (6 May 7.27).

Other respondents were less critical of the site but suggested they were unlikely to visit it again. One respondent for example, didn't see the website as being particularly relevant to her:

'It's not necessarily a website that I'm going to come back to. I haven't found anything to interest me... I'm not really going to spend time finding out what the threats are, I'm going to concentrate on getting through the working week' (15 May, 16.30).

Another respondent suggested that the *Silence is Betrayal* video was more interesting than the *Resilient Communities* site, arguing that people rarely go on government websites unless they're looking for specific information:

'It's [the video] out of the ordinary and it's...not that it's entertaining but it's got less of that boring factor than say going on a government website which you don't really tend to do generally unless you are after a particular piece of information or you are inclined that way to get that kinda knowledge' (15 May, 10.49).

While the younger respondents showed little interest in the *Resilient Communities* site, some community leaders doubted that it would attract younger audiences and 'at risk' youth. For example, one community leader stated:

'I think it is great for people that browse the internet or have a specific interest in this. Again is it really going to get to the disadvantaged youth that they are trying to target?' (28 May, 6.21).

However, one respondent's behaviour would suggest that the website's creators could entice more young users to visit the site if they sent ongoing reminders to this audience. This respondent had participated in a program sponsored by the Attorney-General's Department and although he visited the site rarely, he would occasionally view updates from it when the department emailed him:

'I did a program with the Attorney-General's 'The Generation Change'. So we did the social media workshop at the University of New South Wales. And that's when I first came across *Resilient Communities*... I do get emails from them, newsletters by my work email, yeah, with the latest. So sometimes I do click them and sometimes I don't... But it's not something I go on and visit regularly' (1 May, 10.14).

**Conclusions: Although some young respondents made positive comments about the *Resilient Communities* website, many simply weren't interested in visiting government websites on a regular basis. As this report already argues, communication strategists should not expect that young audiences will be motivated to visit CVE websites. They appear to be especially reluctant to visit these sites when they're government-badged. Indeed, this study suggests that some government-badged websites hold little appeal among young Muslim audiences and should be aimed at other target groups instead, including community leaders.**

Perhaps, recognising that this website is unlikely to engage younger users, the Attorney-General's Department advised the research team that the website's main target audience is 'community leaders or those active in community work'<sup>59</sup>. However, this study suggests that the department can do more to engage community leaders and work with them to ensure the website meets their needs.

### Making the site more accessible to community leaders

The community leaders interviewed for this study were more likely to know about the *Resilient Communities* website than the younger respondents and some praised the website's content. One community worker, for example, showed the research team a speech she'd printed from the site that she thought was 'fantastic' and would engage young audiences:

'I thought the speech [from the religious leader] was fantastic and he apparently gave it through a Friday sermon and that was [distributed] through the *Resilient Communities* [website], it was posted up there... I think things like that really do hit the nail on the head with the young people and I think it was fantastic if it was during a sermon at a mosque. I think we need more of that. We need to be having those conversations' (13 May 2013).

While some community leaders and social workers praised the *Resilient Communities* website, others said they never visit it. One of these leaders, for example, said she had little time and 'no reason' to view it:

'I probably heard about it [the website] somewhere but I had no real knowledge of where it is and no reason to get on there. I tend to go to places where I need to go because I don't have much time to basically browse... It's a matter of going through a hundred emails a day... I mean, to be serious, there's so much that's happening in our community. It's really hard to keep on top of everything'. (24 April, 11.42)

Other community leaders also suggested that they were time-poor. One of the sheikhs for example, said he has assistants to answer his email and manage his Facebook page because he has no time to handle these tasks himself.

While some community leaders spoke in positive terms about the website, others strongly disliked it and some could not understand how the site would benefit them. One social worker for example, said she preferred to visit other government sites which provide links to social services that her clients can use. In contrast, some respondents didn't believe that the *Resilient Communities* website provides similar practical information for them and their communities.

**Conclusions: This study supports the Attorney-General's Department's decision to target the *Resilient Communities* website towards community leaders. This group is more likely than the general community to engage with the site and support it. However, this study shows that some leaders don't visit the website and don't believe it's relevant to them.**

**The research team notes that the department already sends email updates about the *Resilient Communities* site to some community leaders. However, the department should consult further with these leaders to determine how to make the**

site more useful and accessible to them. For example, recognising that community leaders are time-poor, the department could send them succinct updates about the site through Facebook – a site that some use on a regular basis.

## Respondents' positive interpretations of the Resilient Communities website

The respondents appeared to react more positively to the *Resilient Communities* website than the *secureNSW* site (discussed in the next chapter). One respondent liked the *Resilient Communities* website better than *secureNSW* because he felt it was more 'approachable' and more 'positive'.

'Roslyn: So which one [website] do you identify with more?

Interviewee: Definitely the first one. The one that was called the Resilient Community, was it? I find that more approachable, I guess, in a way. I think it's more effective in achieving their goals.

R: Because it's with communities rather than...?

I: Yeah. It kind of works on getting the attitudes of people in a mostly positive manner.

R: Is it a website people will be tempted to go to?...

I: Yeah. In all honesty'. (30 April, 2.02)

This respondent then went on to describe other aspects of the website that he liked, in particular, he praised its emphasis on empowering communities and the fact that it didn't 'discriminate against anyone':

'I mean it's like the website has good intentions and they've done well to not kind of discriminate against anyone. Their goals are respectable and it seems like they are going about it in a decent way. Like I said, empowering communities was an important thing in countering violent extremism. So yeah, I have no problem with it. I like the way they're going about doing it'. (30 April, 2.02)

Other respondents appeared to like the website's focus on communities and the fact that it recognises their role in CVE.

**Conclusions: Some respondents saw the *Resilient Communities* website as 'positive' while others appreciated its emphasis on communities. Although the respondents still criticised this website they made more positive comments about it than the other government-badged website examined: *secureNSW*.**

**It's likely that the respondents' more positive reactions to the *Resilient Communities* website are traceable to the audience research the Attorney-General's Department conducted when constructing the site. In contrast, the creators of *secureNSW* haven't conducted any research on their audiences.**

**The Attorney-General's Department's research appears to have informed its decision not to use words such as 'terrorism' and 'extremism' on the *Resilient Communities*' homepage. This present (ASPI) study shows that such terms anger Muslim audiences yet they're displayed prominently on the *secureNSW* site. The differences between the two websites and the respondents' reactions to them suggest that audience research is likely to be an important component of any CVE communication strategy.**

## Negative responses to the Resilient Communities website – targeting and trying to change Muslims

**Some respondents believed that the *Resilient Communities* website only targets Muslims and is designed to alter their behaviour.** One respondent for example, suggested that the website's wording signals that it's targeted towards Muslim communities rather than other groups and its objective is to change them. In addition, he argued that photos of Muslims used on the site also demonstrate that it's directed towards his community rather than others.

‘Interviewee:... when you first go onto the website and you see just the wording of everything that’s on there, you think like – you know that it’s targeted at a particular group of people. And I think that, sort of, already puts them in a little circle by themselves, so instead of educating random people about these people, it’s, sort of, already putting this circle around and telling them, ‘This is the type of people that we need to change,’ as opposed to [saying] ‘There’re people out there that need to change.’

Roslyn: And so which group are you... [referring to]?

I: Look, in general, it’s not necessarily just Arab Muslims. I think having a little girl that’s wearing this headscarf and then having all these words, ‘Resilient Communities’ and ‘assimilation’ and ‘change’ and all that stuff, it paints a picture by itself more than the words do.’ (23 April 2.50)

It’s important to note that in contrast to the respondent’s claim, the *Resilient Communities* website doesn’t use the word ‘assimilation’. The respondent’s impression of the site is therefore most likely based on his pre-existing assumption that government agencies are trying to force Muslim communities to ‘assimilate’.

Other respondents said that the website is aimed specifically at Muslim communities. One interviewee suggested that the website is ‘tricky’ because it presents as being focused on community cohesion when it’s really only aimed at one group: Muslims ‘like we’re the only group that needs to be like, targeted because [they think] we’re so violent...’ (9 May 14.09). Another respondent also argued that the site was targeted at his community because he felt that the great majority of CVE initiatives are aimed at Muslims even if government agencies say they’re not:

‘Like, they [government agencies] make it a point never to ostensibly mention that it’s targeted in any – at any particular community. But [when] they’re like looking at it, someone with half a brain can realise it, 98% of the time it’s targeted the Muslim community’. (22 April, 22.24).

One of the research assistants argued furthermore, that the website ‘potentially sustains the dichotomy of the good Muslim and bad Muslim’ by featuring photos of women wearing brightly coloured hijabs<sup>60</sup>. He argued that when government websites repeatedly display such photos, they potentially exclude more conservative groups, and it signals that the Australian government prefers some Muslim communities rather than others.

## Respondents’ negative responses – government lexicon

Some interviewees reacted angrily when government-badged websites used certain terms including ‘counterterrorism’ which feature prominently on the *secureNSW* site. They displayed similar negative reactions on seeing the words ‘violent extremism’ on the *Resilient Communities* website.

In response to these angry reactions, the research team sometimes said that government agencies focus their efforts on preventing violence and don’t seek to punish people simply for having radical opinions. We clarified this position in order to observe how the respondents might react to this argument. However, some respondents interpreted any reference to extremism as evidence that government agencies are concerned with promoting a preferred version of Islam:

‘Interviewee: ...I think the name ‘violent extremist’ – that definitely needs to change.

Roslyn: What they [government agencies] argue is it’s not illegal to have an extreme opinion, so they focus on the violence.

Interviewee: A lot of people, though, will say that but they’re trying to change people’s opinions in order to prevent that violence from happening... ‘cause it’s always considered the counter extremism funding, it’s like government funding to change Islam... Like I said, it’s a marketing thing – a marketing issue, I think’. (8 May 10.28)

Another respondent disliked the use of the terms ‘violent extremism’ because he said that when the word ‘extreme’ is used, it provokes Muslim audiences to think about its opposite: ‘moderate’. Some of the respondents revealed that the word moderate

is now used as an insult in Sydney's Muslim communities and is directed towards people who are seen as 'sell-outs' or not 'real' Muslims. As this respondent stated the word moderate also suggests that the people it's applied to are 'diluted Muslim[s]':

'Roslyn: So even putting the word 'extremism' in there is still a problem?

Interviewee: Yeah, sort of, people automatically think, 'Well then the opposite side is a moderate'. Then what makes something moderate? Are they the diluted Muslim? That's what I don't understand... I think language is really important'. (2 May 3.43).

**Conclusions: This research echoes the findings of other studies which suggest that 'counter-terrorism measures are contributing to a wider sense among Muslims that they're being treated as a "suspect community" and targeted by authorities simply because of their religion'<sup>61</sup>. This perception negatively affects young Muslims' interpretations of government-badged CVE websites. Specifically, they believe they're the prime target for such sites which they feel aim to indoctrinate them with the government's preferred version of Islam.**

**It's difficult for government agencies to challenge the perception that its counterterrorism efforts are directed primarily at Muslim communities when government publications state that the 'primary terrorist threat to Australia... [is] extremists who follow a militant interpretation of Islam'<sup>62</sup>. This study suggests that while government agencies are unlikely to change this perception, they should not fuel it. For example, some respondents supported the Attorney-General's Department's decision to refer to various groups in its definition of 'violent extremism' instead of focusing on terrorists of the Islamic faith<sup>63</sup>. This approach is clearly preferable to the use of statements which support representations of Muslims as a 'problem' community.**

**This study echoes the findings of prior research<sup>64</sup> in demonstrating that although the terms 'violent extremism' are now widely used in government and academic literature, when used in CVE communication campaigns they're likely be counter-productive. Communication strategists should use these terms sparingly or not at all in campaigns targeted at young Muslim audiences.**

## **Resilient Communities' capacity to change opinions versus face-to-face strategies**

As already described, some respondents strongly disliked the use of the terms 'violent extremism' on the *Resilient Communities* website. One respondent however, changed his opinion after he read the site's definition of these terms:

'Interviewee: Why do they say 'violent extremism' and not just [say they're] against violence? ...'cause you said yourself that it's not illegal to have an extreme view so why didn't they just say, 'Take action against violence', period?... Let's just see what it [the website] says about violent extremism.

Roslyn: So, for the benefit of the tape. You're just looking at...?

I: Sorry, yeah, yeah, I'm looking at [the] 'What is violent extremism?' [page] Yeah.

[The respondent reads the webpage]

I: ... Yeah, well, it's good that in these examples of violent extremism, they didn't just focus on things that have happened because of Muslims or anything. They've listed different examples, so that's good. (2 May 3.43)

This example shows that the website has the capacity to change negative audience perceptions about government agencies' approaches to CVE. However, some respondents were so repelled by the terms 'violent extremism' that they didn't bother to read the website's definition of it.

While this study shows that the *Resilient Communities* website has the capacity to change its audience's opinions, some respondents strongly doubted that it would change the views of 'at risk' youth. In discussing the website, one respondent echoed the comments of other interviewees in suggesting that face-to-face communication strategies are likely to be more effective in reaching vulnerable audiences than online communication initiatives:

'Roslyn: Will people who are sort of, like you said, 'the angry crowd' be interested in websites like that?

Interviewee: To be honest, those people – I think for those types of people it would be more efficient to kind of approach them, talk to them physically rather than online because if they're the type of person that get really angry and make irrational decisions, I don't think they'd sit down and take the time to read things online. That's why maybe the internet wasn't the most appropriate thing for them.' (30 April, 2.02).

**Other respondents, including youth workers and sheikhs who undertake deradicalisation work, also suggested that face-to-face initiatives are more effective than online communication strategies when it comes to steering young people away from violent paths.** One of the sheikhs described only having to use one or two 'close face-to-face' interviews to assist a young person to find 'the middle path' (which rejects extremes)(11 September, 12.31). However, other respondents suggested that ongoing engagement is required for them to build trusting relationships with young people. One group of youth workers, whose service targets young people at risk of criminalisation, stated for example:

'Working one-on-one with youth is definitely, extremely effective... I think what's important as well, what we've found is very effective is not only seeing them one-on-one. Also consistently being there, week in week out. And they see us on a week-to-week basis. When we first started they weren't interested. It was more like [they said] 'who are these guys?'. ... After about a couple of months of us doing [that] then a lot of young people just started opening up, seeing that we were serious, we were coming every week'. (Interviewee 1, 30 May 18.00).

**Overall conclusions: This study shows that the Resilient Communities website has some capacity to change its audiences' opinions. However, it remains extremely difficult for government agencies to entice young audiences to view their websites. While some of this study's young respondents saw government websites as boring and irrelevant, they were repelled by the language that government-badged sites use including the term 'violent extremism'.**

**This report supports existing research on CVE narratives which suggests that governments have a limited role to play in directly delivering anti-violence campaigns to their young target audiences. Instead, this report concurs with the view that 'the area where government has the most natural and effective role to play in the counter-messaging spectrum' involves ensuring 'that government positions and policies are clearly articulated and directed at the right audiences'<sup>65</sup>. This includes providing clarity on Australia's counterterrorism legislation, young people's rights in relation to these laws, and correcting community misconceptions about key issues, including the current crisis in Syria.**

**This chapter also suggests that online CVE communication strategies are likely to be less effective than face-to-face initiatives in reaching and persuading 'at risk' youth. Many of the respondents, including young people, community leaders, youth workers and sheikhs said they had seen young people move away from violent and criminal paths as a result of face-to-face engagement strategies. It's difficult to find research to back this suggestion. However, some researchers suggest that supportive social networks play an important role in drawing individuals away from violent groups and behaviours<sup>66</sup>. If the respondents are correct then perhaps face-to-face initiatives provide a more effective means than online strategies to reengage young people with non-violent social networks. However, more research is required to verify this finding.**

## secureNSW: Factors shaping the interpretation of communications from NSW Police

As described by NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, the *secureNSW* website is

‘a joint initiative of the NSW Ministry for Police and Emergency Services and the NSW Police Force, supported by other NSW Government agencies that have counter terrorism responsibilities’<sup>67</sup>.

Although the website displays both the logos of the NSW Police Force and the NSW Government, for audiences the site is arguably most closely associated with the Police Force. The police chequered band for example, features prominently on the website's masthead (see Figure 1). In addition, photos of police officers and messages from senior police officials form a substantial part of the website's content. The website looks like a message from the NSW Police Force and this is how the respondents understood it.

The *secureNSW* homepage describes the site as ‘your one-stop-shop for counter terrorism information in New South Wales...’ and it purports to provide ‘an overview of NSW arrangements and our capability to counter terrorism’<sup>68</sup>. In a message on the website, the Commissioner of Police, Andrew Scipione, provides more information on its purpose, stating that the website's objectives include:

- ‘To provide counter terrorism information and demonstrate response capability to the community
- To engage and educate communities at risk of isolation and marginalisation on counter terrorism and related issues
- To communicate key information before, during and after an incident, and support recovery efforts online’<sup>69</sup>.

This report provides information in relation to the second of these three objectives.

### Lack of interest in the website

ASPI's research partners, the NSW Police Force, asked the research team to include the *secureNSW* website in this study. Not all of the respondents, however, viewed this site as some preferred to look at the other websites the study examined. Some respondents' lack of interest in this site is worth noting. For example, one respondent stated, that he didn't want to look at the website because he assumed it would be too ‘macabre’ and he preferred to use the internet for enjoyment:

‘Yeah. Like, I don't know if I saw like that [website], it's like I don't want to read that... I'm like, this doesn't look that interesting to me. It would be like, this is too macabre for me to read, too serious. I just kind of more enjoy myself while I'm there [on the internet] and not really focused on very serious things’ (23 April 5.23).

Although the respondent did look at the website when the research team asked him to, he affirmed that it didn't interest him:

‘...like I said, it's a really serious page. It's very serious. And unlike the stuff that I kinda read, is not very serious... I don't want to look at that’ (23 April 5.23).

Some of our other respondents appeared to use the internet predominantly for fun or to socialise, spending most of their time using Facebook for such purposes. This may suggest that like this respondent, there are young people who are reluctant to view websites that cover ‘serious’ topics like counterterrorism.

### NSW Police Facebook page — potentially more popular with young audiences

**Although some respondents displayed little interest in the *secureNSW* website, some mentioned that they are avid followers of the NSW Police Facebook page.** One respondent in particular could be described as a ‘fan’. When the research team showed her the *secureNSW* website she began to talk about why she liked the police Facebook page. Specifically, she liked that



it continually provides her with information she feels is interesting and relevant. She also appeared to like this page because it delivers facts about, in her words, 'real threat[s]' rather than 'bullshit' (15 May, 16.30):

'Interviewee: You know what I do like, I like the NSW Police page on Facebook, they just pop up with what's happening - I like that. That's really what's going on... And there was once [a post] about [name of her Sydney suburb], like I was just about to leave the house and they said 'a man got tasered as soon as he got in his car'. You know, it's relevant, you want to know where the criminals are.

Roslyn: So you subscribe to the NSW Police [Facebook page]?...

I: Yeah, you know that's not bullshit, they're just telling you what's happening. So they're like 'caught him, he been taking up-skirt shots'. There's been a billion of them by the way, sickos... there's like five posts like that every hour, that's a real threat to society...' (15 May, 16.30).

In contrast to her impressions of the NSW Police Facebook page, **this respondent suggested the *secureNSW* website wasn't relevant to her because she believes she's unlikely to ever be affected by a terrorist attack. Other respondents shared this view** and this appeared to undermine their support and interest in government sponsored CVE websites.

Other interviewees who 'liked' the NSW Police Facebook page also appeared to appreciate its no-nonsense approach which one said fits with the Police Force's 'clear-cut' image:

'The police are a very clear-cut organisation. You know what they're there for. There's no hidden agendas or you hope there isn't anyway. They're there for a specific purpose' (21 June, 12.41).

This belief, that police Facebook pages deliver unembellished facts may explain their appeal among respondents who distrust the NSW Police Force. **Several respondents, some representing organisations that have drawn back their face-to-face engagement with the NSW Police, subscribe to the main NSW Police Facebook page or the Facebook pages of their Local Area Commands.** They appear to trust these pages even when they dislike the Police Force as an institution.

**Conclusions: As already described in this report, some respondents demonstrated little interest in viewing the government-badged websites examined in this study. Although some talked passionately about the topics addressed on these sites, few appeared likely to visit these websites on an on-going basis.**

**In general, the respondents preferred to spend their time on the internet visiting websites they're already loyal to and that appeal to their interests. As it appears difficult to draw such audiences away from their favourite sites to visit government-badged websites, this report suggests that government agencies should deliver information to young Muslim Sydneysiders through the websites they currently use.**

**For example, rather than creating a new website to reach out to this audience, the NSW Police Force should capitalise on this audience's subscription to Police Facebook pages and target them through these channels. This study shows that even when young people are suspicious of government agencies and distrust the NSW Police Force they still subscribe to its Facebook pages and trust their content.**

**The research team notes that the NSW Police Force already advertises the *secureNSW* site through its main Facebook page. The Police Force could use its Facebook pages to better promote fact sheets from this or other websites including a shorter version of the 'Understanding Terrorism Laws'<sup>70</sup> brochure or the *Resilient Communities* website's 'Counter Terrorism Laws' page<sup>71</sup>.**

**NSW Police Facebook pages could also be used to conduct a quantitative survey of *secureNSW*'s audiences. Specifically, the Facebook pages could link to a survey form that its respondents could complete anonymously. This survey would aim to reveal the type of information audiences want about NSW counterterrorism arrangements and uncover any problems users may have in navigating the *secureNSW* website. The survey could also be promoted through other government Facebook pages in order to reach the website's multiple target audiences.**

## What secureNSW could do to further engage its audience

Some respondents provided recommendations to improve the *secureNSW* website's capacity to engage its audiences. One respondent suggested that the website would engage her more if it included stories or mock scenarios showing how the police can assist communities on counterterrorism issues. This approach may demystify the police's counterterrorism work for the website's audience and help them understand how it might be relevant to them.

Interviewee: So, there's not a lot of information [on the *secureNSW* site] of 'hey, did you know that?' or 'these are examples of stories', that kind of thing.

Roslyn: Are you saying that that needs to be on that website...?

I: Yes. It would make it more personal.

R: So say for example, they were to put up like a mock scenario...

I: I'd look through and I'd say, "Hey! That woman she had somebody who was in her family or was in next door worrying about –"

R: Yeah. 'I'm worried about my son'...

I: And here's a case story and – because you are always looking for somebody else who's done it before and see how it worked out.' (24 April 11.42)

**Conclusions: The *secureNSW* website should trial the use of examples or mock scenarios to better explain to its target audiences how NSW police assist communities on counterterrorism issues. These scenarios should be closely based on actual examples where community members have sought police assistance on such matters. The *secureNSW* website team can test community reactions to these scenarios through a quantitative survey delivered through police Facebook pages (as already described).**

## Respondents' interpretations: negative stereotyping of Muslim communities

**This study suggests that when communication strategists use the terms 'counter terrorism' within CVE communication campaigns, it's likely to be counterproductive to their aims.** Rather than engaging their Muslim target audiences, CVE messaging strategies which prominently display these terms are likely to alienate young Muslims. For example, on viewing the *secureNSW* website some respondents became frustrated and upset because they felt it perpetuates the assumption that terrorism is only perpetrated by Muslims. As the following excerpt from one of the interviews shows, some respondents had this reaction on first seeing the website with the words 'counter terrorism' in its masthead:

Roslyn: Is there any first impressions just looking at it [the *secureNSW* website]?

Interviewee: 'Counter terrorism', 'secure'. Like it's just because we are exposed to so much 'terrorism: Muslim', 'terrorism: Muslim'. Like 21st century [anytime] I see anything about terrorism, I'm just like, far-out man, just move to the next stage. It's like we have to prove ourselves that we're still human beings. We still...

R: So the moment you see the words 'countering terrorism', you immediately think this is about Muslims, is that what you're saying?

I: Yeah, and it is. Like cause this is the sad part because you look through it [the website], most of the things have to do with the Muslim community when they're talking about counter terrorism. It's not a good feeling.' (9 May 14.09).

Other respondents had similar negative reactions on seeing the terms ‘counter terrorism’ used in the website’s masthead. **They argued that the word ‘terrorism’ is associated with negative media representations of Muslim communities and the rise of Islamophobia.** A study published by the Human Rights Commission documents a rise in attacks on Muslim Australians since 2001<sup>72</sup>. As the respondents suggested, Muslim communities link the term ‘terrorism’ with the physical and verbal attacks they have increasingly faced since this time. As one respondent stated on first seeing the *secureNSW* website:

‘Interviewee: What turns me off immediately about this is the whole thing... If police are trying and this probably... [this] might be a bit of what to say, but if [they use] the term ‘terrorism’, because [the] media portrays it to be affiliated with Muslims specifically. I don’t want anything to do with the word ‘terrorism’. If the police tell me ‘terrorism’, I’m gonna call him racist, immediately

Roslyn: So you already shut down when you see that the website is titled ‘counter terrorism’?

I: Immediately. Yeah, one hundred per cent. How is that relevant to me?’ (24 April, 4.43)

**Conclusions: This study suggests the *secureNSW* website’s use of the term ‘counter terrorism’ undermines its objective ‘to engage and educate communities at risk of isolation and marginalisation on counter terrorism and related issues’. If NSW Government agencies and police wish to engage with young Muslim audiences, who may or may not be at risk, through the *secureNSW* website, the words ‘counter terrorism’ should not be used in its masthead. Alternative titles could be tested through quantitative and qualitative audience research.**

**Alternatively, given that the website targets multiple audiences it should perhaps retain its simple and easy-to-understand title and modify its objectives instead. This study suggests that the *secureNSW* website doesn’t provide the best means for police and other NSW government agencies to ‘engage and educate communities at risk of isolation and marginalisation’. Such audiences are unlikely to visit government-badged websites on an ongoing basis.**

**It’s better for government agencies to engage at risk communities using face-to-face liaison work and the websites these audiences already use. The quantitative audience survey (already discussed) should inform the development of new objectives which better reflect how audiences use the *secureNSW* website.**

## Community relationships with Police

**This study suggests that young Muslim Sydneysiders’ interactions with NSW Police officers have a strong bearing on how they interpret CVE information campaigns bearing the police logo.** Some respondents, particularly the young men, displayed intense negative attitudes towards NSW Police officers as a result of their experiences with them. These negative experiences underpinned some respondents’ refusal to engage with the *secureNSW* website. As one respondent said during a focus group:

‘Something like that [the *secureNSW* website]... I don’t know I just dislike seeing things like that. Straight out. Just like, I dislike [police] officers and that’s... I can’t look at any officer’s face, I haven’t been treated good by officers’ (17 May 16.00)

The respondents who participated in this focus group seemed particularly angry at the NSW Police with one blaming police officers for the fact that he had been charged with assault. Another respondent said during this focus group:

‘you get treated like shit [by police]. That’s what it is. Like we get picked on. Sometimes there’ll be a fight where... you’re nowhere near it but you somehow get locked up for it. And you get charged for it.’ (17 May 16.00).

However, the majority of the respondents didn’t appear to be as angry with the police as these young focus group participants. Even respondents who described having very negative interactions with NSW Police officers still talked about the Police Force in positive terms. One respondent for example, described an incident where he and his Christian Lebanese friends were stopped by police at a service station and he said the police officers taunted him about his religion. Despite relating this experience he also told the research team about his positive interactions with NSW Police:

‘We rock up to a servo. We’re just getting munchies, having a drink, blah, blah, blah. I’m wearing a Muslim hat. They [the police] pull up, they see a group of Middle Eastern, maybe 10 or 12 Lebbo’s. That’s it: they’ve seen Lebbo’s. Anyway, who did they decide to get staunch and to get smart to? Me. ‘What are you doing with that hat on your head?’

...Yeah. ‘What are you doing with that on your head?’ ‘What are you doing in that area?’ ‘We’re going fishing’. ‘No you’re not’. ‘Get the fuck out of our area’. ‘You don’t belong here’. Blah, blah, blah. He looks at me, ‘You got a problem? Step up to the plate’... We’re maybe 17. We got our P’s so we’re 17, 18, maximum 19.

One of them couldn’t believe that I was in the driver’s seat of a car that had a cross. ‘Aren’t you Muslim?’. I say ‘Yes’ and he goes ‘Whose car is that?’ I go ‘It’s my mate’s’. Then he goes to my mate ‘Why are you hanging with him for?’ And then I thought, ‘You know what - are we in Africa? Is Nelson Mandela gonna pop out and stop apartheid?’ Really? Do you know what I’m saying?...

We had to go back home. We didn’t know much better, we were scared. So dealing with that police officer, he was an asshole... [but] like I said, I’ve had... dealings with police as well where they’ve been actually champions. They’ve looked past my tattoos, my actual look. Do you hear what I’m saying? There have been actually great people where a lot of them – when I thought I was supposed to get a fine, they would just pat me on the back and say ‘See you later’. So if you’re dealing with the police, there are great policemen.’ (29 April, 8.51)

Like this respondent, others described having profoundly negative experiences during their teenage years involving NSW Police officers. For some, these experiences appear to continue to shape their views of the NSW Police Force and their willingness to engage with its officers. For example, one respondent suggested that people of his age are so scarred by such experiences that there’s little point in police trying to develop a relationship with them:

‘maybe our generation is a bit of a lost cause but the generations forward; hopefully they can get a better relationship [with police]’ (23 April, 11.53).

**Conclusions: Some respondents described particularly negative experiences they’d had in dealing with NSW Police officers. In some cases these experiences underpinned the respondents’ rejection of the *secureNSW* website and continue to affect their willingness to engage with NSW Police on CVE and other issues. This study suggests it will be difficult for the NSW Police Force to entice young Muslim audiences to view police CVE websites if they don’t first address these young peoples’ negative perceptions of police.**

**It’s important to note that the respondents described a variety of examples to illustrate the unfair treatment they said they’d received from police. In some cases it appears that the officers involved may have been simply performing their duties albeit sometimes in an unsympathetic fashion. In other cases however, the respondents appeared to have strong grounds to refer matters to the NSW Ombudsman or other complaints mechanisms.**

**The NSW Police Force should assist young Muslim Sydneysiders to understand their rights to complain about police officers’ misconduct. This would address the frustration that some feel about their negative interactions with NSW Police. In fact some young people believe that police and intelligence agencies act with impunity; this perception heightens the anger and distrust they direct towards these agencies.**

**Ideally, a representative from the NSW Police Customer Assistance Unit, which deals with community complaints about police, and a representative from NSW Ombudsman should appear as guests on the *Y Factor* radio program. These representatives should describe some complaints they’ve dealt with and clarify the grounds on which individuals can make complaints about police. The NSW Police Force should seek to facilitate this interview and should ensure that information about these services is available in youth centres and through Facebook.**

## Racial / religious profiling

**In viewing the *secureNSW* website, some respondents drew a link between it and the racial profiling they suggest they're subjected to from NSW Police officers.** During one interview, the respondents began discussing the National Terrorism Public Alert Level, which is featured prominently on the *secureNSW* website. The conversation then rapidly turned to a discussion about Police targeting people of Lebanese ethnicity:

Interviewee 2: I'm telling you I will never use this [website] in my life.

Interviewee 1: ... And that's why – National Terrorism Public Alert Level: Medium. You've got to be kidding me!

Roslyn: So what do you think about that then, the National Terrorism Alert Level?...

I2: If you think about this logically, alright? They're like saying national terrorism is medium. Now how much Muslims are there in Australia?... Two per cent of population are actually Muslim... okay it's not [saying] 'Muslim terrorism' but automatically, when someone says 'terrorism', who are they pointing at, right?

If you're a Lebanese Christian, alright? They'll put a cross on their car just to make sure that the police officer and everybody else around knows that they're not Muslim. Because automatically, you're Lebanese, whether you're Christian or whatever you are, an atheist or whatever, you're automatically targeted as a Muslim' (21 June 7.39).

**Other respondents, some of whom wore beards, traditional Muslim dress and had darker complexions said they're often targeted by police because they look 'Middle Eastern' or 'Muslim'.** One respondent, a convert to Islam of Caucasian appearance, stated that once he began to wear the Muslim turban (Amamah) and cap (kufi) he 'went from being pulled over at RBTs<sup>73</sup> and whatever, once a year, to getting pulled over like twice a month...' (2 May 10.21).

Other respondents said NSW Police officers discriminate against them for looking 'Lebanese'. One respondent, for example, said police treated him lightly because he looked less 'Lebanese' and 'ethnic' than his friends (23 April 11.53). Another respondent described being pulled over by police because, in his opinion, he looks 'suspicious'. He and his co-interviewee then went on to question what looking 'suspicious' means; they said it involves being 'Lebanese' or 'Arab looking':

Interviewee 1: What makes you – What's the profile of looking suspicious?

Roslyn: We'll what do you think it is?

Interviewee 2: It's a Lebanese driving a nice car.

I1: Yeah. Arab looking, nice car, tattoos: criminal.' (29 April, 8.51).

Another respondent suggested that Police Traffic and Highway Patrol officers use number plate recognition technology to target people with Arab sounding surnames:

'Interviewee:... Or because of the person's surname, they pull them over. Like I understand now highway patrols, they can detect five or six different number plates in front of them and all of them immediately on the spot as they're driving so they can pull the information that they want... So they pull that person over for no reason, just because of the surname.' (24 April, 4.43).

**Conclusions: There's a strong perception among some young Muslim Sydneysiders, and especially among youth of Lebanese ethnicity, that they're being targeted and discriminated against by police. This perception shapes some of these young people's engagement with the *secureNSW* website. Specifically, some believe the website is exclusively aimed at them and reinforces the view that Australia's Muslim Lebanese diaspora are a problem community.**

**It's important that NSW Police address these perceptions not only to improve these audiences' reactions to their CVE information strategies but to develop cooperative relationships with them. Existing research suggests that real and perceived incidents of racial and religious profiling undermine national security. Some researchers argue that it alienates**

members of targeted communities<sup>74</sup>. Others suggest that it ‘erod[es] Muslim communities’ trust and confidence in policing<sup>75</sup> reducing the likelihood that young people will turn to police ‘as victims or witnesses of crime’<sup>76</sup>.

The ASPI study reinforces these views as some respondents argued that police aim to harass them rather than protect them. As discussed later in this chapter face-to-face engagement strategies offer police the best means to challenge these perceptions.

## Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad

While some respondents believe they’re subjected to racial profiling, some argue that **the existence of the Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad (MEOCS) reinforces their view that police treat people of Arab background differently to other Australians**. Some respondents also stated that the existence of the MEOCS within the NSW Police Force undermines its capacity to engage with young Muslims. One respondent, for example, argued that Muslim youth perceive a contradiction when police try to develop a relationship with them while targeting them as a ‘suspect’ community:

‘But why would, for example, [if] I’m a young Middle Eastern Muslim 15-year old and somebody comes to me from the police force. The week before, somebody stopped me, [from the] Middle Eastern Operation purely because I look Arab. I become an immediate suspect. And then the next week, the police were trying to engage with me. Like the contradictions are on another level there.’  
(24 April, 4.43)

Another respondent stated that he and his friends had the opportunity to explain to senior NSW Police officers why they find the existence of the MEOCS offensive. According to this respondent the MEOCS signals to youth of Arab descent that the police are ‘out to get them’ and contributes to the creation of isolated communities.

‘...and we said, ‘You know, as Middle Eastern youth, as someone who’s been pulled over by the Middle Eastern Task Force because of the way I’ve looked on several occasions, not just once, you know, I think it’s absurd to name a task force or to sort of have it specialised just for Middle Eastern people.’

And to him [the police representative], it was like, ‘Oh, my God! What a great idea. We didn’t know this, you know.’... I’m like, ‘How can you enforce these policies?... How can you name these teams and not think that you’re isolating a community or isolating youth? We’re educated. I was youth mentor and I taught kids that weren’t educated, and they hate the police. Why? Because they think that they’re out to get them when really they’re there to protect them’ (8 May 7.08).

Other respondents felt that the MEOCS separates those of Arab descent from the broader Australian community, with one questioning why there isn’t ‘an Aussie operation’:

‘...and this one, is the reason why I actually hate police officers. Why is there a Middle Eastern operation and why isn’t there an Aussie operation?’ (17 May 16:00)

Although one of the respondents felt that the NSW Police reacted positively when he told them the MEOCS is offensive, MEOCS has not been renamed.

**The existence of the MEOCS is concerning from a CVE perspective because it has the potential to reinforce the ‘us versus them’ narratives found within violent propaganda.** Such violent narratives, including those promoted through al-Qaeda’s *Inspire* magazine, seek to divide Muslims from their nation states in order to mobilise their support for ‘the Islamic Nation’<sup>77</sup>. The MEOCS title similarly divides those of Arab descent from the broader Australian community, addressing them not as Australians or members of any nation but as ‘Middle Eastern’. Some respondents strongly resisted being separated from their Australian identity, as one respondent stated,

‘Hey! We’re born, bred and raised in Australia. Our schooling is Australian. Our TV is Australian. Our friends are all Australian. Everything that’s around us is Australian. We’re a product of our own environment. Where does Islam come into it? Islam is our

religion, okay fair enough. We're a product of Australian society. It's hard to understand but we are. If you're born, raised and bred in the country, the schooling system's Australian. Everything is Australian. You are Australian'. (29 April, 8.51)

The MEOCS title also seems to support the victim mentality within violent propaganda which suggests that Muslims are the ongoing target of Western aggression across the world. It would be difficult for young men of Arab descent in Australia to not feel targeted by a task force designed to specifically focus on people of their background; indeed this research shows that 'targeted' is exactly how they feel.

**Conclusions: The existence of the MEOCS divides those of Arab descent from the broader Australian community and has the potential to reinforce the 'us versus them' mentality found within narratives promoting violence. The NSW Police Force should examine what other names can be used for their specialist units in place of titles which focus on particular ethnic communities. A more neutral title should be adopted for the MEOCS and the task force should perhaps focus on a geographical area rather than an ethnic group.**

### Positive descriptions of police

Although this report documents respondents' negative opinions of NSW Police, positive and neutral opinions were expressed as well. One respondent said, for example, that in his experience NSW Police officers were never impolite:

'Roslyn: ... And, I guess, is there anything positive? Like have you ever had any positive experiences [with NSW Police]?

Interviewee: Oh, yeah. I mean, you know, when you get pulled over for a random breath test, I've never had a policeman talk to me in an impolite way or anything'. (2 May 3.43)

Other respondents spoke positively about police officers who chose to be lenient on them when issuing traffic fines. A number of the respondents also felt that in most cases, NSW Police officers were simply 'just doing their job pretty much' (23 April, 5.23) and are often 'pretty lenient and pretty friendly' (30 April, 2.02)

Some respondents praised individual police and community liaison officers with several mentioning the work of two representatives from one Western Sydney Local Area Command (LAC). Although other respondents said that police officers from this LAC were difficult to deal with, one stated that he liked these two officers because they're heavily involved with the area's communities. Like a number of other respondents, this interviewee wanted to see other police involved in more activities with his community:

'I: The actual police officers, there's a few that - [name of officer] and [name of community liaison representative], they're awesome, but they're the only two that I know. I'm not judging the rest of them, but they're the two that are really out there and doing a lot of work and trying to get involved [with] people...

R: So they have a profile?

I: Yeah. They're very, very good. I think if the New South Wales Police in general was to do a lot more things within the community, it'll be a lot better for them, a lot better for the communities.' (23 April 2.50)

A small number of respondents also mentioned that they'd met Deputy Commissioner Nick Kaldas and were impressed by his answers to their questions. These individual police officers seem to play a key role in building community trust, however sometimes this trust appears to extend only to the individual officer, rather than the NSW Police Force as an institution.

**Significantly, some respondents' participation in this study helped to cultivate their interest in developing a better relationship with NSW Police.** Some respondents interpreted this study as a NSW Police effort to listen to young people. The research team were surprised when one respondent, who professed his hatred for police during one focus group, participated in a second focus group and wanted to be part of any future youth dialogue with police. At times this respondent struggled to express himself and he appreciated that the research team listened to his opinion without judgement:

'Roslyn: I mean, I think what's encouraging about talking to you guys again, the two of you guys again, is basically you know when I first met you, you were like, 'Who the hell are you?' 'Don't necessarily want to talk to you' but [now] like you actually do want to keep talking to the cops, if that possibility came up.

Interviewee: If I was there I'd rather talking without listening... I'd rather just talk that's how I... I love talking about it and I love saying something to someone and I want to hear what their feedback is. Like I'm talking to you about something, I want you to, like, you always give me that chance to, like, I can discuss, I can say whatever I want and you don't try dissing what I say. You just try putting it in like, you taught me to say it in a better way, like, you know you make it sound in a better way but you never ever told me, 'Ah, that's wrong'...' (21 June, 2.36)

**The research team came to realise that this study provided a cathartic experience for some respondents who appreciated that our government sponsors, and specifically NSW Police, care about their opinions and experiences.** Our respondents frequently told us that face-to-face communication is the most effective means to engage and persuade young people who are disenfranchised and angry with government agencies. The research team's experience with this young man supports this view.

**Overall conclusions: This study demonstrates that police interactions with young Muslims have a strong influence on how this audience interprets police-badged CVE information campaigns. Consequently, if the NSW Police Force wishes to persuade such young audiences using these campaigns they must address these audiences' negative opinions about police.**

**Although this study highlights that some young Muslim Sydneysiders harbour a deep hatred towards the NSW Police Force, many respondents made positive comments about NSW police officers. In fact, many remain open to dialogue with the NSW Police and want to see their communities improve their relationships with the Police Force. As our respondents argued and the research team observed, the most effective way for police to do this is likely to be through face-to-face engagement.**

**Some respondents briefly discussed the Police Force's current face-to-face engagement strategies including police mentoring programs, youth panels, sporting initiatives and the work of community liaison officers. These interviewees felt that some initiatives targeted the 'wrong people', were culturally insensitive or didn't lead to real change. It was outside the scope of this study to evaluate these programs; further research should be conducted examining their effectiveness. This research should involve interviews with police officers and a broad spread of community members including young people.**

## Islamate

The *Islamate* website was launched in March 2013 targeting young Muslims aged between 13 and 17. Media reporting on the launch stated that the website's aim is 'to provide young Muslim–Australians with a moderate source of information' and to challenge 'radicalisation and extremism'<sup>78</sup>. The website's creators—Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations (FAIR)—received funding under the Building Community Resilience grants scheme to create the site and produce a number of short documentaries which form part of its content. According to information on the Building Community Resilience grants website, the initiative is 'a youth led project supported by experienced film-makers as mentors'<sup>79</sup>.

The *Islamate* homepage states that the website is 'your complete and interactive Islamic web portal'<sup>80</sup>. The site has a variety of interactive content including several games, a number of video clips and an 'Ask the Imam' section. The site links to several social media channels but at the time of writing (November 2013) the Facebook page wasn't active and *Islamate* hadn't yet tweeted on its Twitter account.



One of the videos on the website was created with the participation of a group of boys from Birrong Boys High School and a second video from this group is in production. FAIR advised that as part of its ongoing mentoring program the boys attended three film making workshops before developing their first documentary. Other training included ‘ basic camera techniques... interviewing skills, writing a script and preproduction planning [and] they will then learn post production skills such as editing, titles and special effects.’<sup>81</sup>

### Initial reactions — ‘it’s designed for non-Muslims’

On first viewing *Islamate*, some respondents suggested it was designed for ‘non-Muslims’ because, in their view, it was too simplistic to be appropriate for a Muslim audience and provided basic information about Islam that most Muslims would already know.

‘Interviewee: Well, first of all, I’d say it’s aimed at non-Muslim audience obviously. I guess just to get people to understand what Islam’s about.

Roslyn: ...My understanding was that it is actually for a Muslim audience as much of it as a non-Muslim audience.

I: No, I think it’s way too – I don’t know. It seems way too simple, yeah.

R: It’s too simplistic, is it?

I: Yeah, to be for a Muslim audience.

R: But do you think Muslims will go on a website like this?

I: Just to check it out but not to actually learn anything from it...’ (8 May 10.28)

These views were echoed by others. For example, when one respondent first saw the website he tried to adopt the position of a non-Muslim believing this was the audience it targets:

‘See, I’m just trying to imagine myself as being non-Muslim to see whether I’d ever go on something like this, and I don’t know if I would. Maybe close friends of mine that aren’t Muslim, maybe they read this sort of thing, but people that don’t have any association with Muslims, I don’t think they’d ever go on a site like this’. (23 April 2.50)

Some respondents suggested that *Islamate* was aimed primarily at a non-Muslim audience because its content, including pages entitled ‘The Truth About Islam’ and ‘Hijacking of Islam’, appears to address non-Muslims’ misconceptions about the religion. On seeing ‘The Truth About Islam’ page, one respondent argued that Muslim audiences already know the truth about Islam and should only receive instruction on such matters from a Sheikh. For these reasons, the respondent argued that the website wouldn’t appeal to Muslims:

‘Interviewee: I have mixed feelings about it, it’s like [reading] ‘Hijacking of Islam’, ‘The Truth about Islam’, like obviously it doesn’t appeal to Muslims because Muslims don’t need to know the truth about Islam... because Muslims already know what Islam is...

Roslyn: So are you saying that it wouldn’t appeal to Muslim audiences?

I: No it wouldn’t appeal to Muslims because obviously you’re talking about ‘The Truth About Islam’. Are you trying to teach Muslims what Islam is rather than having the sheik talk about it?’ (9 May, 14.09)

**Conclusions: Many of this study’s young Muslim respondents thought *Islamate* was designed for a non-Muslim audience and it didn’t appeal to them. This finding doesn’t bode well for the website’s creators as its primary target audience is young Muslims. However, the respondents of this study were mostly aged between 18 and 30. The website’s main target audience is young people aged 13 to 17.**

**This study shows that Muslims in their 20s already feel they have a clear understanding of Islam. They aren't seeking the type of basic religious instruction they believe *Islamate* provides. However, it's possible that *Islamate*'s simple approach, games and interactive features may appeal to younger audiences. Further research is needed to understand how school-aged audiences interact with this website.**

**Although this study doesn't document the opinions of *Islamate*'s main target audience, some of our respondents were only slightly older than this group. Six were aged under 20 and 21 interviewees were aged 20-25. Our young respondents' reactions to *Islamate* may suggest that the website will attract a younger audience than FAIR envisages. The website should perhaps be targeted at 11- 14 year olds. This may necessitate that the website be delivered through an educational or classroom environment.**

**It's recommended that FAIR more clearly define *Islamate*'s target audience so that the website isn't simply written off by community members not included in its intended audience. For example, some of the websites discussed in this report explicitly state that they're designed for a young Muslim audience; *Islamate* could adopt this approach.**

**As argued later in this chapter, *Islamate*'s focus on teenage audiences is important but *Islamate* should take a more targeted approach. The website's content appears to target a diverse range of audiences including teenage Muslims and non-Muslim adults. It appears difficult for the website to appeal to the needs, wants and interests of such different audiences. *Islamate* should focus on the one target audience and ensure all its content is appropriate for this group.**

## **Initial reactions — 'who's behind it?'**

On first viewing *Islamate* and other websites examined in this study, some respondents opened their 'about us' sections before any other pages. Some interviewees felt it's important to know about the organisations that create the websites they view and these respondents linked these websites' credibility to their creators' reputation. The excerpt below from one of the interviews demonstrates how one respondent sought out the 'about us' section on first viewing *Islamate*:

'Interviewee: I think with these sites, generally with any site [what] you always look for is who it is that's doing it. Who is doing this website? Is there an 'about us' section?

Roslyn: Yeah there is. [points to it]...

I: Oh there.

R: So do you know who that is?

I: Those lawyers in Sydney right?

Research Assistant: No

R: It's [name of *Islamate*'s creator], do you know him?

I: Yeah, yeah, the Turkish guy. Yeah, I've heard about them before, they're good' (16 May 16.00)

Unlike this respondent, some interviewees disliked FAIR and this appeared to influence their criticism of *Islamate*. For example, when they talked about the website, these respondents tended to criticise the individual who developed it. In contrast, when respondents had favourable or neutral impressions of FAIR they directed any criticisms at the website's content.

## **Islamate's reach?**

Some of the respondents representing 'conservative' communities felt that *Islamate* is aimed at 'moderate Muslims'. They said people from their communities prefer to view websites with more religious content. This view is reflected in the following excerpt:

‘Interviewee: I think if I can use the term, I think it’s more for moderate Muslims, you know what I mean?’

Roslyn: So what gives you that impression?

I: um just the way the girls [in the pictures] are dressed, the Imam, the games and it’s very like, friendly...

R: So what kind of category would you put yourself in then?

I: I don’t know, more active I guess.’ (10 September 6:30)

This respondent showed the research team a YouTube channel he regularly visits with content that is dominated by religious lessons and lectures. This example shows that when accessing websites focused on Islam, some people will seek more religious content than *Islamate* provides. They will also seek out internet content that fits with their vision of Islam.

However, in contrast to this example, one of the sheikhs representing a different conservative organisation praised the website and felt that it would attract his younger students. In particular he lauded the video produced by the Birrong Boys High School students because in his view, it provided these young people with a means to express themselves:

‘you give them a voice and you’re allowing others to understand what they feel as well... they don’t usually get that chance and that’s a very important thing for Muslim youth... because how are you going to get anywhere if we don’t know how they’re feeling’ (16 September).

This study demonstrates that different users will seek different things from the websites they view and **communication strategists can’t take a ‘one size fits all’ approach in targeting young Muslim audiences.**

**Conclusions: Existing studies on CVE communication strategies commonly emphasise that such narratives must be delivered by ‘credible messengers’. Some researchers propose that certain types of messengers are likely to be more trusted than others including ‘former extremists’ and victims of terrorism<sup>82</sup>. However, as our respondents argued, the target audiences of such campaigns will also scrutinise the organisations that produce them. Such audiences will reject messages produced by groups and individuals in their communities that they don’t like, know or trust. Furthermore, some will reject sites that don’t fit with their understanding of how religious websites should look.**

**This study suggests that Sydney’s Muslim communities represent highly segmented and diverse audiences. Government agencies can’t sponsor a small number of community organisations to develop CVE communication campaigns in the hope that such strategies will be broadly accepted. There are significant divisions within Sydney’s Muslim communities. In fact, some groups openly dislike other organisations. This complicates government and community efforts to reach the very small number of ‘at risk’ youth in these communities.**

**As already discussed, this report recommends that the Building Resilient Communities grants scheme should include a micro-grants program. With grants ranging from \$2,000 to \$10,000, the micro-grants scheme should be designed to make funding more accessible and enable government agencies to work with a wider range of community groups. In making this funding more accessible, the smaller grants scheme may also address community perceptions that government agencies favour certain organisations and reduce the animosity that some groups direct towards the current grant recipients.**

## **Respondents’ interpretations of Islamate – it only offers a partial solution**

One respondent said that she thought *Islamate* was ‘good’ but likely to have a limited impact on the more ‘angry’ members of its target audience:

‘You know, I mean, it’s [*Islamate*] good but I don’t know how much it’s really going to [do]... All of these things help at the very low level but when you get to the level where they’re already into the gangs and into the anger and the conspiracy theories and everything else, it’s very...’ (24 April, 11.42)

This respondent suggested that a more effective CVE strategy would involve targeting male community leaders and convincing them to tackle the issue of violence ‘head-on’ (24 April, 11.42) with their congregations.

Another respondent said that online information campaigns wouldn’t prevent violence and believed Imams would be more persuasive than CVE websites in spreading anti-violence messages. This respondent also argued that *Islamate*’s ‘Ask the Imam’ section is unlikely to engage young people who are already loyal to their own Imams and suspicious of others:

‘Roslyn: This type of thing [*Islamate*], how effective do you think it might be in reaching people who might be going down a violent path?

Interviewee: Not at all.

R: What needs to be done?

I: ... I think there’s an issue here, for a lot of these kids it’s the leadership that’s got them by the brain. And so if you see something like this, and you see for example, ‘ask the Imam’ and it’s not their Imam.

Research Assistant: that’s true

R: So they don’t want to listen to any old Imam, they’ve got their favourites, is that what you’re saying?

I: yeah, because they say that a number of Imams have sold out...’ (16 May 16:00)

Other respondents supported the view that young Muslim audiences ‘want to see a face that you’re familiar with’ (10 September, 6:30) when they open *Islamate*’s ‘Ask the Imam’ section.

**Conclusions: Some respondents suggested that *Islamate* has a limited capacity to persuade vulnerable audiences to move away from violent paths. However, the respondents made similar comments about other websites examined in this study. They argued that online CVE communication strategies will do little on their own to challenge violent narratives and must be implemented alongside other types of initiatives, including face-to-face engagement strategies, to achieve their objectives.**

**The bulk of research on audiences also supports the view that it’s difficult to change audience behaviour only through using information campaigns. Indeed, most studies conducted over the 80 year history of audience research show that such campaigns don’t have direct effects on human behaviour. Instead, when they shape behaviour it’s typically because they’re reinforced by other factors including other messages and messengers<sup>83</sup>.**

**Some respondents argued that Imams are the most appropriate messengers to promote anti-violence messages to their communities and are likely to be more persuasive than CVE websites. However, this study suggests that young people are likely to be most receptive to information provided by Imams they already know and trust. This finding adds further weight to the suggestion that communication strategists can’t take a ‘one size fits all’ approach in communicating with young Muslim audiences. There is unlikely to be one or even a few ‘credible messengers’ that will appeal to all segments of these audiences or all ‘at risk’ youth.**

## Positive comments

One respondent liked *Islamate*’s approach, suggesting it wasn’t ‘preachy’:

‘I like the way they word stuff. But I’m just looking at the women part [of the website], so this is kind of as far as I went. But they’re not preachy. I guess that’s a positive thing. So they’ll say what they believe. They’re not very preachy about it... which is good’ (8 May, 10.28).

Another respondent said he liked how the website looked and its play on words although he felt this mightn't be appropriate for some audiences:

'It's pretty good... Not only just the looks but even things like 'Hijacking of Islam'. You click on that and it's got 'War of Error'. And then, you click on that and then it's got some general info. It's a play on words.

But not only that, it's just very straightforward and as a Muslim, you know that there was no war on terror. As a non-Muslim, you'd think, 'Ah, this is a conspiracy theory'. So that's why I'm saying maybe for non-Muslims, it probably isn't the best site to go to. [laughs]' (23 April, 2.50).

Some young respondents demonstrated a strong interest in *Islamate's* videos, with several liking the *Birrong Boys High School Project* video. Two respondents knew some of the boys who appeared in this video. These respondents coordinate a youth outreach program targeting young people at risk of becoming involved in substance abuse and other types of criminal behaviour. They felt that the website might appeal to some of their young clients:

'Roslyn: We're just asking whether this is something that you think might be able to target some of the guys you work with.

Interviewee 1: oh yeah... quite awesome... [name of boy featured in the video]

Research Assistant: I think they could have gotten a better picture of him

I1: of his tats?

I1: I think it would be awesome if they could do something about us as well on this [website]. I think that this is really good...

RA: do you think the kids... you deal with would jump onto something like this website ?

Interviewee 2: I think they would yeah' (30 May, 18.00)

Some respondents argued that it's important to target such school-aged audiences in order to steer vulnerable individuals away from violent and criminal paths. Some of the social workers argued that it's important to target these groups because some young people are already in trouble with the law while in early high school. Other suggested that by the time young people are in their 20s they already have set opinions and it's 'too late' to assist them.

'Interviewee: When I think of the community, I always think of the youth because I was a youth mentor for four years. I think most of the time, and I said this when I was... [talking to] the AFP, that most of the time, people try to tackle the issue when it's too late. So when people [are] like 25 to 30. Funding needs to go to our youth. If you nurture your youth and you help them at a young age, it's easier then than [if] it is [delivered later]...

Roslyn: So you're talking the teenage...?

I: Teenage, high school students... So targeting the youth is necessary. (8 May, 7.05).

**Conclusions: Although some respondents criticised *Islamate*, others suggested it's likely to appeal to its primary target audience: school-aged youth. Some interviewees, including youth workers, argued that it's important to target this group because it's more difficult to reach and assist older youths. *Islamate* may therefore serve an important purpose if it engages its main target audience. More research with this audience is required to understand if the website meets its objectives.**

**It was outside the scope of this study to examine *Islamate's* youth mentoring program, however its existence appears important. Some scholars argue that one of the most important roles that governments can play in supporting the development of CVE narratives is to assist 'credible messengers', including young people, to enhance their communication skills<sup>84</sup>; this is what FAIR aims to do.**

**It's important that the ANZCTC commission further independent research to understand the role played by this and other mentoring programs in furthering Australia's CVE Strategy. As already discussed, the respondents frequently argued that CVE websites have a limited capacity to steer young people away from violent paths and should be implemented alongside face-to-face engagement strategies.**

**A variety of organisations, representing multiple sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities deliver a range of youth outreach programs targeting young people at risk of criminalisation. Some also aim to steer young people away from a range of violent criminal activities and may play a greater role in CVE than online communication strategies. The ANZCTC should endeavour to learn more about these programs and their outcomes with a view to potentially supporting some under the micro-grants scheme discussed in this report.**

## Youthink

*Youthink* is an online magazine created as a part of the Lebanese Muslim Association's 'Sharing Humanity Leaders Program'. This program was funded under the Building Community Resilience grants scheme during the 2011-12 funding round<sup>85</sup>. The project was designed with CVE objectives, aiming to develop educational resources and programs which would 'address issues of identity, sense of belonging and cultural isolation, which can be factors leading to radicalisation'<sup>86</sup>.

According to its website, the magazine aims to provide:

'young people from across the globe with an opportunity to connect with their fellow brothers and sisters. To share experiences, passions, informed opinions, interests and concerns with one another'<sup>87</sup>.

The website publishes articles, from 500–700 words in length, under five headings: 'activism', 'spirituality', 'lifestyle', 'arts' and 'global Muslims'. In November 2013, 48 articles were accessible through the website; the majority of these (33) were uploaded in 2012 with the remainder produced in 2013<sup>88</sup>. According to the website's counter, the article with the largest number of views had been accessed approximately 2800 times. The average number of views per article is 618.

This report doesn't provide as much detail on the interviewees' responses to *Youthink* as it does on their reactions to the other websites discussed in this report. Most respondents hadn't heard of *Youthink* before participating in this study and it was difficult to introduce them to the website during their interviews. There were two main reasons for this: (1) some respondents preferred mostly to view video clips rather than read articles when using the internet and (2) some didn't want to read articles in the context of an interview. Researchers examining this website in the future could direct respondents to it ahead of their interviews in order to give them sufficient time to read and form opinions about its articles.

## What the respondents liked about Youthink

Few respondents had heard of or visited the *Youthink* website but most of those who were familiar with it appeared to like it. One respondent said that the website has a positive focus and promotes 'good things Muslims are doing' (23 April). He also suggested that unlike some other websites he visits, its contributors don't 'rant' about the topics they discuss:

'Roslyn:... did you go on it [*Youthink*] and what did you think about [it]?

Interviewee: It's actually pretty good. I haven't posted anything at all on it. I just – maybe from here to there, I might look at some of the things other people post.

R: So what do you like about that website?

I: Pretty much how quiet it is compared to the *YFactor* [laughs] in terms of the ranting kind of stuff. It's just important stuff, people showing off good things that Muslims are doing... it's a nice blend between culture and religion, so I kind of like that. (23 April, 5.23)

Another respondent suggested that the *Youthink* magazine is a good concept, providing one of a few avenues for young Muslim Sydneysiders to draw attention to issues of importance to them:

‘I think it’s a great concept, and I think a lot of people contribute towards it... I think it’s a voice for young Muslims, so it’s about providing them with the space to write articles about issues that they think matter; talking about issues they think matter. There aren’t any other avenues for them to do that, so it’s a very important avenue, I think. It definitely does what it’s meant to do’ (8 May, 10.28).

Other respondents said they visited the website because they knew and liked its creators whom they said work hard to produce it. Importantly, when the respondents knew *Youthink*’s editors they appeared more likely to trust its content. For example, one interviewee suggested that she was initially wary of the website because she knew it had government funding but her personal connection to *Youthink*’s team helped her to overcome her reservations about visiting the site:

‘Research Assistant: Did you know that it was a project [funded] under CVE?’

Interviewee: I did know that, yeah.

Roslyn: Did that have any impact on what you thought about it or anything?

I: I wasn’t very impressed to begin with [laughs]. But, the thing is because I do know the people who have been working on the content of it, and they’ve been working quite hard at it, and they’re quite passionate about the project, so to me, it kind of overrode any CVE...’ (21 June, 12.41)

**Conclusions: Few respondents had heard of the *Youthink* website but of those who had, many supported the initiative. Specifically, some felt it provides an important avenue for young Muslims to draw attention to issues that matter to them. Others were drawn to the website because they knew its creators.**

**As the research team observed in relation to a number of the websites examined in this study, the respondents were more likely to trust, view and share information sent to them or authored by their friends. For some respondents, their friends’ involvement in the *Youthink* initiative persuaded them to put aside reservations about visiting this government-funded website.**

**As already recommended, communication strategists should engage directly with young Muslims and involve them in the creation of CVE communication campaigns. When target audiences observe these young people driving such projects, their participation can enhance the credibility of the messages they produce.**

### **Criticisms of *Youthink*: not updated regularly**

Some respondents who liked the *Youthink* website suggested they’d lost interest in it because its creators rarely updated its content. One respondent, for example, remarked that the site was ‘good’ but also ‘slow paced’ especially in contrast to the popular Sydney-based website *Muslimvillage.com* which updates its content on a daily basis.

‘Roslyn: ...So when did you see *Youthink* [for the first time]?’

Interviewee: Probably last year.

R:... Is it something that you would go to often?

I: Not really. No. It’s slow paced... there’s not a lot of content on the actual site.

R: What do you mean by slow paced?

I: So the main one [website] that I probably visit is *Muslimvillage*. The *Muslimvillage* has got new stories every day with a range of lifestyle, politics, and all that stuff. *Youthink* it’s good, but I think it’s just really slow in terms of what happens on it or what’s uploaded.

R: So they don't put enough [up] or they're not updating it every day?

I: Yeah. So you find that something that would've been relevant two months ago or a month ago, it's coming up now... It's not current, I feel. Maybe it's changed now. The last time I went on it was five months ago, but yeah, it never seemed to be up-to-date with everything that's actually happening now. It was up-to-date a month behind.' (23 April 2.50)

Another respondent stated that although she thought *Youthink* was a 'good idea', she had stopped following the site because of a 'lack of consistency':

'I thought it was a good idea when it came about. It seemed to start off strongly and they've just died down for a while. I think they're sort of revamping it again now, but for me, it was the lack of consistency, I guess. So, I don't really follow them as thoroughly' (21 June, 12.41).

Some respondents suggested that the young editors of *Youthink* were simply too busy with university and other commitments to regularly update the website. One respondent suggested that **if these volunteers were paid they may be able to devote more time to writing articles for the site.**

**Conclusions: The respondents appeared to be more attracted to websites that regularly update their content. Some respondents said they no longer visit *Youthink* because it rarely publishes new articles. To engage and maintain the interest of their young Muslim target audiences, government and community-created websites need to be updated on a regular basis.**

**While 15 of *Youthink's* 48 articles were published in 2013, only one has been published in the second half of this year. This supports the respondents' view that the editors have slowed the pace at which they're producing content for the website. One study on CVE narratives observed that**

**'extremist voices... are able to punch above their weight because they're determined, vociferous and dedicated to their cause... [those promoting] alternative narratives... are dedicated but have full-time jobs to hold down and family commitments to honour'<sup>89</sup>.**

**This comment appears to apply to the *Youthink* initiative. While some respondents believe the website is important and still has potential, its volunteer editors appear unable to devote the time required to regularly update it. Government agencies should perhaps fund and support CVE communication initiatives that are easier to produce and require less ongoing commitment from their volunteer creators than online magazines. This would include for example, Youtube campaigns or other strategies that respond to current issues and can be created relatively cheaply and quickly. Alternatively, more complex projects, like online magazines, may require government funding across successive years to ensure their viability in the long term.**

### **Criticism: *Youthink* is ineffective as a CVE initiative**

Some respondents argued that government-funded CVE initiatives often target people who aren't at risk. Some said that successive government-sponsored youth mentoring programs for example, have drawn in the same group of highly educated young people who aren't vulnerable and have limited links to 'at risk' youth. One respondent made a similar claim about *Youthink*, suggesting that it involves and targets 'the wrong people':

'Roslyn: the objective is to try and counter violent extremism, right? So how successful, do you reckon, these [websites are]?

Interviewee: Honestly, the one thing that I've always had a problem with is that all these programmes are awesome, but they're targeting the wrong group of people. The *Youthink* was an awesome initiative, but does anybody actually – is there a huge response from it? I don't think so.

The *Y Factor* was an awesome idea as well. *Y Factor* was a private thing, right? But the audience, again... It seems like the audience for all of these [websites] are educated Muslims and... you don't need to worry about those types of people. They've been to uni. They



go to the lectures. They go to events and all that stuff. They're in the community. You don't need to worry about them. It's the people that don't go to these things that you need to worry about, people that don't really care about or it's not that they don't care about the community, but they don't really interact with people.' (23 April, 2.50)

Another respondent said although he felt that *Youthink* and other government-funded initiatives were beneficial, they don't target the most vulnerable people in Sydney's Muslim communities:

'Interviewee: I know there was some – I think *Youthink*? This one was also – I know that was a leadership one because one of the girls I work with was involved in that...

Roslyn: So you didn't have... I mean some people have known about particular programs and had quite strong opinions either way...

I: Look, I support any program that's going out there. I don't know that any of them have been a complete waste of money and time. I think each one will have had some kind of benefit but I think they're already working with [the] converted... So they're working with those who are still in the good crowd or who are young enough to be channelled in the right direction.

I think that's fine. I don't think there's any problem with that, [but] it doesn't address that hardcore element which is [into] the conspiracy theory, 'we don't trust anybody', and who are affected by the huge amount of angry material saying that, 'We have to do something about world events.' (24 April, 11.42)

Other respondents made similar claims. One interviewee argued that while it's important for government agencies to build relationships with groups 'participating in mainstream society', they aren't liaising enough with vulnerable groups:

'They [government agencies] are doing consultation but I wonder at what level are they doing consultation. Are they doing consultation with the existing groups that possess no threat whatsoever? And so are they targeting those organisations that come from educated, well-off or working class families or people that go to University or people that have jobs in society or people that are participating in mainstream society?

You know, if that is the groups that they are consulting with that's great, they definitely need to be included. But in terms of the actual groups that are vulnerable, that are I guess more susceptible to being a problem, are they reaching that community? And, I don't believe that they are.' (28 May, 6.21)

**Conclusions: The respondents argued that *Youthink* largely appeals to the most educated and socially connected young people in their communities. In contrast, some respondents argued that these communities' most vulnerable members are poorly educated or have little contact with people outside the small socio-religious groups to which they have withdrawn.**

**It's important to note that although research has shown that possessing tertiary qualifications doesn't make an individual less vulnerable to violent extremism<sup>90</sup>, of those convicted of terrorism related offences in Australia 'the majority were not educated beyond high school level'<sup>91</sup>. As some researchers note, however, the number of Australians within this group is too small to 'give an accurate portrayal of [the influence of]... variables' like education<sup>92</sup>. It was outside the scope of this study to examine these issues further.**

**Although this study doesn't provide evidence as to whether *Youthink* targets 'the wrong people' (those least at risk) as some respondents claimed, it does appear to have a limited reach. The research team observed that it was our most educated respondents that knew about and liked *Youthink*. In addition, the magazine appeared to have little penetration into conservative communities.**

**This study also supports some respondents' claims that government agencies appear to have developed strong relationships with only some sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities. The research team observed in particular, that they appear to have weak relationships with the more conservative organisations and with people who work with 'fringe groups'. The ANZCTC should investigate further whether government-funded CVE programs and communication strategies disproportionately involve only certain sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities while ignoring people most at risk.**

## Notes

1. This report draws on Ashour's definition of deradicalisation which occurs when individuals 'abandon... the use of violence to achieve political goals' in Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, Routledge, New York, 2009, 6.
2. Attorney-General's Department, *Countering Violent Extremism Strategy*, <http://www.resilientcommunities.gov.au/aboutus/Pages/countering-violent-extremism-strategy.aspx>.
3. Australian Government News, 'Attorney-General Dreyfus meets senior media representatives and community leaders', 15 July 2013, FACTIVA database.
4. In using the term 'violent extremist', this report draws on the definition of 'violent extremism' offered by the Attorney-General's Department. See: Attorney-General's Department, *What is Violent Extremism*, <http://www.resilientcommunities.gov.au/aboutus/Pages/what-is-violent-extremism.aspx>.
5. Catherine A Theohary & John Rollins, *Terrorist Use of the Internet: Information Operations in Cyberspace*, Congressional Research Service, 2011 p.2, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/R41674.pdf>.
6. For a comprehensive summary of such initiatives see Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government?*, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, July 2013 <[http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISD\\_Kanishka\\_Report.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISD_Kanishka_Report.pdf).
7. Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko & Clark McCauley, 'Containing the Narrative: Strategy and Tactics in Countering the Storyline of global jihad', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, Vol.5, No.1, 2010, pp.42-57.
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13. Attorney-General's Department, *Previous recipients: Building Community Resilience grants*, <http://www.ag.gov.au/NationalSecurity/Counteringviolentextremism/Pages/PreviousrecipientsBuildingCommunityResiliencegrants.aspx>.
14. For example, see Sharon Pickering, Jude McCulloch and David Wright Neville, 'Counter-terrorism policing: towards social cohesion', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, Vol.50, Iss.1-2, 2008 pp.91-107.
15. Jonathan Rae, 'Will it ever be possible to profile a terrorist?', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol.3, Iss.2, 2012 <http://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/jtr/article/view/380/429>.
16. Community Relations Commission, *My Muslim Mates Are*, 25 September 2012 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcGiFl9wik8>.

17. Community Relations Commission, *Somali Podcast*, <http://www.somalipodcast.org.au/>.
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22. Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko & Clark McCauley, 'Winning the Battle but Losing the War: Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.3, Iss. 9, 2009, <http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/68/html>.
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24. Although reception studies have focused on examining 'the message' and the power relations inherent in its construction, this study focuses squarely on the audience. This approach follows that of Lull, amongst others (see, James Lull, *Inside Family Viewing: Ethnographic Research on Television Audiences*, Routledge, London, 1990).
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34. *ibid.*
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## **Acronyms and abbreviations**

- AFP Australian Federal Police
- ANZCTC Australia-New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee
- ASIO Australian Security Intelligence Organisation
- CVE counter violent extremism
- FAIR Forum on Australia's Islamic Relations
- MEOCS Middle Eastern Organised Crime Squad

## Appendix 1: The respondents' impressions of the Australian Federal Police

While many respondents talked about their interactions with NSW Police officers, few described their experiences in dealing with the Australian Federal Police (AFP). There were two main reasons for this. First, the study's examination of the *secureNSW* website prompted the respondents to talk about the NSW Police. Second, the respondents appeared to interact with NSW Police officers more often than with AFP members. This was no doubt due to differences between the agencies' responsibilities as the majority of respondents who interacted with police did so as a result of routine traffic checks. The NSW Police Force also has a stronger presence in Sydney communities than the AFP due to the state agency's larger Sydney-based workforce and Local Area Commands (LACS).

The respondents who said they had met AFP members tended to have favourable or neutral impressions of the agency. Overall the respondents' comments about the AFP were more positive than their remarks about the NSW Police Force. This finding differs from the conclusions of another study conducted in Victoria which found that its Muslim respondents had a more favourable impression of the Victorian state police than 'federal agencies'<sup>21</sup>. However, as so few of our respondents talked about their experiences with the AFP, it's difficult for this (ASPI) study to draw definitive conclusions about young Muslim Sydney's impressions of the agency. More research is required to verify the findings discussed here.

The respondents' positive impressions of the AFP seemed largely traceable to the work of one member of the agency's Sydney-based community liaison team. For some respondents, this AFP member provided the only contact they'd ever had with the agency and was their only source of knowledge about its work as illustrated in the following excerpt:

'Roslyn: [do you know] anything about AFP? So the Federal Police. Have you heard anything [about what] they do?

Interviewee: Only in terms... 'cause one of the girls who did [name of mentoring program], she works with the AFP... All I know about AFP is what she told me. I didn't ask her— I didn't go into too much detail. I just asked her, 'What do you guys do?'... I mean, well that's my only knowledge; my only connection with AFP is through her. I don't know anything else about [them]'. (2 May, 3.43)

When the respondents made positive comments about the AFP they often praised this AFP member. For example, one respondent stated that she was 'very impressed with the AFP', but most of her positive remarks about the agency related to this individual. Specifically, this respondent suggested that the young AFP representative was well respected and ensured positive measures were implemented for her community. Similar views were expressed by other respondents.

'I have been very impressed with the AFP. I've been impressed with [name of AFP member]. [name of AFP member] is a real go-getter... she doesn't take no for an answer and she doesn't take ifs and buts.

If she sees things are going too slow, she'll step in and she'll say, 'Okay, this is what we're gonna do'. And she has got a lot of respect, I think. I'm sure she's stepped on a lot of toes. But she's got a lot of respect from the people she works with...' (24 April 11.42).

### Other positive comments

In addition to praising its staff, some respondents lauded the AFP because they believed the agency was responsive to community concerns. For example, one respondent described the AFP as 'willing to change':

'Roslyn: Was there – are there any agencies that you see as doing a better job than others?

Interviewee 1: I mean the AFP does a good job in general probably because they've introduced the kind of people into their, into their fold that are part of the community and they're willing to change, so that's good. I think that that's really positive for the AFP.' (23 April, 11.53)



Two respondents saw the AFP as 'receptive' to their criticism and believed the agency listened to their concerns. Although the AFP hadn't addressed all the issues these young men raised, they appreciated the opportunity to discuss them with AFP representatives:

'Interviewee: I mean, I find them quite receptive when we've told them – well, after the dinner, [name of AFP member], one of the community liaison officers we've dealt with, sat us down... and said to us, 'What do you guys think?' And we gave a pretty honest advice...

They just do this stuff, like a Q&A session or something like that, so we can ask them questions. And then a couple of months later, we have the Q&A sessions and they listened to them –

Roslyn: Right. So, they actually did, they implemented what you wanted?...

I: Me and... some of the boys, we went down there and, although the answers were not satisfying, it was a start...' (30 April, 11.39).

## Known for events rather than CVE

Some respondents appeared to describe the AFP in positive terms because they associate the agency mostly with its events and dinners. When such respondents discussed the AFP they often referred to these events rather than its CVE or law enforcement work. This is reflected in the following excerpt:

'Roslyn: ...Do you know anything about AFP? Had you had any dealings with the Federal Police?

Interviewee: I have no dealings with them, but I've heard a lot about them through the things that they do... A friend of mine works with them so I know they do some... They had the Harmony Day thing recently – or the Harmony thing, I think, last year, the Women's Day, Special Women's Day Breakfast. I can't think of anything specifically but I know they do good stuff' (8 May, 10.28).

Some respondents appeared to only have contact with AFP members through the agency's dinners and events. As a result some respondents stated that they only discussed 'surface stuff' with the agency rather than more difficult topics. However, rather than criticising the AFP for seemingly avoiding conversations about CVE, two respondents suggested this approach helped the agency to develop trusting relationships with communities.

'Interviewee 1: All the interactions I've had with the AFP have actually been pretty good. I went to the AFP dinner last year, was it the Eid dinner? And we had one of... what was he? A community liaison [team member] sitting on our table.

Research Assistant: Each table had community liaison officer?

I1: Yeah, a community liaison officer. I mean they were pretty good. It was all on the surface stuff, nothing really in depth... They're not focusing on little petty issues and they're trying to focus on the bigger picture rather than the smaller picture.

Roslyn: So how are they going with communicating with you guys on countering violent extremism?

Interviewee 2: It doesn't really come up with the interaction of AFP.

I1: It doesn't really come up too much, yeah. They're just working on I think creating ties with our community at first, creating faith in them, creating trust in them. And I think that's – and that's something they're starting to achieve. (30 April, 11.39)

## Criticism

Some respondents criticised the AFP, suggesting that it had become exclusive in how it interacts with Sydney's Muslim communities. For example, one respondent suggested that the AFP's events are generally 'invite only' and are targeted towards more educated young people. This respondent argued furthermore that the agency tends not to engage with 'at risk' youth.

'Interviewee: you know, it's great that they have a community liaison team and all those sorts of things but I wonder whether or not they are targeting, you know, younger educated Muslims rather than the actual people that they are trying to... the very purpose for why they started up...

Well, it's the type of initiatives that they are having it really only draws a particular crowd. You know, for example if you are going to host a morning tea with politicians and whatever that maybe, that's going to attract people who are interested in that area.

Research Assistant:... it's invite only.

I: Exactly, exactly, and it's always invite only. Most every single AFP event that I have attended is because it is an exclusive, I received this personalised invite and it wasn't open to the rest of the community. So, it's very, um, it's very exclusionary and I feel that that's the work that the AFP does quite often. I have not heard of anything else that they've done which would target at risk youth.

(28 May, 6.21)

Other respondents felt that the AFP most often works with people who aren't 'at risk' and its outreach programs draw in people who already have favourable impressions of police agencies. For example, two respondents suggested that rather than attracting vulnerable youth, AFP-organised sporting competitions tend to appeal to young people who are already amenable to engaging with the agency.

'Interviewee 1: I remember once they [the AFP] were organising an Oztag competition using funding from Combating Violent Extremism—that's not what it's gonna do... You know you have an AFP team against the boys. It's not really doing anything... If there's a lot of people who have the same experiences as we do with the police. They're not even gonna make the effort to go down there—you know what I mean?...

Roslyn: Are you saying that... the type of people that are involved in like that type of sporting activity with the cops are already sort of cop-friendly?

I2: Yeah, yeah. They're all right.

I1: Yeah, pretty much. Even with other activities that have been funded, they're not reaching people out to who they want or they should reach out to' (21 June, 7.39).

In contrast to these respondents' claims, the AFP community liaison team advised the ASPI researchers that they work with a wide range of groups including 'at risk' youth. The research team became aware through independent sources that the AFP has provided small amounts of funds to programs targeting young people at risk of becoming involved in criminal activities. However, we also observed that police and other government agencies appear to have weak relationships with some sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities, potentially limiting their capacity to assist 'at risk' youth. Thus this report recommends that the ANZCTC further investigate this situation and seek to remedy this issue.

## Criticism of CVE work

A small number of respondents stated that the AFP had been granted excessive powers under Australia's counterterrorism laws. Given that some Muslim groups have condemned the AFP's counterterrorism operations involving raids on Muslim homes and organisations, it was surprising that so few respondents criticised the AFP's counterterrorism work<sup>2</sup>.

Most often when the respondents criticised federal agencies for what they perceived to be intrusive surveillance of Muslim communities or unjust counterterrorism measures, their criticism was directed at the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). However, given that media reports document some Muslim groups' strong criticism of the AFP, it's possible that negative views on the agency's counterterrorism role are more widespread than represented in this study.

**Conclusions: The respondents directed little criticism towards the AFP but few said they had any experience in dealing with AFP members. Some of the respondents had favourable impressions of the agency due largely to its community liaison work and events. Consequently some respondents associated the AFP with its events and dinners rather than its law enforcement work. This appears to have helped the AFP to develop a positive image among some sectors of Sydney's Muslim communities. However, the low profile of the AFP's CVE work contributed to some respondents' perceptions that its approach is ineffective and mistargeted.**

**Perhaps the most significant conclusion to draw from the respondents' comments about the AFP relates to the important role that its young community liaison representative appears to play in demystifying the agencies' work for young people in Sydney's Muslim communities. She not only explains the work of her agency to such audiences but facilitates their understanding of Australia's counterterrorism laws and other legislation.**

**It appears likely that her young age (she is in her mid-20s) helps her to engage with other young people, to gain their trust and relate to their experiences. Indeed, this study identified multiple examples where young audiences placed more trust in messages delivered to them by other young people. This report recommends that government agencies should partner directly with young people when developing anti-violence messaging strategies.**

## Notes

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## Appendix 2: International approaches to countering violent narratives online

Kristy Bryden\*

In recent years, governments have recognised the internet's potential in stimulating violent extremism<sup>1</sup> and have sought to implement counter-narrative programs to contest the online space and undermine the supply of violent extremist narratives. This report describes a variety of such programs and is intended to be a resource for policymakers developing such initiatives in Australia. It focuses specifically on programs developed by the UK, the US, Denmark, Canada and the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Those countries were selected because of their similarity to Australia as Western democracies with multicultural societies.

### Common features

This section discusses common aspects of the five countries' approaches to online countering violent extremism (CVE) activities. Each country's strategies are detailed in the subsequent sections.

### Measurement and success

All of the countries discussed in this report appeared to struggle with measuring the effectiveness of their counter-narrative programs. The US's Trans Regional Web Initiative and the UK's Research, Information and Communications Unit, in particular, have been heavily scrutinised due to deficiencies in their evaluation and performance metrics. But not all challenges associated with assessing these programs' effectiveness are traceable to the initiatives themselves. It's difficult to evaluate counter-narrative programs, given that the measure of their success is the absence of something (violent extremism), which is not easily quantified.

The development of effective measures remains a work in progress, although governments seem to be placing greater emphasis on their development due to increasing financial constraints. A number of the governments discussed in this report have sought to solve this problem in a variety of ways. Canada, for example, has commissioned the development of an evaluation 'toolkit' and recently sponsored two studies concerned with evaluating CVE programs.

### The role for government

The governments referred to in this report have commonly determined that while they have a role to play in assisting communities to develop online CVE strategies, their role in delivering counter-narratives is limited. This accords with one of the main findings of a report commissioned by the Canadian Government, which suggested that there was a 'limited role for governments in producing and disseminating counter-narratives because of their credibility gap'.<sup>3</sup> However, the report found that governments had a role to play in developing and disseminating 'government strategic communications', and as messengers and facilitators of 'alternative narratives'.<sup>4</sup>

The Netherlands, in its *National Counterterrorism Strategy 2011–2015*, states that 'It is very important, for all forms of "counter narrative", that the government asks itself who the sender should be ... In many cases this will not be the government itself.'<sup>5</sup> In its *Building Resilience Against Terrorism* strategy of February 2012, the Canadian Government saw itself primarily as a facilitator rather than as a messenger in the development of CVE narratives. Similarly, the UK Government's Research, Information and Communications Unit acknowledges that 'often it is more effective to be working through groups that are recognised as having a voice and having an impact with that voice, rather than it being seen to be government trying to give a message.'<sup>6</sup> Most of these governments therefore concluded that community groups rather than government agencies must drive the development of counter-narrative campaigns.

## Areas of debate

The countries discussed in this report appear to be wrestling with a variety of common limitations and ethical considerations that shape their counter-narrative work. In addition to debating how government sponsorship of CVE narratives may affect the credibility of those messages, governments are concerned with balancing their CVE objectives with their citizens' rights to freedom of speech. They are also debating the principle of separation of church and state, and questioning whether they should engage with 'orthodox' but non-violent groups.<sup>7</sup>

## Who to engage

While each country discussed in this report approaches preventing violent extremism from the point of view of preserving and promoting democratic values, they differ in their approaches to funding or engaging with groups that hold 'orthodox' but non-violent views. The Danish Security and Intelligence Service's Dialogue Forum aims to engage with individuals who espouse controversial views, provided they have rejected violence, because the agency believes those groups have the best chance of influencing young people who are in the process of radicalising. Similarly, the Dutch Government believes that encouraging 'multiform supply (with both an orthodox and a moderate message) can also lead to a delegitimisation of the jihadists and the content of their discourse'.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the UK Government has stated that it will not work with or fund 'extremist organisations that oppose our values of universal human rights, equality before the law, democracy and full participation in our society'.<sup>9</sup>

## 'Separation of church and state'

The US Government has been very heavily involved in producing counter-narratives and strategic communications (for example, correcting misinformation on foreign policy) for a number of years. However, the Constitution's First Amendment right to freedom of speech and the separation of church and state severely restricts the government's options in implementing and funding domestic counter-narrative programs. This is a concern shared by the Dutch Government, which ceased funding one community-based project after receiving continued criticism from parliament about the program's potential violation of the principle of the separation of church and state.

While not having a constitutional separation of church and state, the UK has various pieces of legislation that provide for freedom of religion. Although this doesn't cause the same restrictions as are evident in the US and the Netherlands, the UK government's decision to fund religious organisations under the PREVENT program has been problematic. Its concerns include the perception that it is siding with some Muslim groups against others. The 2011 review of the PREVENT strategy noted that 'dealing with the theology of Al Qa'ida is only a role for Government in certain well-defined and exceptional situations' and '[a]lthough the Government may provide support and assistance, it must avoid seeming either to want or to endorse a particular kind of "state Islam"'.<sup>10</sup>

Despite limiting these governments' capacity to challenge violent narratives' religious arguments, one report highlights that there are potential benefits associated with these restrictions. A 2013 RAND report points out that 'this restriction could ultimately benefit CVE discourse as it frees Muslim groups of the taint of government funding and prevents the government from having to "choose sides" in intra-Muslim discourse and debate'.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the issues associated with the separation of church and state, governments face other problems when funding religious organisations to produce counter-narratives. The 2013 RAND report stated that 'Nearly every individual interviewed [for the study] argued that government sponsorship of Muslim voices could undermine legitimacy'.<sup>12</sup> Further, any perception that the government is promoting one group's religious message risks alienating other adherents of that religion.

As this report demonstrates, many countries' counter-narrative strategies are in their infancy. Nevertheless, many of the early strategies have been evaluated and revised and, problems with measurement and evaluation mechanisms notwithstanding, data is now available on the effectiveness of approaches, strategies and programs. The examples provided in this report are by no

means a complete account of the counter-narrative programs implemented by these governments, and of course other countries have also developed counter-narrative strategies. However, the examples discussed here demonstrate the various approaches, the range of work being undertaken and the common problems facing Western democratic governments in developing counter-narrative programs.

Furthermore, networks of government and non-government practitioners have developed over the past decade and there is an increasing amount of academic work and audience research examining terrorists' and violent extremists' use of the internet. While all of this will be valuable as governments now direct their attention to countering online violent extremist narratives, there is a dearth of empirical research examining audience responses to counter-narrative strategies. This remains an important area for future study.

## United States

**The Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States strategy** was released in August 2011. The strategy is divided into three key areas of 'priority action':

- enhancing federal engagement with and support to local communities that may be targeted by violent extremists
- building government and law enforcement expertise for preventing violent extremism
- countering violent extremist propaganda while promoting our ideals.<sup>13</sup>

The US Government's domestic counter-narrative efforts are concentrated under the third area of priority action.

The Empowering Local Partners strategy was followed by the *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (SIP), which was released in December 2011. The SIP contains an implementation plan for each of the three areas of priority action. The plan for 'Countering violent extremist propaganda while promoting our ideals' acknowledges that, when implementing the strategy, careful consideration of a number of legal issues, especially those related to the First Amendment, is required. The First Amendment's 'establishment clause' prevents the US Government from directly funding religious organisations or activities.<sup>14</sup> For example, this includes preventing the government from funding religious organisations to conduct counter-narrative work in the way the UK Government sponsored the Radical Middle Way.

**The strategy also reflects the US Government's view that it's often more effective to empower communities to challenge violent extremist narratives than to have the government act as messenger.**<sup>15</sup> To that end, while the SIP included a plan to 'provid[e] grants to counter violent extremist narratives and ideologies, within authorities and relevant legal parameters', its emphasis was on building communities' capacity and facilitating connections between activists, communities and the private sector.

**To date, the US Government's domestic activities to counter online violent extremism have prioritised capacity building and networking for communities and other groups.** For example, the National Counter-Terrorism Center has connected activists with technology experts, resulting in a training seminar focused on maximising the use of technology to counter violent extremism online.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, government officials have provided contacts, encouragement and advice to help facilitate a series of workshops for Muslim community leaders that were to be run by the New America Foundation in early 2013.<sup>17</sup>

The Empowering Local Partners strategy recognises that the internet and social networking play a role in advancing violent extremist narratives; consequently, the strategy aims to empower families and communities to counter online violent extremist propaganda.<sup>18</sup> Further, the SIP stated that a separate strategy to counter and prevent online radicalisation and leverage technology to empower community resilience would be developed.<sup>19</sup> The government is yet to release that strategy, but the White House released a statement titled **Working to counter online radicalisation to violence in the United States** in February 2013.<sup>20</sup> The statement focuses exclusively on the government's plans to promote awareness about the threat of online radicalisation and

provide communities with practical information and tools for staying safe online and does not contain a strategy for countering online extremist propaganda.

There have been no further policy statements from the US Government or administration on this issue. However, government and administration officials continue to engage with various communities in relation to CVE activities, as is exemplified by their attendance at the 'Online radicalization: myths and realities' policy briefing held by the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the New America Foundation in late May.<sup>21</sup>

**While the First Amendment constrains the US Government's attempts to target CVE narratives towards its domestic audience, the government has directed such narratives towards international audiences for a number of years.** The **Digital Outreach Team (DOT)** is probably the most well-known of its online counter-messaging initiatives. Established in 2006 under the State Department, the DOT is a team of ten native Arabic, Somali, Punjabi and Urdu speakers<sup>22</sup> who engage with online users in those languages on forums, social networking sites and video sharing platforms. The DOT does not try to change minds. It targets 'lurkers': those who have not made up their minds on various issues and can still be influenced.<sup>23</sup>

Before the creation of the **Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC)** in 2010 (under which the DOT now sits at the State Department), the DOT focused on discussing US foreign policy in the Middle East with its audiences, correcting misinformation and presenting alternative views. Since its incorporation into the CSCC, its focus has shifted to counterterrorism.<sup>24</sup> As Alberto Fernandez, head of the CSCC, told the *Washington Post*, the mission has shifted from spreading positive information about the US to spreading negative information about al-Qaeda.<sup>25</sup> More than 17,000 engagements between the DOT and its target audiences have occurred since 2006, and more than 7,000 since the DOT became part of the CSCC.<sup>26</sup>

The DOT team aims to '[c]ontest the space, redirect the conversation, and confound the adversary'.<sup>27</sup> The team 'confounds the adversary' by quickly responding to extremist narratives that appear on the internet and redirecting the conversation in internet forums to topics that portray al-Qaeda negatively.<sup>28</sup> The DOT's campaigns often mimic or parody those of al-Qaeda. For example, in May the DOT released a video on YouTube parodying a video produced by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>29</sup> The comments on the video on YouTube were largely abusive and threatening, but Fernandez sees 'irate responses from online extremists' as an early measure of effectiveness.<sup>30</sup>

**The DOT's effectiveness is challenging to evaluate**, primarily because it's difficult to determine the impact on the target audience of 'lurkers'. Fernandez is cognisant of this difficulty, saying that solid measures of performance have been developed, but 'measures of effectiveness remain rudimentary'.<sup>31</sup>

The CSCC was established to 'coordinate, orient and inform Government-wide public communications activities directed at audiences abroad and targeted against violent extremists and terrorist organisations, especially al-Qa'ida and its affiliates and adherents' in order to reduce radicalisation, extremist violence and terrorism.<sup>32</sup> The CSCC is 'comprised of three interactive components': the DOT; integrated analysis; and plans and operations.<sup>33</sup> Integrated analysis draws on the intelligence community, academia and other sources to provide information and analysis to CSCC communicators, while plans and operations 'designs and implements non-digital CVE communication strategies, tools, and programs'.<sup>34</sup> In the UK, the Research, Information and Communications Unit (which is discussed in the next section) performs a similar function, but is targeted at domestic, as well as international, audiences.

The **Viral Peace project** is a non-governmental initiative funded by the State Department and run from US embassies. It is designed to develop activists' social media and online communications capabilities and to connect them to resources, partners and audiences. Training courses have so far been run in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Maldives and the Philippines, and there are plans to expand into other countries in the future.<sup>35</sup> The training courses don't instruct participants in a certain message to use for their counter-narratives. Rather, the courses give them advice on how to craft their own counter-narratives and teach them about the 'types of tools and techniques that are relevant to both the content and delivery of counter-messaging campaigning, designed to increase their motivation and reach'.<sup>36</sup>

While Viral Peace intends that its messaging strategies will be ‘viral’, the term also refers to its desire that participants will pass on what they have learned to other would-be communicators. The project has developed an online repository of the reference material used during its courses and conducts ‘train-the-trainer’ workshops.<sup>37</sup> Viral Peace has a main Facebook page, as well as a page for each country in which the program has been delivered, encouraging ongoing contact between its graduates. It also posts information about projects designed by graduates, including, for example, the Youth Fest website in Maldives, so participants can learn from each other’s approaches.<sup>38</sup>

The **Trans Regional Web Initiative** (TRWI) is a US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) program under which ‘news and information websites in support of the geographic combatant command’s (GCC) countering violent extremism objectives’ are developed and maintained.<sup>39</sup> It is run by a private company, which won the five-year contract in September 2009.<sup>40</sup> The websites resemble a news service, aiming to ‘offer accurate, balanced and forward-looking coverage of developments’ in each of the respective regions.<sup>41</sup> The websites are essentially an alternative narrative, providing a different source of news in regions where a violent extremist threat has been identified. There are approximately 10 websites under the TRWI, covering Latin America, the Caribbean, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf states, Iraq, Southeast Europe, Mexico, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa.<sup>42</sup> The websites are in the languages of the target regions as well as English. US Government branding does not appear on the sites, but the ‘About us’ section of each site states which command (AFRICOM, PACCOM etc.) sponsors the site.

A recent report produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue discussed two of the websites—Sabahi and Magharebia, which were established in February 2012. In addition to current news content, these websites (and the others under the TRWI) contain background papers on the target countries and significant events, as well as opinion pieces written by local journalists.<sup>43</sup> The report stated that ‘reports have indicated that Sabahi receives around 4,000 visitors and 10,000 article views daily’.<sup>44</sup>

An article published in *Foreign Policy* in late 2011 stated that another of the TRWI sites, Central Asia Online, had published an average of 71 stories per month in that year, which a SOCOM spokesman had advised garnered ‘168,000 article reads, 85,000 unique visitors, and 380 reader comments per month’.<sup>45</sup> Referring specifically to the Central Asia Online site, the article noted that the content on the site reappears in local newspapers and websites as well as international news aggregators.

In June 2011, while contemplating the Defence budget for the following fiscal year, **the Senate Armed Services Committee noted that the TRWI websites had become a ‘significant and costly component of the countering violent extremism campaigns of the GCCs despite there being limited information to demonstrate these websites are reaching or appropriately influencing their intended target audience’**.<sup>46</sup> The Act passed with the Senate Armed Services Committee’s recommendation essentially preventing any funds from being spent on the TRWI until the Secretary of Defense made ‘certain certifications’ about the effectiveness and measurement mechanisms of the program.<sup>47</sup> The Secretary of Defense’s certifications were not made public but appear to have been accepted, as the program continued to operate after this time.

In April 2013, a classified Government Accountability Office report found that ‘the TRWI program lacks meaningful performance metrics and is poorly coordinated with other US government public diplomacy programs’.<sup>48</sup> Two months later, while contemplating the Defence budget for the 2014 fiscal year, the Senate Armed Services Committee stated that the costs of operating the websites were excessive and not justified, given their lack of performance metrics and questionable effectiveness.<sup>49</sup> This time the committee recommended an amendment that would terminate funding to the TRWI.<sup>50</sup> The amendment was voted down in the House of Representatives in July 2013, but the TRWI is likely to continue to be closely scrutinised.

## Key points

- The US’s domestic counter-narrative work is constrained by the US Constitution’s First Amendment, which prevents the government from providing funding to religious organisations or activities. The US Government has therefore focused its efforts on building the capacity of communities and other groups to create counter-narratives through training programs.



It also focuses on acting as a facilitator to connect community leaders and activists with potential sources of assistance and funding.

- Measurement and evaluation of some the US Government's international counter-narrative programs has been lacking. The Trans Regional Web Initiative, in particular, has been the subject of continued scrutiny and at least one attempt by Congress to remove its funding due to inadequacies in its approach to performance measurement.

## United Kingdom

**The UK's counter-narrative work is conducted under the PREVENT strategy, one of the four elements of the government's counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST.** The first CONTEST strategy was published in 2006, and updates were published in 2009 and 2011. A comprehensive review of the PREVENT element began in 2010 and a revised PREVENT strategy was released in 2011.

The aims of the PREVENT strategy are to:

- respond to the ideological challenge of terrorism and the threat we face from those who promote it
- prevent people from being drawn into terrorism and ensure that they are given appropriate advice and support
- work with a wide range of sectors and institutions (including education, faith, health and criminal justice) where there are risks of radicalisation which we need to address.<sup>51</sup>

The government's counter-narrative work is conducted under the first aim of this strategy and is carried out mainly by the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). The UK Government doesn't often make the details of its counter-narrative work public or publicly name the organisations it works with and supports. Most publicly available information on the work is available from a number of sources, including MP's questions in parliament, the annual CONTEST report and reports of the Committee on Communities and Local Government and the Committee on Intelligence and Security.

## Counter-narrative strategy and programs

In June 2007, the government established the **Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU)**, which is jointly funded and staffed by the Home Office and the FCO and acts as the central hub for the delivery of the government's PREVENT communications.<sup>52</sup> At the time it was established, the RICU was also jointly funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), which subsequently ceased its funding and staffing during 2010 'in line with its new remit to lead work to promote integration separately'.<sup>53</sup> In 2010–11, the RICU had 22 full-time staff and a budget of £4.25 million.<sup>54</sup>

The RICU coordinates and supports the communications delivered by other departments and PREVENT partners, disseminates information to partners and stakeholders on current issues and delivers its own campaigns and media work.<sup>55</sup> It also conducts domestic and international research and analysis, producing a number of reports, including *Credible voices—exploring perceptions of trust and credibility in Muslim communities*; *Counter-terror message testing—qualitative research report*; and *Young British Muslims online*.<sup>56</sup> In October 2009, the DCLG stated that much of its PREVENT communications work was 'supported by research, guidance, campaigns and other communications projects produced by the [RICU]', demonstrating the lead role that the unit plays in this area for the UK Government.<sup>57</sup>

**The RICU has produced a toolkit (PREVENT: a communications guide)<sup>58</sup> for developing, implementing and evaluating a CVE communications strategy and plan.** It has also coordinated the provision of 'professional communications skills to community groups who appeared to be well-placed to challenge the ideology associated with Al Qa'ida' and delivered workshops throughout the UK to support strategic communications development at the local level.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the work and programs produced by the RICU, the UK Government's counter-narrative efforts have focused on education, networking and the delivery of a 'mainstream' message of Islam. PREVENT programs involving education

institutions, NGOs and community organisations have provided advice to equip young people to challenge extremist narratives, raised awareness of extremist speakers on university campuses, and supported the development of citizenship education in madrasahs.<sup>60</sup>

Work has been done domestically and internationally under PREVENT to create ‘networks capable of developing and promoting a wider counter-narrative’.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the UK Government supports the work of Muslim chaplains to challenge extremist views in the prison system.<sup>62</sup> The FCO and DCLG sponsored a series of roadshows by Muslim community groups throughout the UK that involved ‘lectures, debates and cultural events aimed at promoting a mainstream message of Islam on key issues, including terrorism’.<sup>63</sup> Although not explicitly stated, it can be assumed that this refers to the roadshows organised by **Radical Middle Way**.

The UK Government’s funding of the Radical Middle Way roadshows and website is one of its most well-known activities in the counter-narrative sphere. Established in 2005 in the wake of the London bombings, Radical Middle Way is a ‘community interest company’ that promotes a ‘mainstream, moderate understanding of Islam that young people can relate to’.<sup>64</sup> Among other aims, the website is designed to provide guidance to give its audience ‘the tools to combat exclusion and violence, and encourage positive civic action’.<sup>65</sup>

Radical Middle Way is best known for its events, including speaker tours (such as the roadshows), dialogues on faith, and arts and cultural performances. It also provides training and workshops to provide ‘an understanding of key issues and solutions on how to tackle them’.<sup>66</sup> The Radical Middle Way website provides a variety of information on its activities, including video and audio recordings from its events, campaigns and speakers. It also uses Twitter and Facebook to share events, news and articles on relevant issues.

From December 2005 to April 2009, Radical Middle Way received £1.06 million for its website and domestic programs and £615,458 for its international work.<sup>67</sup> The UK Government is not currently funding Radical Middle Way. **It was criticised for funding Radical Middle Way because of the organisation’s ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and the inclusion of ‘fundamentalist Muslim preachers’ in its roadshows.**<sup>68</sup> Similar criticisms were also made in regard to a number of other PREVENT funding recipients, as acknowledged in the PREVENT Review.<sup>69</sup>

A 2009 report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, *Countering online radicalisation: a strategy for action*, found fault with the UK Government’s funding of only a small number of websites, stating that this ignores how the internet has evolved:

By putting all its eggs into just a few baskets, however, the government not only ignored the logic of the internet, it also spent large amounts of public money without making any significant difference.<sup>70</sup>

Noting that **‘Some of the most successful commercial sites on the internet started as projects by students or other enthusiasts’, the report suggests that the government provide small start-up grants in the range of £5,000 to £10,000.**<sup>71</sup> Among other benefits, this would facilitate the targeting of smaller demographics or segments of the community.<sup>72</sup> This appears to be particularly important in areas with diverse communities, such as in Sydney, and ASPI recommends a similar scheme be developed in Australia as discussed in the main body of this report.

## **PREVENT Review and the evaluation of CVE narratives**

The PREVENT Review, which culminated in June 2011 with the release of an updated PREVENT strategy, identified a number of problems with specific PREVENT programs and with the effectiveness of the overall strategy. The review stated that the RICU had played a central role in developing counter-narratives as well as producing research that had enhanced the understanding of their impact and audiences.<sup>73</sup> However, the review also noted that the impact of this work was varied.<sup>74</sup> Further, the updated CONTEST strategy released a month later in July 2011 stated that ‘RICU’s counter-narrative work has not been as successful as we want’ and that in future RICU would be expected to ‘deliver sharper and more professional counter-narrative products’.<sup>75</sup>

The review stated that, in its attempts to develop language to describe the terrorist threat ‘which would not inadvertently lend credence to the claims about counter-terrorism made by extremist and terrorist groups’, the RICU had risked removing the ideological component it should have been addressing.<sup>76</sup> **The review also found that the organisations the RICU chose to work with struggled to make themselves heard and it needed to take more care to identify credible partners in the future.**<sup>77</sup>

The RICU has focused on addressing this credibility issue. The Home Secretary advised the Intelligence and Security Committee in January 2012 that:

Often it is more effective to be working through groups that are recognised as having a voice and having an impact with that voice, rather than it being seen to be government trying to give a message. Indeed, it’s always better to be using those people to whom people look naturally to hear the message, rather than simply doing it as RICU itself.<sup>78</sup>

This view is also supported by the research discussed in the main body of this report, and is reflected in ASPI’s recommendation that government agencies support existing popular community-developed campaigns rather than prioritising the development of new CVE websites.

The early PREVENT work did not have the benefit of the audience research later conducted by the RICU. The review argued that this led to a waste of money and resources and to messages that gave the impression that the government believed it had to convince Muslim communities that terrorism was unacceptable.<sup>79</sup>

**In 2011, both the PREVENT Review and the Intelligence and Security Committee found that the effectiveness of PREVENT programs was not clear, and pointed to problems with its evaluation methods.** The review noted that projects were being evaluated based on the number of people receiving a message rather than its impact.<sup>80</sup> In its 2010–11 annual report, the Intelligence and Security Committee found that it was ‘essential that there is some mechanism by which the success of work on the PREVENT strand of CONTEST—the benefits of RICU in particular—can be evaluated’.<sup>81</sup>

In January 2012, the Home Secretary advised the Intelligence and Security Committee that, as a result of the PREVENT Review, RICU was considering developing clearer definitions and better approaches to measure the impact of CVE campaigns, including the use of focus groups.<sup>82</sup> However, the committee remained ‘concerned about the lack of measures to assess the effectiveness of the strategy’.<sup>83</sup> The Intelligence and Security Committee did not discuss the RICU in its most recent annual report, and no other information is available to assess whether these problems have been resolved.

## Countering online extremist narratives

As noted above, the UK Government has been addressing online extremism since the original CONTEST strategy. However, it appears to have largely focused on removing online material that contravenes the *Terrorism Act 2006* provisions against ‘encouragement of terrorism’ and ‘dissemination of terrorist publications’, rather than countering violent extremist narratives.<sup>84</sup>

The PREVENT Review stated that the RICU ‘runs a range of projects designed to challenge terrorist ideology online through effective counter-narratives, positive messaging from credible sources and critical analysis of extremist propaganda’.<sup>85</sup> However, like much of the PREVENT work, there is little information in the public domain that describes the UK Government’s CVE efforts in the online sphere in detail. In January 2012, in relation to challenging extremism online, the Home Secretary advised the Intelligence and Security Committee that the RICU was ‘currently road-testing some quite innovative approaches to counter-ideological messages’.<sup>86</sup> However, the UK Government has not published any further information on those approaches.

Under the previous PREVENT strategy, examples of work in this area included the FCO’s sponsorship of the production of a short film called *Wish You Waziristan*. The film was intended to be released online and provide a counter-narrative by telling the story of two young British-Pakistanis who attend a terrorist training camp in Waziristan. The story is told from the perspective of a young man whose older brother turns to extremism after being targeted by racists. The younger brother is not committed to the terrorist cause but follows his older brother. Together, they watch terrorist training videos and travel to Waziristan, where conditions are

rough and they are not initially welcomed. After participating in a failed attack in Waziristan, the two return to the UK, where they are arrested.<sup>87</sup> The film was never released in full, however; after clips were posted on YouTube in April–May 2011, a British Sunday newspaper revealed the funding source, and the FCO put the film's release on hold without revealing its reasons.<sup>88</sup>

The new CONTEST strategy places a greater emphasis on the role of the internet, both as a problem and as a solution to violent extremism by challenging narratives, radicalisation and recruitment. The strategy states that the government aims to 'make the internet a more hostile environment for terrorists' and that it needs to:

- identify, investigate and disrupt terrorist use of the internet
- make it harder for terrorists to exploit the internet for radicalisation and recruitment
- counter terrorist propaganda and narrative online
- make it harder for terrorists to conduct cyber attacks.<sup>89</sup>

The CONTEST strategy acknowledges that the majority of people reject terrorist propaganda and will never visit a terrorist website, but affirms the need to ensure greater challenges to that propaganda and make positive messages easier to find.<sup>90</sup> The 2012 CONTEST annual report stated that the UK Government has 'worked with digital communications experts to help fifteen civil society groups exploit the potential of the internet'.<sup>91</sup> Work also continues to support community-based counter-narrative campaigns.

## Key points

- The UK Government's PREVENT communications are centralised under the Research, Information and Communications Unit. The RICU acts as a hub, coordinating and supporting the communications of other departments and PREVENT partners, as well as delivering its own campaigns and media work.
- The PREVENT program underwent a review in 2011 and was criticised for funding radical groups and working with too few or inappropriate community organisations.
- The PREVENT program continues to experience difficulties in measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of its counter-narrative strategies.

## Canada

Canada's counter-narrative work is conducted under its first counterterrorism strategy, *Building resilience against terrorism*, released in February 2012. Similar to the UK's CONTEST strategy, *Building resilience* is a four-pronged strategy of 'prevent', 'detect', 'deny' and 'respond'. The strategy states that the desired outcomes of the 'prevent' element are as follows:

1. Resilience of communities to violent extremism and radicalisation is bolstered.
2. Violent extremist ideology is effectively challenged by producing effective narratives to counter it.
3. The risk of individuals succumbing to violent extremism and radicalisation is reduced.<sup>92</sup>

For outcome 2, the strategy intends to focus on 'providing positive alternative narratives that emphasize the open, diverse and inclusive nature of Canadian society and seek to foster a greater sense of Canadian identity and belonging for all'.<sup>93</sup> **The strategy appears to place the government in the role of facilitator rather than messenger of CVE campaigns.** It states that programs will be aimed at 'empowering individuals and communities to develop and deliver messages and viewpoints that resonate more strongly than terrorist propaganda'.<sup>94</sup>

The strategy recognises the important role that the internet plays in disseminating violent extremist ideology. The Canadian Government's desire to further understand this issue can be seen in some of the research it has sponsored through the **Kanishka Project**. The project is named after the Air India Flight 182 plane that was bombed in June 1985, killing 329 people, mostly Canadians.<sup>95</sup> The Kanishka Project aims to develop a body of research to assist the government to understand terrorism and how best to address it in Canada. So far, four rounds of grants have been provided since June 2011.

The Kanishka Project grants have been provided to a number of research projects that develop or evaluate counter-narratives or provide further information on terrorist use of the internet. One example is the 'Counter Narrative Resources for Education Professionals' project being conducted by the Trialogue Education Trust. The project will 'create educational resources for the prevention of terrorism and violent extremism, including short films and online materials'.<sup>96</sup> Another project, conducted by Charlie Edwards (developer of the UK's CONTEST strategy and overseer of the PREVENT Review), will address problems associated with measuring and evaluating CVE interventions. Specifically, Edwards aims to develop an evaluation toolkit for use by policymakers and practitioners.<sup>97</sup>

Developing its counter-terrorism strategy only recently, the Canadian Government has sought to learn from other countries' experiences. In July 2013, it commissioned the Institute for Strategic Dialogue to produce the *Review of programs to counter narratives of violent extremism* report, which it released in July 2013.<sup>98</sup> The recommendations in the report aim to guide the Canadian and other governments on how they can tackle violent extremist narratives.

## The Netherlands

The murder of Theo Van Gogh in 2004 increased the Netherlands' counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation efforts, culminating in the *Polarisation and Radicalisation Action Plan 2007–2011*. The action plan aimed to address all forms of extremism, with a particular focus on right-wing and Islamic radicalisation. **The plan viewed acts of extremist violence or terrorism as a potential by-product of a larger problem: the disintegration of societal cohesion.**<sup>99</sup> It aimed to prevent '(further) processes of isolation, polarisation and radicalisation by the (re-)inclusion of people who are at risk of slipping away or turning away from Dutch society and the democratic legal order'.<sup>100</sup>

The Polarisation and Radicalisation Action Plan identified that the 'people who are susceptible to polarisation and radicalisation are primarily youths (generally younger than 30) who are looking for their identity or calling'.<sup>101</sup> The plan notes that another important dimension influencing radicalisation in Muslim communities was the 'political dimension, based on the perception of injustice vis-a-vis themselves or vis-a-vis other Muslims at home and abroad'.<sup>102</sup>

**The Netherlands' local governments and municipalities were given primacy in the action plan and were tasked with undertaking actions 'aimed at prevention, signalling and intervention'.**<sup>103</sup> Dutch local government agencies appear to be much more heavily involved in CVE work than their counterparts in the other nations that this report discusses. At the commencement of the action plan, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, in collaboration with the Dutch Government, conducted a scan to identify areas showing signs of polarisation and radicalisation. The municipalities then used that information to develop programs for their specific areas, in association with teachers, neighbourhood police officers, youth workers and others.<sup>104</sup> At the national level, the Dutch Government's policy was 'not specifically geared to the reduction of polarisation and radicalisation' but would contribute by attempting to remove factors that undermine social cohesion.<sup>105</sup> The government aimed to do this by encouraging its citizens' participation in society through, for example, education, employment and tackling discrimination.<sup>106</sup>

As the Dutch Government sought to address the issues of 'polarisation and radicalisation' at the local level through the relevant agencies, community groups and individuals working together, the action plan didn't outline a national counter-narrative approach. However, the government intended to '[d]evelop tools/methods to offer a retort to radical expressions for administrators, teachers, police and youth workers'.<sup>107</sup> The government produced a 'Guide to Retort', which contained advice on

how to respond to radical expressions.<sup>108</sup> The responses are ‘based on content (democratic argument) and method (how to engage youngsters to critically reflect on beliefs).<sup>109</sup> An English version of the guide is not available on the internet, limiting ASPI’s capacity to evaluate it for this report.

The Dutch Government funded a total of 78 projects (53 delivered by local governments or municipalities and 25 by NGOs) under the Polarisation and Radicalisation Action Plan.<sup>110</sup> Each of the projects was evaluated by an external agency, KplusV.<sup>111</sup> The City of Amsterdam received funding for a project that trained moderators of internet forums to identify and address radical messages.<sup>112</sup> The evaluation completed by KplusV in October 2011 indicates that training was provided to moderators and webmasters, but that plans to address radical messages on the internet had not been realised at the time of the evaluation.<sup>113</sup> The action plan expired in 2011, and there is no information available as to whether this project has continued.

The Dutch Government provided funding to a website created by the National Ethnic Minorities Committee (a government-funded NGO) that was designed to ‘showcase the diversity of opinions on Islam in the Netherlands’.<sup>114</sup> The Dutch Parliament was critical of the site because ‘... it was vulnerable to (parliamentary) critique of violating the principle of separation of state and religion’, and funding was stopped in 2010.<sup>115</sup>

A change in government and the expiry of the action plan led to the development of the **National Counterterrorism Strategy 2011–2015**. The strategy is made up of five pillars: Procure, Prevent, Protect, Prepare and Prosecute.

Under the Prevent element, the strategy aims to combat radicalisation, and by extension terrorism, by pursuing a policy:

1. to reinforce resilience on the demand side
2. to undermine supply
3. to reduce the breeding ground
4. to reverse observed processes of radicalisation (deradicalisation).<sup>116</sup>

Counter-narrative work will take place under the second aim. The strategy states that the government is ‘taking steps to analyse this “narrative” and, where possible, provide counter-arguments or a “counter narrative”’, the exact content of which will differ depending on the arguments used in the narrative, the environment (country, region, city) and the size of the target group.<sup>117</sup>

The strategy notes that the government may not always be the most suitable messenger for counter-narratives:

Intermediary organisations or certain people will often enjoy more credibility and support than the government among the target group for which the message is intended. In addition, the government must always take account of the separation between church and state.

As a result of these concerns and limitations, the strategy notes that the Dutch Government will try to make alliances with intermediaries but recognises that it is ‘important to prevent these organisations and people from losing credibility and support—precisely because they collaborate with the government’.<sup>118</sup>

**Unlike some countries, such as the UK, the Netherlands is not averse to supporting narratives that are ‘radical’ but non-violent, and the national strategy suggests that the government ‘encourage as many alternatives as possible’.** The strategy states that ‘Encouraging such multiform supply (with both an orthodox and a moderate message) can also lead to a delegitimisation of the jihadists and the content of their discourse.’<sup>119</sup>

The 2011–15 strategy also acknowledges the role of the internet in promoting violent discourses and the ‘possibilities for the government to organise—through government means or third parties—a “counter narrative” against this jihadist discourse’.<sup>120</sup> No further detail is provided on how the government might exploit those possibilities.

## Key points

- Like the US Government, the Netherlands Government is concerned about not violating the principle of the separation of church and state when conducting its CVE programs. This has limited its capacity to fund some programs.
- The Netherlands Government encourages the development of both 'orthodox' and 'moderate' counter-narratives.

## Denmark

In January 2009, the Danish Government released ***A common and safe future: An action plan to prevent extremist views and radicalisation among young people***. The plan intended to build on efforts the government was already undertaking 'to maintain and further develop Denmark as a society with freedom, security and opportunities for all'.<sup>121</sup> Prior to the release of the plan, the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET) had established a Centre for Prevention under its Preventative Security Department, and the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs had established a Division for Cohesion and Prevention of Radicalisation, which would 'work to prevent extremist views and radicalisation among young people'.<sup>122</sup>

The action plan described 22 specific initiatives that the government wished to implement, four of which were focused on communications and counter-narratives.<sup>123</sup> In response to ASPI's enquiries, the Danish Government advised that 'only some of the initiatives are part of the work programme of the present government, which came to office in September 2011', although it did not indicate which initiatives were adopted.<sup>124</sup>

**Initiative 6 of *A common and safe future* aimed to increase dialogue and information on Denmark's foreign policy among Danish citizens.** The Danish Government aimed to 'create a counter image to the propaganda and hostile imagery of extremist groups' in relation to its foreign policies through meetings with young people in schools, in clubs, on the internet and in other places they frequented.<sup>125</sup>

**A June 2011 review of the plan stated that presentations, meetings and seminars on Danish foreign policy in Muslim countries had been conducted with 13,285 Danish high school students, 324 high school teachers and 127 university students.**<sup>126</sup> Dialogues had also been held with immigrant associations and groups of young people of immigrant backgrounds. Educational materials on Danish development policy and projects were produced and distributed in high schools, and an article on the conflict in Afghanistan was published in an educational magazine that reaches a third of the country's schools.<sup>127</sup>

The review found that the work conducted under the initiative received positive feedback from students, teachers and migrant associations.<sup>128</sup> The government intended to sustain this work, noting that baseline and follow-up studies would be required to measure its impact and long-term effects.<sup>129</sup>

**Initiative 8 of the action plan was a dialogue forum against 'militant extremism', which was to be conducted by PET.** PET had already established 'an ongoing dialogue' with 'representatives from ethnic minorities and imams' and intended to extend this to include other influential representatives from Muslim communities.<sup>130</sup> The goal of the initiative was to engage with individuals who hold controversial views to strengthen the 'disagreeing dialogue', as the government felt that 'Often it is precisely these individuals who have the best chance of influencing the attitudes of the young people who are in a process of radicalisation'.<sup>131</sup> Thus, like in the Netherlands, the Danish Government appears open to working with a wide range of groups, including those that may hold 'radical' views.

In April 2012, the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) published a case study on the dialogue forum that was written in consultation with PET and others. The CGCC noted that membership of the dialogue forum and the issues discussed are not made public, and highlighted the uniqueness of the forum in that the government agency involved was the country's security and intelligence service.<sup>132</sup> This differs from the approach taken by other countries discussed in this report, in that the Danish intelligence service appears to be taking a leading and highly public role in community outreach for the purposes of CVE.

PET directly invites individuals who have ‘insight and influence’ and have rejected violence to participate in the dialogue forum.<sup>133</sup> The study noted that forum members held a variety of positions in their communities and included women, but relatively few representatives under the age of 35.<sup>134</sup> Although pointing out that youth were a target audience, the study’s authors thought this might not be a limitation if members had good access to youth in their communities.<sup>135</sup>

Members of the dialogue forum saw it as a positive initiative and suggested that they wanted to participate in it because it offers them an opportunity to inform the intelligence service about their communities’ issues and concerns.<sup>136</sup> The initiative leverages the community leaders’ motivation to promote the prevention of radicalisation in their communities while acting as a mechanism for them to share their concerns about various issues affecting their communities.

The dialogue forum has helped the government and communities to counter rumours (for example, that there were plans to burn the Qur’an at a rally in Copenhagen) and develop more balanced media coverage of terrorism, integration and other issues.<sup>137</sup> However, the forum isn’t just designed to help the government to create a more effective message or challenge community misconceptions. A member of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave a presentation to the dialogue forum on Danish aid to the Middle East and North Africa, which was ‘reportedly an eye-opener for some members ... who were not previously aware of the extent of Danish support’.<sup>138</sup> In this way, the forum equips its members to better counter misinformation being used in extremist messages.

More evaluation is needed to determine the impact and effectiveness of these counter-narratives, but the forum seems to have maintained the interest of its target communities, and built trust and contacts between the members themselves and between them and the government.<sup>139</sup>

**Initiative 13 aimed to establish an internet forum for young people, focused on democracy and radicalisation.** The plan acknowledged the role of the internet in exposing young people to extremist ideologies and messages. The internet forum was intended to provide a space for ‘debate and information related to democracy, extremism and international issues’.<sup>140</sup> Although the forum was being established by the government, it was hoped that young people would ‘assume co-ownership’ of it.<sup>141</sup>

The June 2011 review of the plan noted that money had been awarded to four projects for work under this initiative, but no further information was provided describing those projects.<sup>142</sup> In response to ASPI’s enquiries about the initiative, the Danish Government advised that ‘In close collaboration with international and national experts, practitioners, academics, intelligence agencies and relevant industries, the Government is working on developing specific initiatives that will be implemented in 2013 and forward.’<sup>143</sup>

**Initiative 21 aimed to develop on an overall communication plan to counter misinformation espoused by violent extremist groups.** According to the action plan, the Danish Government intended to ‘develop an overall plan for information on and communication of the efforts within areas such as inclusion and citizenship, prevention of extremism, Denmark’s commitment in the surrounding world etc.’<sup>144</sup> In response to ASPI’s enquiries, the Danish Government advised that an overall communication plan has not been established.<sup>145</sup>

## Key points

- The Danish Government tackles misconceptions about its foreign policies and other issues through direct dialogue with various communities. This appears to be the main way in which the government delivers its counter-narrative strategy. Its efforts in this regard appear to be considerable, involving thousands of Danish citizens.
- The Danish national security and intelligence service (the AIVD) convenes a dialogue group of individuals with ‘insight and influence’, some of whom hold controversial views, to strengthen its counter-narratives and create networks. This approach appears to be unique, in that the intelligence services of the other countries in this report are not publicly involved in CVE work, let alone taking a highly visible public role.



## Notes

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

CGCC Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation

CSCC Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (US)

CVE countering violent extremism

DCLG Department for Communities and Local Government (UK)

DOT Digital Outreach Team (US)

FCO Foreign and Commonwealth Office (UK)

PET Security and Intelligence Service (Politiets Efterretningstjeneste) (Denmark)

RICU Research, Information and Communications Unit (UK)

SIP Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States

TRWI Trans Regional Web Initiative (US)

UK United Kingdom

## About the author of Appendix 2

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## About the lead researcher

**Roslyn Richardson** joined ASPI in 2011. Roslyn has a Ph.D in communication and a master's degree in international relations. Prior to joining ASPI, Roslyn worked as an academic and social researcher. Roslyn has also worked as a senior researcher in the public service and has undertaken research for UNHCR's Centre for Documentation and Research in Geneva.

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