

GNET-CENS Workshop

Civil Society Counter-Messaging in Asia: Experiments and Developments

ZOOM, Thursday 27 January 2022, 16:00-17:30 (Singapore)

The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET) is an academic research initiative backed by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) and convened by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London. CENS organised and facilitated this event as part of our function as a core GNET member.

Summary

In recent years, various civil society organisations (CSOs) have experimented and deployed counter-messaging campaigns and projects to prevent violent extremism in Southeast Asia. The pandemic has also accelerated the roll-out of some online CSO initiatives, while offline face-to-face projects have shifted to hybrid models. This CENS-GNET Workshop brought together counter-messaging practitioners from Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to share best practices and recurring challenges in this developmental field.

Speakers

- **Aizat Shamsuddin**, Founder/Project Coordinator, Initiate.my (Malaysia)
- **Orissa Sofyan**, Programme Specialist, Harmoni (Indonesia)
- **Adam Anay**, Program Coordinator, Equal Access International-PH (Philippines)

Moderator

- **Dr Shashi Jayakumar**, Senior Fellow & Head, Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), RSIS.

Attendees

- 25 participants from civil society organisations, research institutes, and universities in South and Southeast Asia, and Australia

Aizat Shamsuddin, Founder/Project Coordinator, Initiate.my (Malaysia)

Initiate.my is a data-driven initiative to promote tolerance and prevent violence based in Malaysia. It seeks to address the alarming trend of rising extremism and tensions motivated by religious hatred and racism after the 2018 general election. Initiate.my approaches counter-messaging as a dual-track process. The first aim is to challenge extremist narratives, including those which dehumanise others and those which claim to justify a false sense of victimhood. The second strategy is alternative-narrative messaging, which disseminates and promotes positive alternatives based on the rule of law, human rights, and dignity.

Much counter-messaging work in Malaysia is conducted by an organisation called the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism (SEARCCT), which engages former extremists and youth groups to produce and post tailored messages to vulnerable audiences. However, the organisation falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the associated narratives are not well integrated through various relevant state agencies, such as the Ministry of Religion, which does not always promote religious diversity.

Civil society efforts to prevent violent extremism (PVE), through strategic communications or otherwise, remain underdeveloped in Malaysia, as government generally manages the associated activities. But following the 2018 general election, a number of new youth-led non-governmental organisations have become active, while social media has continued to transform civil society advocacy, particularly during the pandemic.

One issue facing NGOs working on P/CVE in Malaysia is funding, as the nation is not generally seen to be as vulnerable to terrorist attacks as other countries in the region. To raise awareness of existing fault lines in Malaysia, Initiate.my has built a comprehensive database cataloguing incidents of conflict motivated by religious hatred. One finding was a rise in inter-group contestation along ethnic lines in the lead-up to the 2018 elections, while another of concern is the emergence of vigilante groups that impose their values on others through a kind of informal 'morality policing'.

A further Initiate.my initiative is a pilot project launched in November 2020 to improve youth media literacy. Around forty young people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds are currently involved, and discussions include theories of radicalisation and freedom of religion and belief. Participants are taught how to recognise, research, and counter disinformation, and how to build infographics to communicate relevant issues to followers on social media.

Orissa Sofyan, Programme Specialist, Harmoni (Indonesia)

Orissa discussed two ongoing initiatives at Harmoni, which is a USAID-funded five-year project aiming to strengthen resilience against intolerance and violent extremism in Indonesia. Extremist interpretations of Islam can forbid certain cultural practices such as music and dance, and to counter this creeping trend, Harmoni supports two community-based organisations in West Java to promote performing arts and highlight local identities among vulnerable communities.

One project run by the Nahdlatul Ulama affiliated organisation, Lesbumi, is revitalizing traditional arts such as shadow puppetry and ceremonies which reconnect community members with their shared past and the diverse Cirebonese belief system. The second is an initiative from the Bandung based Komuji, which works with young people to develop their potential through music, discussion and creative activities that encourage critical thinking, inclusivity and tolerance. Over 100 aspiring musicians have received training and support through the programme, with many selected to be Komuji Ambassadors through Spotify. The scheme also involves a 'creative hub' venue which hosts discussions on topics relevant to young people such as contrasting views on early marriage and feminism in Islam.

During the COVID-19 pandemic activities were largely shifted online. For Lesbumi, this adjustment was challenging as the initiative depends on communities gathering in-person and participants were not always active on social media. However, local television and community radio stations broadcasted performances, which proved popular. With a younger, more urban audience, Komuji was much more successful online. Komuji's followers on Instagram grew by

500 per cent in one year, and the platform's Rumah Komuji is now attracting other creative communities and government institutions as a collective space for expression and messaging.

The Komuji and Lesbumi projects do not confront exclusivist narratives head on but instead reinforce collective identities and positive forms of expression. In sum, these grass roots initiatives are building resilience by shrinking the 'identity vacuum' which extremists aim to exploit.

Adam Anay, Program Coordinator, Equal Access International-PH (Philippines)

Equal Access International-Philippines (EAI-PH) was created in 2018 to facilitate an innovative approach to instigate peace and transform extremism by creating Alternative Messaging Hubs. These hubs were intended to close the gap filled by violent extremists with messaging that aims to empower and convey the strength of community members forwarding peaceful solutions. The approach was piloted in Nigeria and subsequently scaled, with adaptation, to Kenya and the Philippines.

Adam shared that Mindanao's history of conflict is driven in part by narratives of relative deprivation and marginalisation, which are exploited by violent extremist groups. EAI-PH has observed that youths in Mindanao are approached by terrorist recruiters lurking outside schools and in online spaces. Online recruitment has appeared to increase, coinciding with the fact that the Philippines remains one of a handful of countries yet to resume face-to-face classes due to the pandemic.

This haphazard shift to online learning only highlighted the rift between students who have the resources to pursue distance learning against pupils who have no internet access. Thus, EAI-PH initiatives focus on "communities and schools in action" to prevent violent extremism. The associated upstream initiatives are meant to indirectly contest violent extremism in the short term and to enhance the capabilities of schools and communities in the longer term.

EAI-PH has several programmes in place, including the conduct of "Tech Camps" where youth leaders are provided training to create content espousing positive narratives. Products made by Tech Camp participants are intended for social media platforms such as Facebook, or in areas with limited connectivity, radio stations. EAI-PH also runs educational interventions to insert peacebuilding narratives into school curriculums. Adam said EAI-PH is working with the Department of Education to pilot-test the integration of modules into existing values education classes. Some of the curriculum insertions could be as simple as visual portrayals of Filipino Muslims from Mindanao in educational materials. This is meant to balance the ubiquity of characters that display traits from the non-Muslim areas of Luzon and the Visayas.

In conclusion, Adam offered several 'lessons learned' from his work with the EAI-PH. First, local efforts that recognise regional variations lead to better results. Second, localised content better elicits the feeling of agency and critical thinking within a target audience.

Q&A

A participant appreciated the creative work shared by the speakers, but asked how we can know whether counter-messaging efforts actually work.

One speaker replied that it was indeed difficult to know whether directly challenging a particular message was effective, but it is certainly possible to measure the impact of positive narratives through levels of engagement. In this sense, the work is not so much about refuting arguments but shrinking the pool of disaffected potential recruits, and enhancing the pull of positive identities.

Another speaker said one of the ways their organisation evaluates impact is whether the recipients of their media training continue creating content, and the extent of their enthusiasm towards advocacy. Promising signs can be observed at this micro-level, but the speaker also conceded it was hard to obtain a more general sense of the positive impact.

A participant added that one way of measuring the effectiveness of counter-narrative initiatives was through reaction from extremist networks themselves. In Indonesia recently there has been a lot of push back from pro-ISIS social media users commenting on a particular project formed by an association of former prisoners. This clearly communicated irritation and indignation is surely a good sign that the group's positive narratives have impact.

A further question asked how one organisation followed the careers of the trainees and inquired about the nature of social media discourse in the Philippines more generally.

The speaker said they monitor the respective campaigns that former trainees establish, and they also maintain a robust and active alumni community, involving monthly or quarterly check-ins with people all over the island. There is also a higher level programme called the Peace Promotion Fellowship, which is a six-month journey where participants get involved in specific community projects with regard to counter-messaging. This time-line allows the monitoring of progress and sustainability.

Social media in the Philippines is highly polarised, especially on Facebook, and disinformation is thriving. Mobile data limitations often mean that users cannot access whole articles or check facts, so misleading article previews are also an issue. To combat toxic discourse, the organisation encourages users to move discussions on to higher ground through reconstructing arguments in positive ways, rather than challenging points directly and aggravating unhelpfully combative debate.

Speakers were asked to give closing thoughts about what improvements can be made to enhance PVE initiatives by civil society groups

One speaker said greater emphasis on collaboration among small organisations at the transnational level, where knowledge and experiences could be shared would be a constructive development. Another speaker mentioned the need in some contexts for faith-based approaches. Finally, a speaker stressed the importance of multi-stakeholder coordination, particularly among actors who do not traditionally work together.