

Media Development and Countering Violent Extremism: *An Uneasy Relationship, a Need for Dialogue*

BY COURTNEY C. RADSCH, Ph.D.

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Center for International Media Assistance National Endowment for Democracy

1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20004
PHONE: (202) 378-9700
FAX: (202) 378-9407
EMAIL: CIMA@ned.org
URL: <http://cima.ned.org>

Mark Nelson
SENIOR DIRECTOR

ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR THE CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ASSISTANCE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Courtney C. Radsch, Ph.D., is the Advocacy Director at the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#).

As a veteran journalist, researcher, and free expression advocate, she [writes and speaks](#) frequently about the nexus of media, technology, and human rights. She is the author of [Cyberactivism and Citizen Journalism in Egypt: Digital Dissidence & Political Change](#) and several



book chapters and articles about the Arab Spring, media, terrorism, and human rights. Her commentaries and articles have been published in *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, Al Jazeera, Oxford Analytica, and the *Huffington Post*. Prior to joining CPJ, she worked with UNESCO's Section for Freedom of Expression, where she coordinated strategy in the Arab region and edited the flagship publication "[World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development](#)." Radsch also previously managed the Global Freedom of Expression Campaign at Freedom House, where she edited [Policing Belief: The Impact of Blasphemy Laws on Human Rights](#) and conducted training for activists in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. Radsch holds a Ph.D. in international relations from American University. She speaks Arabic, French, and Spanish.

Introduction

When US President Barack Obama held a summit on Countering Violent Extremism at the White House in February 2015, it was clear that a major new international agenda had emerged. The term “Countering Violent Extremism,” or CVE, is now commonly used to refer to a variety of tactics and strategies—usually employing tools for mass communication—to blunt the efforts of terrorists to publicize their ideology and marshal support for violence.

Though the techniques associated with CVE have long been used, the term and its associated field of practice have grown in prominence along with the terrorist group ISIS,* which has achieved unprecedented success in its use of social media to recruit new militants from around the world. With its territorial foothold in the Middle East, a network that has launched attacks outside the region, and apocalyptic justifications for brutality, ISIS has quickly become one of the greatest threats to global security, and the primary justification for CVE programming. At a UN summit just months after the initial White House CVE summit, Obama confirmed, “We’re stepping up our efforts to discredit [ISIS’s] propaganda, especially online.”¹ By December, the UN Secretary General had adopted a Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE), calling on each country to develop its own national strategy.

The rise of the CVE agenda has been met quickly with controversy. Given that a significant number of the projects gathered under the CVE rubric involve media components, there has been a vigorous debate about whether the CVE set of approaches, which are rooted in strategic communications, are more or less effective than approaches to violence and extremism from the media development sector, which tends to instead emphasize the moderating effects of a responsible, vibrant, and plural media sector.² This debate over the role of media is not occurring in isolation; it also inflected by a wider discussion about how the field of democracy promotion should cope with violent extremism. These debates—about violent extremism, media, and democracy promotion—have good reason to be contentious as they raise fundamental questions about the nature and causes of the receding tide of democratization’s third wave.



Photo: U.S. Department of State / Public Domain

*“We’re stepping up
our efforts to discredit
[ISIS’s] propaganda,
especially online.”*

— PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

* This report will use the term ISIS throughout, which is the acronym for the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq. The organization is also often referred to as ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), the Islamic State, and Daesh, the acronym of ISIS’s name in Arabic.



How the influence of CVE on media development is felt

- 1 CVE is reshaping the funding landscape for media development practitioners—for better or for worse, depending on the vantage point.
- 2 CVE objectives are at times finding their way into media development projects.
- 3 The rise of CVE poses a reputational risk to media development practitioners and may provide cover for oppressive regimes to justify repressive measures.

Yet as each side marks its distinct theoretical territory, the lines separating CVE and media development appear to those on the ground to be growing blurrier, not more distinct. This report, drawing from such voices on the ground, argues that the theoretical posturing is doing a disservice to the needs of practitioners by failing to recognize and respond to the *de facto* convergence of the CVE agenda with the media development sector. This convergence has potentially important consequences for the media development sector, including considerable risks that need to be urgently addressed. Yet, it has also highlighted how some media development practitioners recognize shared challenges and common interests with the field of CVE that are otherwise overlooked by presenting the fields as competing paradigms. The risks and shared interests outlined in this report might form the basis for a more productive dialogue across the fields, recognizing the need to keep CVE and media development activities separate while also ensuring the fields can function effectively in parallel at the country and regional level.

As the fields increasingly intersect, the influence of CVE on media development has been felt primarily in three ways. First, there is a view that CVE is reshaping the funding landscape for media development practitioners (for better or for worse, depending on the vantage point). Second, CVE objectives are at times finding their way into media development projects. Finally, the rise of CVE poses two significant risks. CVE poses a reputational risk to media development practitioners who fear their existing relationships could be damaged by association with a security agenda. And media development practitioners fear that the CVE rhetoric could be used by oppressive regimes to justify the repression of critical media voices.



In addition to these concerns, however, there is an acknowledgement among media development practitioners that—in spite of their objections to the elements of the CVE agenda—the two fields do share common interests on issues of great importance. In an environment where the tools of mass communication are no longer exclusive to professional journalists, the field of international media assistance is under pressure to involve a much wider array of stakeholders in its work. And among the new challenges with which it must contend are the darker sides of public-driven media: bullying, hate speech, discrimination, polarization, and extremism. The uneasy relationship between CVE and media development ultimately points to the unanswered question of how to build media systems that are at once free, plural, and inclusive, and still resilient to these darker forces. This report does not offer a decisive answer to this question, but highlights the contours of the challenge in hope of initiating the conversation needed to find solutions.

The report begins by examining the emergence of ISIS and its unique media strategy, which has been credited with spurring the group's global reach. It then turns to the development of the CVE strategy and the various initiatives Western governments have undertaken to halt the spread of violent extremism, particularly in the media and online. With that foundation, the report then discusses the varied reactions to the CVE agenda from within the media development community, including the concerns felt by many media development practitioners that a focus on CVE may have unintended consequences when coopted by authoritarian regimes looking to censor oppositional media organizations. The report concludes by suggesting an agenda for dialogue and collaboration between the two sectors.



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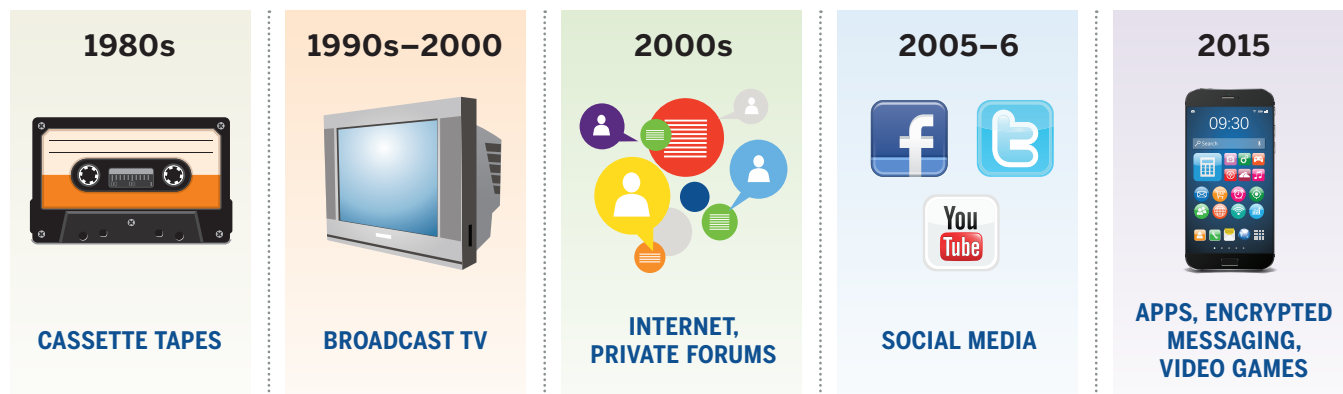
The ISIS Mediascape and the Emergence of the CVE Agenda

ISIS regards its media and information strategy to be a central element of its jihad. Behind the sheer magnitude of the group's media output lie strategy documents, interpersonal communications online, and extensive efforts devoted to content production, all making an emphasis on media abundantly clear. According to reports, media operatives are paid up to seven times the amount of regular fighters and are accorded a high status within the group's ranks.³ They are provided with specialized training, high quality equipment, and dedicated staff, which is often more than can be said for many of the national or local news outlets in the region.

The group's media strategy within its territories is dual-pronged. It seeks to both control access to information and also to ensure that information available to its subjects supports its political goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate. Toward that end, ISIS has developed significant media operations within the territory it controls, much of which came with the legacy of a state-owned media environment where journalistic independence was limited. As Alberto Fernandez, former head of the US State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), put it, "ISIS is itself a full-service news operation that both seeks to 'make' news and provide the footage for the news it is making."⁴

ISIS has devoted significant effort to establishing a media monopoly within its territories. For example, ISIS-operated *Al-Bayan* radio, based in Libya and broadcasting into Iraq, has reportedly muscled out other FM stations

Media Use by Extremist Organizations



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— ALBERTO FERNANDEZ, former head of the US State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC)

ISIS’s Media Production

PRINT
NEWSPAPERS
AND INTERNET
MATERIAL



3
VIDEOS PER DAY
(AVERAGE)



15
PHOTOGRAPHIC
REPORTS PER DAY



90,000
SOCIAL MEDIA
POSTS PER DAY



46,000
to 70,000
PRO-ISIS TWITTER
POSTS PER DAY



and now dominates the airwaves with a range of news programs, call-in shows, and informational programs.⁵ ISIS also produces print newspapers and internet material that feature a range of content with high production values. According to one study, ISIS produces an average of three videos and 15 photographic reports per day.⁶ While ISIS’s Amaq News Agency provides a constant stream of content, *Al-Naba*, a weekly newspaper, features interviews, opinion pieces, and coverage of ISIS-controlled territories.

Perhaps more worrying to the international community, however, is ISIS’s prolific use of media for international recruitment, fearmongering, and dissemination of its cause. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become primary battlegrounds for ISIS propaganda and recruitment, alongside Ask.fm, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, YouTube, and others.⁷ According to the *New York Times*, in early 2015 ISIS and its supporters were producing approximately 90,000 social media posts per day.⁸ A previous study of Twitter between September and December 2014 estimated that there were between of 46,000 and 70,000 pro-ISIS posts per day on the microblogging platform.⁹ Most of the posts originated in Iraq and Syria, and less than two thousand accounts were responsible for most of its Twitter outreach. The sheer visibility of such efforts, not to mention the brutality of ISIS’s actions, has added pressure on governments to respond. This is particularly true for governments in Western nations that have witnessed attempts at radicalization and recruitment within their borders. Such concerns have brought the call to counter violent extremism to the forefront.

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Defining CVE and Government Implementation of CVE Initiatives

While much has been said of countering violent extremism, the objectives and players encompassed within such an agenda extend so broadly as to yield only vague, “working” definitions.

Three broad types of CVE programs:

1

PREVENTION

2

DISENGAGEMENT

3

DE-RADICALIZATION

For the purposes of this report, perhaps most useful is the definition provided by the May 2016 US Department of State and USAID Joint Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism: “CVE refers to proactive actions to counter efforts by violent extremists to radicalize, recruit, and mobilize followers to violence and to address specific factors that facilitate violent extremist recruitment and radicalization to violence. This includes both disrupting the tactics used by violent extremists to attract new recruits to violence and building specific alternatives, narratives, capabilities, and resiliencies in targeted communities and populations to reduce the risk of radicalization and recruitment to violence.”¹⁰ The US government’s CVE agenda is thus a broad one that encompasses both disruption tactics and efforts to strengthen communities in danger of radicalization.

There are three broad types of CVE programs: prevention, disengagement, and de-radicalization. The majority of prevention programs are aimed at refuting propaganda and providing counter-narratives, including content removal efforts of offensive items online.¹¹ Thus far, such prevention has focused on countering ISIS and radical Islamist ideologies, although countering Russian propaganda and misinformation has become linked as well, according to experts. “We need to keep track of this issue because it is everywhere,” said one Western official in an interview, noting that CVE online had been discussed in a number of international forums, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organization of American States (OAS), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), UNESCO, the Freedom Online Coalition, and other venues.

Given the group’s brutality, reach, and unprecedented media savvy, fighting ISIS in the information realm has become a major pillar of most CVE strategies, including those of the US and the UN. This is of particular relevance to the media development community given both the impact on programming and donor objectives, and the impact on press freedom and freedom of expression more broadly.

Governments have focused their efforts particularly on counter-messaging campaigns, and have provided support to civil society on initiatives aimed at challenging ISIS online by disseminating alternative, non-extremist narratives about current events. Most major donors funding media development also support programming related to countering violent extremism, often with a component related to building the capacity of NGOs to produce content on social media.

A number of countries around the world have created new agencies devoted to coordinating and funding CVE efforts. In 2015, the United Kingdom launched the Commonwealth Countering Violent Extremism Unit, which is housed at the secretariat of the Commonwealth of Nations. This unit is charged with supporting the commonwealth nations and civil society organizations to counter extremist ideologies, a part of which includes developing and funding counter-narrative programs. The UK pledged to fund the unit with approximately \$1.3 million dollars a year for five years.¹² In 2015, the government of Australia pledged \$18 million to an initiative combating terrorist propaganda online, and another \$22 million to a project focused on counter-narrative programming.¹³

The US government has also stepped up CVE efforts in 2015 by establishing an interagency CVE task force under the leadership of the Department of Homeland Security. This task force focuses on coordinating counter-messaging efforts with US-based tech companies, among other activities.¹⁴ In May 2016, the US Department of State and USAID released a joint strategy on CVE, outlining how the two agencies would coordinate to implement the government's CVE efforts abroad.¹⁵ The Department of State oversees the Global Engagement Center (formerly the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications), whose charge is to coordinate US-sponsored counterterrorism messaging to foreign audiences.¹⁶ This center has a budget of around \$5 million a year and works closely with partner organizations in the Middle East on strategic communications, such as counter-narrative programming, online media training programs, and "tech camps." Two of its primary partners are the Sawab Center and Hedayah, both based in the United Arab Emirates and recently founded with the express objective of countering violent extremism.¹⁷ For its part, USAID manages a newly created CVE Secretariat with the aim of integrating CVE throughout its development assistance portfolio. The total budget for these initiatives is approximately \$188 million. This includes online media training programs, "tech camps," and strategic communications efforts such as the production of counter-narrative programming.



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Categories of CVE Efforts Emanating from the US



Counter-Narrative Programming



Online Media Training Programs



Capacity Building and "Tech Camps"



Local Content Production Efforts through The Sawab Center (UAE)



International Visitors Leadership Programs



Regional CVE Summits

The global focus on violent extremism signals a subtle but significant shift from the previous discourse of terrorism, "extremism" being the more nebulous concept of the two.

The UN's call in 2015 for countries to develop Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) action plans and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which link development and security, "creates the political space for development agencies to allocate funds to support both PVE-specific and PVE-relevant work."¹⁸ In early 2016, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) officially recognized the eligibility of CVE/PVE contributions in measuring official development assistance (ODA).¹⁹ This designation, which is used by the OECD to track international aid flows, could thereby allow countries to fund more CVE projects while still meeting their international aid commitments.

The global focus on violent extremism signals a subtle but significant shift from the previous discourse of terrorism, "extremism" being the more nebulous concept of the two. As evidenced by the working definition of CVE, the potential breadth of such an agenda presents challenges both to those directly focusing on CVE-inspired policies and programs, and those who come into contact with them—a list that has been steadily growing. Given the prominent roles of messaging and alternative narratives in the CVE agenda, it is no surprise that CVE and international media assistance have become so closely associated.

Response of the Media Development Community to the CVE Agenda

There are three distinct views on how the CVE agenda is influencing media development efforts: programmatic critique, pragmatic adaptation, and engaged reassessment. This section will examine these different perspectives. It should be noted that these responses are not mutually exclusive, as a number of people consulted for this report expressed complex analyses that do not neatly fit into any one response. Rather, these categories are meant to give an overview of how different individuals and organizations within the media development community are responding to the increased prevalence of CVE-related projects.

A. Programmatic Critique

The emergence of the CVE agenda has caused widespread unease among a number of individuals concerned with how this new programmatic focus might negatively affect media development work. This includes fear that the CVE agenda will both distort the goals of international media assistance and shrink the amount of available funds dedicated to media development.

Conflation with Strategic Communications Undermines Media Development Agenda

One of the primary concerns is that media development will be conflated with strategic communications. Whereas international media assistance seeks to support independent and pluralistic media, strategic communications focuses on disseminating specific narratives—or counter-narratives—in hopes of affecting change in people’s thinking. Thus, some fear the entanglement of media development goals with counter-propaganda objectives and the conflicting interests that this could create.

Those concerned about the conflation of strategic communications projects and media development point to past examples of military-funded projects seeking to manipulate the news. This in turn undermined the independence, and thus credibility, of local news outlets. For example, Afghanistan has been the recipient of tens of millions of dollars in media development assistance over the past fifteen years. The goal has been to build a sustainable, independent media in the war-torn country. However, during the same period, the US military



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— KATE FERGUSON, author of the report “Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies”

spent hundreds of millions of dollars on information operations, including the production of radio and television programming that lauded the Afghan government, its security forces, and local NGOs with the intention of countering negative Taliban propaganda.²⁰ When it came to light that the US military paid for positive news coverage, the independence and credibility of local media was put into question. It also undermined the credibility of international organizations that had been providing support to those media outlets. Media development practitioners now express concern that CVE initiatives, which frequently put an emphasis on content production, may again undercut the credibility of media outlets and individual journalists who receive training and assistance from international development organizations. What’s worse, these relationships may put outlets and journalists at serious risk if they are perceived as beholden or biased.

At a broader level, some fear that the mere existence of government-funded CVE programs and the hype they receive may taint the work of the broader media development community. Kate Ferguson, author of the report “Countering Violent Extremism through Media and Communication Strategies,” says: “Organizations don’t want to be tainted by CVE objectives, or CVE agendas, or that kind of branding, because they think that that will totally undermine the aspects of media development projects that can make them distinct from CVE agenda media projects.”²¹

A potentially larger concern is that policymakers will lose sight of the value of independent media. “There is a real risk that in the CVE paradigm it is rather black and white, and that independent journalism is a casualty,” UNESCO’s director for freedom of expression, Guy Berger, said in an interview. “I think what’s really important is to make the case for, in principle and empirically, journalism,” he added, noting that journalism becomes even more important when there is so much propaganda. “If all that intelligence personnel can rely on are readings of propaganda and reports from paid informants, this won’t necessarily give them the range of information needed to do their job.” According to Berger, when journalism is co-opted into an instrumentalist agenda, it also undermines the broader role journalism plays in informing the public, and it risks undermining the ability of people to accurately analyze and form opinions on public policy.

Concerns about a Decrease in Funding for Media Development

Already in the media development community, there is a broad consensus that media development is not adequately funded. Indeed, it is estimated that about 0.5 percent of all development funds are spent on media development.²² Yet, as policymakers turn their attention to CVE media-related projects, many anticipate a resulting decrease in media development funding. Leon Morse, deputy director of media development at the international development non-profit IREX, noted, “Money, which was already kind of thin for media development, is being pushed more towards just program development, which isn’t really media development.”

Anna Staevska, the associate director at Albany Associates, a London-based communications firm, also observed the focus on creating new programming. “They had to take money from somewhere else, and I think media development is struggling because a lot of funds now are pumped into these CVE communications projects.” With this, she said, she has seen an increase in calls for CVE-related proposals, including specific mention of information dissemination using the media.

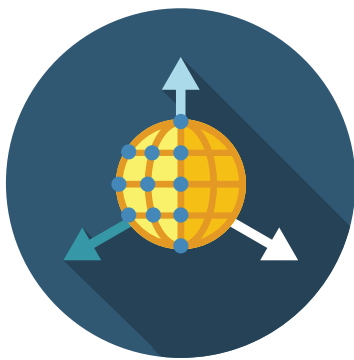
Similarly, Rana Sabbagh, executive director of Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ), said the organization’s funding had recently been cut by 40 percent. “The Finnish, Swedes and Norwegians want to focus on Syrian refugees and radicalization,” she said, lamenting that the emphasis on CVE was detracting from and distorting funding. One mid-level practitioner at a US media development NGO said that he had seen several proposals for CVE of late, and that the development department had recently enquired about how to include a CVE component in a program where it might not have been suitable.

Jessica Dheere, co-director of the Beirut-based Social Media Exchange (SMEX), said that as a small, local NGO, SMEX felt that the global policy emphasis on CVE was putting pressure on the funding environment and worried it might co-opt the organization’s agenda.²³ Specifically, she noted the discrepancy between the amount of funding SMEX had received to design and implement online training for dozens of journalists and bloggers in the Middle East, versus the much larger amount received to organize a single CVE conference in Lebanon. Yet, as several experts and practitioners interviewed for this report agreed, informed and capable media are a critical component for countering the impact of ISIS, as well as other violent extremist groups. In this way, limiting funds to media development efforts may, in fact, hamper projects that would otherwise contribute toward the ultimate aims of the CVE agenda.



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“...The 2016 US State Department and USAID joint strategy on CVE specifically calls for empowering and amplifying local voices to change perceptions of extremist groups and ideologies.”

— MILICA PESIC, executive director of the UK-based Media Diversity Institute

B. Pragmatic Adaptation

While the concerns about the impact of the CVE agenda on media development are undeniable, some within the field of media development have taken a more pragmatic approach. They are adapting to the rise of the CVE agenda and using it as an opportunity to seek out new possible funding, either through the development of specific programming aimed at addressing CVE goals or by repackaging existing media development work with the latest terms and buzzwords.

The executive director of the UK-based Media Diversity Institute (MDI), Milica Pesic, noted that the institute's programs were relatively unaffected by the CVE agenda because it already works on inclusion and diversity with media outlets and journalists to improve coverage and mitigate conflict. “Counter-narrative is one of the buzzwords currently,” Pesic said in an interview.²⁴ “We can easily reshape [a program] and focus on the burning topics of the time” without redesigning the project. “This is because MDI seeks out funding for its priorities rather than responding to those of the donor,” she added.

“Donors always have buzzwords—now it’s journalists and civil society working together and even co-producing programming... Indeed, the 2016 US State Department and USAID joint strategy on CVE specifically calls for empowering and amplifying local voices to change perceptions of extremist groups and ideologies,” said Pesic.²⁵

What’s more, while some have expressed concerns that the CVE agenda detracts funding from traditional media development projects, the lack of a central database for CVE and media development project funding makes it unclear whether such perceptions are, in fact, accurate. Marjorie Rouse, senior vice president for programs at Internews, said she has not seen any indication that traditional democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) funding is being rerouted, or that traditional funding available for media and democracy projects has been rebranded as CVE. “I think that it’s new resources,” she said in an interview, adding that perhaps more money was going to media because the CVE agenda had created new funding opportunities. “At the moment there’s no sort of separate funding for CVE at USAID,” Russell Porter, special coordinator for the Countering Violence Extremism Secretariat at USAID, said in an interview.²⁶ Without this separation of funding, it is exceedingly difficult to discern exactly how much is going toward CVE, either in lieu of or alongside support for media development. Given that, the perceived financial drawbacks for media development ultimately may not be as harmful as many fear.

C. Engaged Reassessment

Still others in the media development community see the rise of the CVE agenda, and even its potential conflicts with traditional media development work, as an opportunity to reassess the impact and objectives of international media assistance, particularly in the realm of monitoring and evaluation of impact. And while some in the media development community may not agree with the CVE approach, they acknowledge there is a need for the media development field to develop a more cohesive, forward-thinking approach in response to the problems that CVE identifies.

A more holistic approach to media development

“[CVE] is making us rethink the way we do media development, what media development means, and what the outputs and end results of media development should be,” explained Leon Morse, the deputy director of media development at IREX. “In the past, we really did focus a lot more on the media themselves and journalism.” Now, he said, they are taking a more holistic approach and looking at the intersection of civil society and media.

“Straightforward journalism is not necessarily able to address some of the complexities that come with violent extremism and identity-based violence. You have to understand these issues,” said Jesper Højberg, executive director of International Media Support (IMS). The myriad of factors underlying concerns like polarization and social fragmentation, for instance, extend well beyond the field of media development, though the media community is without a doubt a key player in addressing them. If international efforts to promote professional journalism and robust media are to have a real and positive impact, as Højberg suggests, they must simultaneously recognize and address issues beyond those that have traditionally been considered within the field.

Such a holistic approach calls for a broadening of efforts across regions, as media development communities observe and learn from efforts around the globe. Addressing the concerns of the CVE agenda, for instance, draws attention also to the rise of extremist communities beyond the Middle East and ISIS, encompassing a wide spectrum of beliefs, goals, and capacities. How best to address the cacophony of voices within the media space is a matter continuously up for debate, and one that reaches far beyond either CVE or media development alone.



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The need for further impact studies, monitoring, and evaluation

As the media development community reassesses the approach and reach of the field, handling the interplay of the CVE agenda also encourages a reassessment of the field's current and potential impact. What factors must be taken into consideration in creating sustainable media ecosystems, and what is the impact of information communication technologies on traditional conceptions of media production and reception? These questions pose considerable challenges for media development, most often in environments where traditional economic models for media support and profitability have been undermined.

Højberg similarly identified the challenge of proving impact, noting that highlighting the link between hate speech and the consequence of hate speech is easy, whereas proving that countering hate speech has an impact is difficult and largely anecdotal. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks are lacking, and donors have not invested in impact studies. This provides room for growth and opportunity to learn—provided that future projects can generate such information.

Unintended Consequences: Crackdown on Independent Media and Freedom of Expression

A concern shared by many in the media development and media freedom communities is the way that the CVE agenda may be undermining independent media as authoritarian regimes use it as a pretext to censor media organizations that voice dissent. Many countries around the world are using the fight against extremism, especially CVE's emphasis on online communication, as an excuse to undermine journalistic practices, such as source protection and on-the-ground reporting. Moreover, these regimes are imposing greater controls over expression on the internet, specifically on social media, under the guise of curbing extremism.

"The 'war against terrorism' waged over the past 15 years ... has shown that restricting human rights in order to combat terrorism is a serious mistake and an ineffective measure which can even help terrorists' cause," Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Nils Muižnieks said in remarks published on the council's website.²⁷

The use of the CVE agenda to limit freedom of expression has been prevalent in the Middle East. In May 2015, The Arab Information Ministers' Council adopted a proposal sponsored by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that deals with the role of the media in promoting values of tolerance and combating extremism. It called for "media actors" to support the mission of CVE and to develop "a comprehensive, long-term strategy with specific goals that all media and community stakeholders should pursue together." It also called for content production that preaches tolerance and the acceptance of others.²⁸ Such a proposal, however, risks providing cover for repressive governments to restrict content and put pressure on dissident and oppositional voices.

Jordan, which has received millions of dollars in media support and development aid from a range of donors, has prosecuted dozens of people who posted messages the government viewed as supportive of ISIS. The government has arrested at least four journalists for reporting or commenting on anti-terrorism operations.²⁹ In April 2014, Jordan amended its anti-terrorism law to include prison penalties for "disturbing relations with a foreign state" and promptly charged a Muslim Brotherhood supporter who wrote a critical Facebook post about the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of Jordan's major foreign donors.³⁰



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Council of Europe Human
Rights Commissioner



The CVE agenda also provides cover for repressive internet policies. China, for example, has defended its regulation of online content, pursuit of a real-name registration policy for internet services, and banning of social media accounts using this logic.

Likewise, both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have charged critical journalists with terrorism, and Bahrain has even stripped several journalists of their citizenship on charges related to terrorism.³¹

The CVE agenda also provides cover for repressive internet policies. China, for example, has defended its regulation of online content, pursuit of a real-name registration policy for internet services, and banning of social media accounts using this logic.³² In August 2014, China blocked popular messaging apps over claims that they could be used for terrorism, according to South Korean authorities.³³ China even hosted a CVE Working Group meeting of the Global Counterterrorism Forum in late 2014. Turkey, one of the attendees, emphasized its focus on the “proactive dissemination of positive counter-narratives” and removal of illegal content.³⁴

Threats to freedom of the press created by CVE agenda are similarly found in democratic countries. In 2015, police in the UK used anti-terrorism legislation to demand the communications between a BBC journalist and a man in Syria who said he was a member of ISIS.³⁵ Officials have also used these laws to obtain information on journalists’ confidential sources,³⁶ and to require internet service providers (ISPs) to do more to track and take down extremist content.³⁷ Such actions not only detract from media freedom, but also undermine media development efforts abroad as they risk being seen as hypocritical.

Conclusion

This report describes how media development practitioners perceive the expansion of the CVE agenda's influence into various aspects of their field, and the different and sometimes ambivalent ways in which they respond to these perceptions. Two conclusions emerge strongly from these interviews. The first is that the efforts to distance CVE conceptually from media development are not providing the guidance needed to navigate an increasingly blurry line between the two fields in practice. The second is that audience reception studies and investments in media information literacy are needed, yet receive inadequate attention in CVE efforts and funding.

The dialogue required to address these issues, however, is fraught with fundamental contentions. Media development practitioners are often non-governmental organizations that are wary of the security sector actors that are involved in CVE, such as the US Department of Homeland Security. The two fields also hold very different, perhaps incompatible, views. CVE pursues a strategic communication objective, whereas media development efforts focus instead on the quality of the media ecosystem as a goal. But there are urgent reasons to overcome this reluctance: the risks posed by a further encroachment of CVE objectives into media development efforts, and the shared interest of both fields to find ways to respond to the spread of extremist views on digital media. This is not to say that the two fields should collaborate operationally. Experts warn that development initiatives “need not be altered to show CVE-specific aims” since such a reframing “risks diminishing the impact of development programs and may neglect the importance of broader human security in favor of narrower state security.”³⁸ The potential pitfalls of a focus on counter-narrative objectives are significant for journalism and for the development of media independence. But there is some scope for dialogue and some need for greater mutual understanding, as highlighted by this report.

Such a dialogue is also hampered by inadequate evidence with regard to the effectiveness of approaches emanating from either CVE or media development that are intended to assuage extremist positions or to quell the threat of conflict or violence. A fundamental premise of counter narrative, and even of content removal programs, is that audiences are influenced by the content they consume, and that countering messages with facts, religious voices, or debunking myths will prevent



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radicalization. Yet audience studies are starkly missing from the CVE debate, with many assertions linking consumption of online content with radicalization, but without supporting evidence. While there are some qualitative anecdotes, the lack of statistically significant evidence means that a core underlying assumption of CVE online efforts remains untested. Furthermore, the presumption of an active audience also suggests that investment in media and information literacy would help to strengthen resistance to extremist propaganda, and to improve the ability of people to be more discerning in their information consumption. Rarely does mention of reception or the role of the audience figure into national CVE strategies or online engagement programs. Such studies are essential for testing the principles of CVE, including the assumption that counter-messaging with facts and more moderate perspectives will prevent radicalization. This type of research would also provide a benefit to media development, which has similarly failed to consider the active role of audiences. A greater understanding of this side of the media equation could assist both fields to make the critical and necessary shift away from their narrow focus on media producers towards strategies that incorporate media information literacy.

Though CVE advocates and media development practitioners undoubtedly have a shared interest in understanding the impact of their different approaches on audiences, this report also emphasizes that the fields must remain operationally partitioned. To this end, an important issue to be addressed separately, or through a cross-sectoral dialogue, is how to ensure that the two types of activities remain clearly compartmentalized—even in instances where they serve similar objectives. Governments and donor organizations need to find modalities for keeping CVE and media development activities separate in their budget lines and programmatic boundaries. Donors should also ensure that support for independent media is funded exclusively within the structures and objectives of development assistance, and not co-opted or tainted by CVE frameworks. Effectively demarcating these areas will require efforts from many donors, and from implementers as well. And while it is vital to keep these activities programmatically and operationally separate, given the risks that convergence entails, the two fields must also recognize that they do indeed share interests, and may in some cases wish to coordinate their parallel efforts. The ongoing challenge will be for practitioners of these distinct, but interrelated fields to remain capable of discussing their shared interests, while still safeguarding the boundaries that separate them. This report may not have the solutions to this complex challenge, but its findings may shine some light on the pathway to discovering them.

METHODS

This report draws on the author's interviews with more than 40 experts, practitioners, policymakers, and journalists. It is also based on the author's participation in several national and multilateral consultations as well as dozens of conferences and events on countering violent extremism, including in Global Network Initiative's Countering Violent Extremism Working Group and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) expert roundtable.³⁹

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR
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PHONE: (202) 378-9700
EMAIL: CIMA@ned.org
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