

## **Walk Away from Violent Extremism: a campaign to address violent extremism online**

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Countering violent extremism (CVE) is recognised as an important and necessary aspect of addressing the threat of terrorism and other forms of violence. Just as there is no single path to violent extremism, programs and initiatives that aim to prevent individuals from engaging in violence should also be multi-faceted, comprising diverse strategies and approaches. A multi-faceted approach to countering violent extremism recognises that individual vulnerability is not the only factor driving violent extremism. It does not, for example, explain why some people will become violent extremists while others with similar backgrounds and in similar situations do not. Strategies to counter violent extremism should also take into account the social settings, the broader conditions and the ways in which individuals and groups become exposed to and engage with violent extremism.

While there is significant research into the causes and pathways to violent extremism, the research on countering violent extremism is underdeveloped. There is still much we do not understand about why people become violent extremists and how this phenomenon can best be addressed. Violent extremism is a complex issue that suffers from definitional dilemmas. As a result, the vital role that communities can play in combating violent extremism is often hindered by a lack of knowledge and understanding of what constitutes violent extremism; the kinds of behaviours that indicate engagement in violent extremism and the ideologies associated with violent extremism and how to counter violent extremism. Increasingly, however, civil society groups are playing a more prominent role in the CVE space. This is particularly evident in the European context where exit groups such as Exit Germany and Exit Sweden provide vital support services for those wanting to disengage from violent extremism. UK based non government organizations such as Quilliam Foundation have a specific remit of challenging extremism and preventing radicalization

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while Against Violent Extremism empowers former violent extremists to counter violent extremist narratives. Victims and survivors of violent extremism in Europe have also formed well organised groups that are beginning to play a more prominent role in countering violent extremism<sup>2</sup>.

In Australia, the situation is somewhat different. Fortunately, Australia has not suffered a major terrorist incident on its soil<sup>3</sup>, yet in the past decade or so since the September 11 attacks on the United States in 2001, Australia has enacted over 50 new laws to combat the threat of terrorism. These new laws provide for restrictions on speech inciting violence through to sedition and detention<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, Australia has also attempted to enact 'soft' measures to prevent recruitment and radicalisation to violent extremism. Australia's counterterrorism approach outlined in *The Counter Terrorism White Paper: Securing Australia, Protecting our Community* (2010) describes four elements: Analysis, Protection, Response and Resilience. *Resilience* in the Australian strategy is 'building a strong and resilient Australian community to resist the development of any form of violent extremism and terrorism on the home front'<sup>5</sup>. Through this strand of counter terrorism, the Australian government has funded a number of programs designed to develop community capacity to challenge terrorism through independent, civil society initiatives. Notably, in 2010, the government shifted its language from counter terrorism to countering violent extremism. Although this new counter terrorism approach continued to reinforce the threat of terrorism (specifically Jihadi Islamist), the re-focus on violent extremism created the conditions for the development of initiatives that specifically focussed on drivers of extremism and radicalisation, as opposed to issues associated with social integration and harmony. It also created a new language and terminology, 'violent extremism', that enabled violent

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<sup>2</sup> Schmid, Alex, 2012, Strengthening the role of Victims and Incorporating Victims in Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism and Terrorism. ICT Research Paper. ICCT: The Hague

<sup>3</sup> The Bali Bombings in October 2002 in which 202 victims were fatally injured including 88 Australians are often considered a proxy attack on Australia.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, George, 2011, A Decade of Australian Anti- Terror Laws, Melbourne University Law Review, Vol 35 pp 1136-1151

<sup>5</sup> Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2010). Counter Terrorism White Paper: Securing Australia, Protecting our Community.

extremism and the project of countering violent extremism to be broadened to include violence that is driven by various forms of extremism: ideological, social and religious.

Against this backdrop, People against Violent Extremism (PaVE) was formed in January 2013 as Australia's first non-government organisation specifically aimed at addressing violent extremism in all its forms. PAVE was incorporated in response to a recognised need for a not for profit, independent organisation in the space of CVE in Australia and the region. A not for profit organisation could facilitate vital linkages between research, policy and community to ensure that policy drivers are informed by empirical evidence; that community driven programs are effective in addressing violent extremism; and that research is translated into practice. The organisation is a non-political, non-religious and non-sectarian national network of people dedicated to ending violent extremism, with a focus on all forms of violent extremism regardless of religious, ideological, political and/or social affiliation. The objectives of PaVE include raising public awareness and understanding of violent extremism as well as the development and implementation of targeted programs that directly address violent extremism in Australia and the region. Rather than emulate itself on existing Exit programs in Europe and Australia (Exit White Power), PaVE tailored its approach to a uniquely Australian environment characterised by:

1. A lack of broad community awareness of violent extremism;
2. Lack of human capital and expertise in the form of Australian based former violent extremists who could add significant value to the understanding of radicalisation of violent extremism and exit from violent extremist groups; and
3. Absence of a coordinated approach to CVE that incorporated practitioner experiences, stakeholder voices, research, law enforcement and government driven policy.

Alex Schmid from the International Centre for Counter Terrorism at The Hague makes a strong case for this final point. In reference to the need for closer cooperation between government (including law enforcement) and academia in efforts to combating terrorism, he paper concludes that "Policy and science must come closer together, not only to lessen the

threat of terrorism, but also to minimise misguided responses to it.”<sup>6</sup> To this end, PaVE in partnership with Curtin University, Hedayah International Centre of Excellence for CVE and Macquarie University’s Centre for Policing Intelligence and Counterterrorism launched the inaugural CVE Symposium in Perth, Western Australia in November 2013. The Symposium brought together community level CVE practitioners, law enforcement, government policy makers and academics to explore how the different sectors contribute to CVE in Australia and around the world.

In 2013, PaVE received funding from the Australian Attorney General’s Department to develop and trial an online CVE campaign. The concept for the campaign, consisting of an interactive website, videos and other resources was informed by extensive research on counter narratives and online radicalisation. The next sections of this article present the theoretical/ conceptual approach to the campaign and discuss some of the considerations in developing the campaign as an online counter narrative to violent extremism.

### **The PaVE online campaign: Walk Away from Violent Extremism**

‘Walk Away from Violent Extremism’ Campaign (the Campaign) is a comprehensive online social marketing approach to the problem of a growing violent extremist online presence. The Campaign consists of three elements:

1. PAVE website- an interactive multi-platform website with links to resources about violent extremism and how to combat it. The website includes frequently asked questions, definitions of violent extremism and a “Voices against Violent Extremism” page that invites formers and victims of violent extremism to provide commentary. The website provides resources for communities, individuals and, importantly, peers and parents who are socialising agents to increase their understanding of violent extremism and recognition of radicalising environments and behaviours.
2. Walk Away from Violent Extremism online social marketing poster campaign. The poster campaign is designed to raise awareness of violent extremism. As the principle visual

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<sup>6</sup> Schmid, Alex, 2014, Terrorism Research and Government, ICCT Commentaries, <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-commentaries/terrorism-research-and-government>

mechanism of communication, the posters reflect PaVE's approach to violent extremism as a set of behaviours associated with a variety of ideological, social, religious or political causes and feature the recurrent use of dual images. The two images are intended to represent the spectrum of ideological motivations for violent extremism personified in the two 'faces' of violent extremism.



3. Videos- the campaign produced three short videos as vehicles for disseminating the core messages. The two short videos run for 1.5 and 3 minutes respectively and focus on the theme of online violent extremism with the core message of 'walk away' from violent extremism. These videos target 'seekers' who are searching violent extremist propaganda and are starting to engage with online messaging. The videos target both Muslim and broader population youth. One reason for this is to address the perception among Muslim youth that CVE programs are exclusively Muslim and ignore the potential risks posed by other social and ideological groups such as White Supremacists.

The third video runs for 10 minutes and is a short documentary. The documentary entitled “The Strongest Among You” features a well-known Australian Rules football player on the subject of what makes a person a hero. This video specifically targets young Muslim males who may be seeking meaningful ways to address perceived grievances.

In its entirety the campaign addresses violent extremism by:

- enhancing community knowledge, awareness and understanding of violent extremism
- developing a counter narrative communicated through online platforms
- developing resilience to radical and extremist influences among young people by adapting moral disengagement processes to reinforce self-regulatory systems that prevent individuals from being influenced by violent extremism.
- providing resources to assist individuals leave violent extremism.

### **Developing the campaign: Two guiding principles**

Three fundamental questions arise when first considering a campaign designed to influence or persuade individuals to cease or undertake a particular behaviour: Who is the campaign for? (the audience); How will the campaign be delivered? (the medium) and; What will the campaign do? (the purpose). In answering these questions, PaVE turned to existing research in the field and distinguished two guiding principles for the development of the campaign.

While there has been extensive research on the related areas of countering violent extremism, radicalisation and terrorism, understanding of how and why individuals become violent extremists is still relatively underdeveloped. This is arguably due to the fact that there is no singular vulnerability profile to terrorism or violent extremism: the pathways and trajectories to violent extremism are as varied as the violent extremists themselves. In response, much of the literature on terrorism points to the importance of multi-level approaches that do not focus singularly on individual radicalisation but that also take into account group dynamics, social structures and the environmental conditions in which terrorism occurs. An Occasional Paper published by the Home Office entitled *Al Qa’ida Influenced Radicalisation: A rapid evidence assessment guided by Situational Action Theory* (Bouhana and Wikstrom 2011), asserts that radicalisation is not simply a matter of individual

vulnerability. The paper proposes that radicalisation is best approached as a combination of vulnerability (defined as the propensity for individuals and groups to come into contact with and be influenced by terroristic narratives) and exposure to terrorist supportive environments. The paper calls for an approach that is less focussed on vulnerability and more focussed on the environmental elements that facilitate radicalisation: the emergence of radicalised settings and exposure to radicalising influences:

To acquire a propensity to terrorism people have to become exposed to terrorism-supportive moral contexts (exposure). For them to be exposed, settings with terrorism-supportive moral contexts have to be present in their environment (emergence) and they have to come into regular contact with these settings (vulnerability to selection). For radicalisation to result from exposure, individuals have to be sensitive to the influence of the terrorism supportive features of the settings they come into regular contact with (vulnerability to moral change) (page viii, emphasis in original).

Bouhana and Wikstrom's (2011) understanding of radicalisation, described above, begins with the exposure to terroristic narratives and contextualises individual vulnerability within a framework that gives primacy to exposure and emergence. In contrast, other models of radicalisation begin with individual vulnerability and describe radicalisation as a process through which individuals or groups become socialised to a particular world view that is considered radical or extreme (see for example Silber and Bhatt, 2007). The preference for counter narrative strategies over vulnerability based policies depends on counter narratives being informed by frameworks that equally consider environmental and individual drivers of radicalisation and that contextualise individual radicalisation within a broader understanding of the problems of exposure and emergence.

In accordance with the approach put forward by Bouhana and Wikstrom, the first principle in the development of the PaVE campaign is a **focus on exposure to supportive moral contexts.**

In practice, the principle of focussing on exposure defined the **medium and audience** for delivery of the campaign. The recent research focus on terrorists' online activities and the

embedded messages in online narrative has yielded significant understanding in how violent extremists package their ideas for consumption by a (mostly) youthful audience. Scholarly contributions on narratives and counter narratives, for the most part, deconstruct the key messages embedded in online narratives<sup>7</sup> and examinations of the online medium of communication used by terrorist organisations tend to also focus on analysis of online content and how terrorists use the internet to conduct psychological warfare<sup>8</sup>.

The body of work that has been conducted in relation to violent extremist messaging confirms that the internet presents a virtual marketplace of ideas. A study by the RAND Corporation tested five assumptions in the literature with regard to internet radicalisation and found that empirical evidence existed to support the assumption that the internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised and serves as a space for individuals to find support for their ideas among like-minded individuals<sup>9</sup>. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the internet presents as a setting for exposure to violent extremism and that it could also serve as a setting for a campaign to counter violent extremism.

In considering the internet as a setting for the exposure to violent extremism, necessary questions about the audience are also raised. There is scant research on the audience of violent extremist messaging though some attempts have been made at conceptualising such an audience. Weimann and von Knop identify several stages to describe the ways in which individuals engage with violent extremist content online: the searching phase; the seduction

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<sup>7</sup> D Al Raffie, "Whose Heards and Minds? Narratives and Counternarratives of Salafi Jihadism", *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 3 (2012), pp13- 31; Anne Aly(2013) "The policy response to home-grown terrorism: Reconceptualising Prevent and Resilience as collective resistance", *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 8 (2013),pp2-18

<sup>8</sup> Weimann, G., *Terror on the Internet: The new arena. The new challenges*, (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace (USIP) Press, 2006); Weimann, G., "The psychology of mass-mediated terrorism", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(2008), pp 69-86; Weimann, G. "Terrorist Facebook: Terrorist and Online Social Networking", in Mark Last and Abraham Kandel eds., *Web Intelligence and Security*, (NATO Science for Peace and Security Series, 2010) pp. 19-30 ;Weimann, G., "The Role of the Media in Propagating Terrorism", in Updesh Kumar and Manas K. Mandal eds., *Countering Terrorism : Psychosocial Strategies*, (London: Sage Publication, 2012a) pp. 182-200; Weimann, G., "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace", *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3(2012b), pp. 75-90;Weimann, G., *Terror in Cyberspace: The Next Generation*. (forthcoming 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Ines von Behr, Anaïs Reding, Charlie Edwards, Luke Gribbon, *Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism*. (Brussels: RAND, 2013)



phase; the captivation phase; the persuasion phase and the operation phase<sup>10</sup>. A single campaign or approach cannot possibly target every stage of engagement. Rather, programs need to be targeted at a particular stage of online engagement and tailored towards capturing the audience at each stage. In defining the PaVE campaign audience, consideration was given to the capacity for reaching and influencing audiences that were already highly engaged with violent extremism (captivation, persuasion and operation phase). Applying the principle of addressing the problem of exposure, it was decided that the target audience for the PaVE online campaign could be defined and segmented as:

Primary target- Searchers: Adolescents and young people aged 16- 25 who are beginning to engage in violent extremist narratives on the Internet and who may progress to continued and sustained exposure to radicalising narratives. This group is highly immersed in online activities and use the internet as a social medium as well as a medium for developing and consolidating their world views. This age group is most susceptible to ideological influences and also most active in their use of the internet.

Secondary target A – Searchers: People outside of the target group demographic who are engaging in the violent extremist narratives on the Internet and who may progress to continued and sustained exposure to radicalising narratives

Secondary target group B -Parents and peers who will also be able to access the resources and present as a socialising agent for the target groups.

As previously stated, there is no single vulnerability profile for radicalisation to violent extremism. In addition, violent extremism is driven by a variety of motivations and/or combination of motivations- religious, social, political, ideological. In the Australian context, an over emphasis on radicalisation coupled with a singular focus on “Islamic” violent extremism has resulted in a policy response focussed on reducing the vulnerability of Muslims to radicalisation. There have been many criticisms of this response, leading to a significant shift in the policy direction of CVE in Australia. The focus on radicalisation does not distinguish between violent extremism and non-violent forms of radicalisation such as

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<sup>10</sup> Von Knop and Weimann, G. “Applying the Notion of Noise to Countering Online-Terrorism”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31(2008), pp.883-902.

tacit support for terrorists perceived to have a legitimate cause while rejecting the use of violence. Research published by Aly and Striegler (2012) found that disengagement from violence did not also lead to de-radicalisation. The authors make an important distinction between disengagement and de-radicalisation asserting that radicalisation to extremist ideological, social or religious belief systems may still be present after the individual (or indeed group) have abandoned violence as a legitimate tactic<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the second principle in the development of the PaVE campaign is the **distinction between disengagement and de-radicalisation**. In practice, this principle **defines the problem as violent extremism** and enabled the campaign to focus specifically on violent extremism as behaviour as opposed to violent extremism as a set of beliefs exclusive to a particular ideology. As such, unlike other programs that target far right violent extremism or Jihadi Islamist violent extremism, the PaVE campaign does not focus on one form or expression of violent extremism. This is underscored by the campaign's primary message "Violent Extremism has many faces" and the use of dual images throughout the campaign. Nor does the campaign attempt to challenge beliefs or ideological assumptions of violent extremist groups. While de-radicalisation programs are part of PaVE's broader remit, the campaign avoids the use of narrative elements that counter the ideological frames used by violent extremist groups such as concepts and interpretations of 'jihad' or mythologies of racial superiority.

The two guiding principles of the PaVE campaign: focus on exposure and distinction between disengagement and de-radicalisation informed the medium, audience and scope of the campaign. As the key purpose of the campaign is to influence the behaviours and choices of members of the target groups who were exposed to and beginning to engage with violent extremist narratives online, the campaign elements were developed within theoretical frameworks on attitude and behaviour change.

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<sup>11</sup>Aly, A. & J. L. Striegler (2012) 'Examining the Role of Religion in Radicalisation to Violent Islamist Extremism', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35(12): 849-862

**Theoretical drivers: Moral Disengagement and Self Efficacy**

In the social cognitive theory of moral disengagement, moral agency is expressed both as a refrain from behaving inhumanely and in proactively behaving humanely. The theory of moral disengagement proposes that individuals engage in violence and aggression in violation of their own moral standards. These moral standards are adopted through the course of socialization and serve as guiding principles for moral conduct. Behaviours that conflict with an individual's moral standards create high levels of discomfort and hence are avoided through self-sanctions. Conversely, behaviours consistent with moral values create high levels of self-worth and hence are activated through positive self-sanctions<sup>12</sup>. When faced with situations and influences that contradict their moral standards of right and wrong, people can choose to behave morally by exerting self-influence.

Individuals who are otherwise socialised can commit acts of violence with no sense of self-censure and do so through a gradual process of disengagement. Moral disengagement is a psychological process through which self-regulatory mechanisms of internal control are disengaged or dismissed. Self-sanctions are disengaged through the mechanisms of moral disengagement: "reconstructing conduct as serving moral purposes, obscuring personal agency in detrimental activities, disregarding or misrepresenting the injurious consequences of one's actions, and blaming and dehumanizing the victims"<sup>13</sup>. Collectively, the mechanisms of disengagement allow individuals to cognitively reconstruct the moral value of violence, putting aside self-sanctions, so that acts of violence can be committed.

The majority of research on moral disengagement in the field of terrorism studies examines extremist narratives in relation to the mechanisms of moral disengagement. Hafez's study of the last will and testament video speeches made by Palestinian suicide bombers drew linkages between moral disengagement and the embedded messages in the video speeches. Palestinian suicide bombers used moral justification and dehumanisation to justify their violence as serving an altruistic cause of freedom from an oppressive and dangerous

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<sup>12</sup> A. Bandura, "Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193- 209.

<sup>13</sup> A. Bandura, "Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in Terrorism." In *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, edited by W Reich. 161-91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

threat<sup>14</sup>. Aly's analysis of the narratives employed on Islamist extremist websites notes that biographical narratives of suicide bombers on these websites tend to follow a common format that portrays the suicide bomber as a devout martyr motivated to self-sacrifice by absolute submission to faith and an intense desire to fulfil the greatest demonstration of piety possible. Violent extremist narratives also transfer the responsibility for violence on the victims of violence by claiming that atrocities perpetrated against Muslims by Western regimes are the primary cause for their retaliatory actions<sup>15</sup>. The claims made in violent extremist narratives empower individuals to absolve themselves of blame for inhumane acts and behaviours while religion provides a moral template for justifying acts of violence as a moral response to perceived injustice.

Moral disengagement appears as a personal risk factor to engaging in violent extremism and methods of measuring moral disengagement processes have been used to predict acts of violence among young people and support for violent extremism<sup>16</sup>. Conversely, process of moral disengagement may be adapted and moderated to reinforce self-regulatory systems that prevent individuals from being influenced by violent extremism. Moral disengagement can then provide a useful framework for the development of counter messages that challenge the elements of violent extremist narratives that promote moral disengagement in the audience.

The PaVE campaign applied the theory of moral disengagement in the development of the campaign elements by incorporating messages that directly challenge violent extremist messaging. The counter narrative embedded in the campaign website, videos and posters challenge the violent extremist narrative by drawing on specific elements within this narrative that act as mechanisms of moral disengagement.

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<sup>14</sup> M Hafez, "Moral Agents, Immoral Violence: Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in Palestinian Suicide Terrorism." In *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Origins of Terrorism* edited by J Victoroff. 292-307: IOS Press, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Aly, "The Terrorists' Audience: A Model of Internet Radicalisation." *Journal of Australian Professional Intelligence Officers* 17, no. 1 (2009): 3-19.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Alfred L McAlister, "Moral Disengagement: Measurement and Modification ". *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 1 (2001): 87 -99; Paul S Lieber, Yael Efreom- Lieber, and Christopher Rate. "Moral Disengagement: Exploring Support Mechanisms for Violent Extremism among Young Egyptian Males." Paper presented at the Proceedings of the 1st Australian Counter Terrorism Conference Perth, 2010.

| <b>Violent extremist message</b>                                     | <b>Campaign counter message</b>                                    |
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| Violence serves a moral purpose                                      | Violence is immoral and there are alternatives                     |
| Victims are to blame   | Victims are innocent and suffer injurious consequences of violence |
| There is no personal agency in committing acts of extremist violence | You can walk away  |

An important element in the Campaign is that of self- efficacy. Self- efficacy can be defined as the belief in one’s capacity to perform a particular activity or achieve a particular outcome. Self- efficacy can, in itself, be a motivator to action- if one believes that he/she can successfully complete a task, he/ she is more likely to undertake that task. Violent extremist messaging presents violence as the only effective response to perceived grievances. This kind of messaging has the effect of encouraging vulnerable individuals to remove any self-sanctions to violence by absolving them of responsibility for their choices. A useful response to this is to reinforce self-sanctions and encourage individuals to use their own agency to reconsider the morality of violence. Most individuals are not socialized to accept violence against innocent victims as a feasible or effective response to grievance. Rather, it is through a process of moral disengagement that individuals who may have never shown a propensity towards violence become violent actors. Emphasising the individual’s capacity for self-agency- their ability to ‘walk away’ from the violent extremist narrative- challenges the violent extremist messaging that violence is not only a justifiable option, but also an unquestionable obligation.

### **Conclusion**

People against Violent Extremism (PaVE) is a newly incorporated association based in Perth, Western Australia. The organization is the first of its kind in Australia formed to specifically address violent extremism in Australia and the region. In its first year of operation, PaVE developed a comprehensive online social marketing campaign designed to address some of

the issues identified with radicalization to violent extremism through online mediums. While the dilemma of online radicalization is still not fully understood, there is general agreement among scholars and practitioners alike that the internet plays a role in violent extremism by providing a medium for the emergence and exposure of morally supportive contexts.

How violent extremist morally supportive contexts emerge and how individuals become exposed to such contexts is still an area requiring research and further understanding. However, considering the internet as a domain for emergence and exposure also provides an opportunity for the development of online programs and campaigns that counter the detrimental impact of violent extremist messaging online.

In developing the 'Walk Away from Violent Extremism' Campaign, PaVE approached the internet as a radicalizing setting and identified the Campaign's audience as young 'seekers' who are beginning to be exposed to violent extremist narratives online. These young people may be vulnerable to further engaging with violent extremism through online mediums. There are several stages of engagement leading to persuasion and operation. While it may be difficult to 'disengage' individuals who have already progressed to the operation stage through online messaging campaigns, it may be possible to capture audiences who are still at the searching phase by providing alternative narratives that persuade individuals away from violent extremism. This approach is not designed to compete with approaches that attempt to directly challenge the violent extremist narrative by presenting alternative religious interpretations or correcting misinformation in violent extremist propaganda. Rather, the approach that focuses on persuading individuals away from engaging with violent extremism as a behavior complements de-radicalisation efforts and allows for messaging that targets the mechanisms of moral disengagement that are common to violent extremist narratives across different social, religious, political or ideological causes.