Extreme Dialogue:
Social media Target Audience Analysis and Impact Assessments in support of countering violent extremism

An abridged summary report of findings and lessons learned

www.SecDev.foundation
www.preventviolentextremism.info

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Introduction to Abridged Report

Can targeted engagements through social media contribute to reducing the risk of Canadians becoming involved in violent extremism?

This research question broadly framed a joint 16-month project conducted by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, and The SecDev Foundation, supported by Public Safety Canada’s Kanishka Programme.

Launched in 2014, this social media research project was undertaken in support of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s CVE effort – Extreme Dialogue – an educational initiative involving a series of awareness-raising films that aims to “reduce the appeal of extremism among young people and offer a positive alternative to increasing amounts of extremist material... on the Internet.”

The social media research component of the ISD-SecDev joint project aimed to undertake social media research to aid in dissemination and track uptake of the Extreme Dialogue CVE films. The effort was defined by two objectives, namely to develop and apply:

- a practical methodology for Target Audience Analysis (TAA) that was informed by SecDev’s prior experimentation with applying risk factor analysis to social media audiences; and,

- a practical Measures of Effectiveness/Impact Assessment (MOE/IA) in support of counter narrative education resources distributed through social media and aimed at online communities.

The summary report highlights some of the project’s key lessons learned and findings in the development and application of TAA and IA methods and principles, as developed in conjunction with the specific Extreme Dialogue effort.

The project was ambitious and complex, involved considerable active experimentation, and returned some important lessons learned. Perhaps the biggest of these involved the tensions around enhancing targeted online reach and resonance; and, bridging the online and ‘real’ worlds:

1. The potential of social media assisted targeting in PVE needs to be tempered by other considerations. The TAA methodology employed by the project focused on online gatekeepers and intermediary communities as a means of identifying entry points onto target audience communities (youth, educators, youth workers). The project initially experimented with a combination of open source tools and methodologies. However, these tools proved quite powerful, capable of generating information that could be used to profile individuals or communities. The researchers, concerned about privacy issues, elected to use a less powerful approach, namely, target audience profiles generated and sold by social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) as these are deliberately myopic, and thus do not expose individuals or groups to the same degree as more advanced methods and techniques.

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1 This report is an abridged version of a much longer technical report produced by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and the SecDev Foundation as an output of this research effort. Researchers interested in additional data and information are welcome to contact: info@secdev.foundation

2 Launched across Canada in February 2015, Extreme Dialogue produced a series of short documentary films to tell the personal stories of Canadians profoundly affected by violent extremism. The films are accompanied by a set of educational resources that can be used with young people in classroom or community settings.

3 The films tell the stories of Daniel Gallant (former white supremacist) and Christianne Bourdreau (mother of Damian Clairmont who was killed while fighting with ISIS in Syria).
**Takeaway:** Advanced social media research tradecraft and tools definitely have the potential to yield fine-tuned audience data and metrics, of potentially great use for targeted campaigns, and for later tracking of campaign resonance (uptake). However, they also risk returning too much information which could violate rights to privacy and raise wider societal concerns. Existing guidance and legislation on these issues remain underdeveloped and require re-doubled policy engagement and efforts (including around issues of protection of minors online). For further discussion of these issues, see our work under an earlier Kanishka-funded effort: *Social media, online networks and the prevention of violent extremism: Lessons Learned.*

2. **Virtual efforts would benefit from a closer understanding of successful or promising real world efforts at community engagement strategies** and how these can be adapted to, and augmented in online space.

The decision, early on, to pursue a more generalized audience assessment protocol meant that the research ambitions around measures of effectiveness were likewise toned down.\(^4\) The results of the more general TAA were used to inform the types of posts that would likely be most effective for dissemination around the launch of the Extreme Dialogue films, and was also useful for contextualizing offline networks within and between various communities in targeted geographic areas. However, more refined impact assessment experimentation would require both a longer time frame and an ability to follow-up with surveys and assessments delivered off line (for example compare assessments from social data with more traditional survey methods and interviews). In this respect, while the project could inform whether a target audience was engaged by the content, it could not demonstrate the resonance or impact of that engagement in terms of changes in attitude or behavior or over time.

With these caveats in mind, the more constrained pilot effort to map online audiences and dissemination results for a specific CVE Campaign – Extreme Dialogue – delivered a number of key guidance points useful for future such campaigns, including on the effectiveness of different platforms and media types, as well as paid advertising, organic outreach and metrics. The experience also yielded some recommendations for governments and social media platforms on avenues to better support future PVE efforts. These observations are summarized at the end of this abridged report.

**About this Report**

This report is an abridged version of a final technical report submitted to Public Safety Canada. This version of the report has been edited to highlight the key findings and lessons learned that may have value for a wider public audience, specifically, identifying engagement with the main mechanisms used by Extreme Dialogue to reach out to potential target audiences. The findings are mostly tactical and should be understood as lessons learned and findings specific to the project (and its constraints), and the choice of material that was used by the Extreme Dialogue website.

The intended audience for the report are researchers and practitioners that are actively experimenting with applying risk reduction methods to address violent extremism online.

For those researchers who are interested in a more detailed perspective on the rounds of experimentation carried out, we would encourage you to contact us directly:

Kanishka.ISD@secdev.foundation

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\(^4\) SecDev developed interactive dashboards that centralized and visualized engagement data from Extreme Dialogues’ properties on the various online channels, which informed the campaign’s decision-making on ad spending and allocation of time for engagement. SecDev also developed an analytical tool to understand the nature of conversations and debates on online news articles related to the campaign.
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INTRODUCTION

The Extreme Dialogue awareness-raising film series was launched in Canada at the University of Calgary on the 17th February 2015. ISD conducted an online dissemination campaign using a combination of paid and unpaid methods to distribute the films and attract users to the website and social media accounts to ensure that the project outputs were widely consumed and shared online. As well as encouraging activity and engagement with content on social media, the campaign also aimed to raise awareness of the project to a wider audience through positive media coverage to amplify the counter-narrative embodied in the films themselves.

Over the launch period ISD and SecDev tracked online engagement with the Extreme Dialogue campaign across its website and social media accounts. Using the social media analytics dashboard created for the campaign (allowing for enhanced data collection and analytics capabilities), and analytics information provided by Extreme Dialogue’s website and social media accounts, ISD and SecDev were able to analyse the effectiveness of the campaign. Evaluating the success (and failures) of counter-narrative campaigns is crucial as practitioners in this relatively new field are still working to identify best practices and learning through active experimentation how to use online dissemination and advertising tools effectively.

Both quantitative and qualitative measures were used in order to effectively assess the campaign;

- **Reach and awareness metrics:** are target audiences aware of the project, is it easily found online, how many users of the website and social media channels and viewers of the films are there?
- **Engagement metrics:** how much did users interact with Extreme Dialogue content, website and social media accounts?
- **Impact indicators:** does Extreme Dialogue content and media coverage encourage critical thinking and spark discussions around violent extremism among target audiences?

This report examines the findings of the campaign analysis in terms of the effectiveness of the various platforms and the paid and organic dissemination tactics employed in generating reach and awareness and driving engagement. It then analyses the qualitative data available to assess the impact of the campaign on audiences, before concluding with a final campaign assessment, best practices for future counter-narrative campaigns and recommendations for governments and social media platforms.

**Online Campaign Overview**

Prior to the launch of the project ISD defined a series of objectives that the online campaign hoped to achieve:

1. A minimum of **10% of views of, or interactions with**, the project content stem from the target audiences.
2. Video content is **widely shared and consumed across social media**.
3. **Coverage in offline media** is positive and helps to amplify the counter-narratives embodied in the original assets.
4. **Sufficient data is collected** to enable solid conclusions to be made around the effectiveness of platforms, tactics and spending in reaching the intended target audience(s), and to allow for analysis of engagement and impact.
There were a number of different target audience groups (both core & halo) that were considered key to the success of the project;

- **Core: Young people aged 14-25.** This age group were considered the primary target audience of the project as they are typically the most ‘at-risk’ to radicalisation. *(Note: the educational resources are aimed at 14-18 year olds but the films were considered to have value as a standalone counter-narrative for older audiences)*

- **Halo: Teachers and parents across Canada.** Teachers were targeted as the primary intended users of the educational resources, and parents in order to raise awareness of radicalisation and to enlist potential advocates for the use of the films and resources with young people.

It was also decided that the campaign would focus on **specific cities within Canada** that have experienced problems with violent extremism in recent years;

- Ottawa (ON)
- London (ON)
- Windsor (ON)
- Calgary (AB)

A more limited geographical focus also enabled SecDev to track the flow of Extreme Dialogue content through online social networks in London, Windsor and Ottawa based on the results of the Target Audience Analysis phase conducted prior to the launch. *(Note: Calgary was added as a target area at a later stage)*

The project primarily used **Facebook, Twitter & YouTube** as they are the three most popular social networks in Canada. Video content was hosted on the project YouTube channel with appropriate titles, descriptions and keyword tags added to ensure they appeared in the appropriate searches. Facebook and Twitter were used primarily to share content and media coverage, advertise the launch event and interact with followers to build the project’s reach and online communities.

**Paid Advertising**

Paid online advertising allowed ISD to directly reach target audiences using self-reported demographic, geographic, occupational, and interests data as target criteria. Paid advertising took place on YouTube and Facebook as these have proven to be the most effective platforms for disseminating counter-narrative content during previous ISD campaigns.

The following types of advertising were used;

- **YouTube In-display ads** (video displayed next to other YouTube content in side-bar)
- **YouTube In-stream ads** (video displayed prior to other YouTube content, for a compulsory minimum of 5 seconds)
- **Facebook boosted posts** (posts by the Extreme Dialogue page are promoted within targeted audiences’ news feeds)
- **Facebook paid ads** (text/image adverts appear in targeted audiences’ newsfeeds and side-bars)

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**Budget**

The budget was allocated to YouTube and Facebook over Twitter (and Google) ads based on their relative effectiveness and value for money during previous ISD-led campaigns. As the campaign was mostly promoting video content YouTube was prioritised over Facebook. The budget was allocated evenly between promoting the Christianne Boudreau and Daniel Gallant films.

The advertising budget was provisionally allocated as follows, although the allocations were flexible in order to allow for alterations based on the relative success of different ad types during the campaigning period;
**SUMMARY FINDINGS**

**Website: extremedialogue.org**

**Overview**
The website acted as a central hub for the project, hosting the films and resources and linking to the three social media accounts.

- Extremedialogue.org was visited **4460 times by 3707 users** over the first week of the campaign.

![Extreme Dialogue Website Users](image)

- Traffic peaked on the 18th February after the launch itself, then again over the weekend on the 20th and 21st, before tailing off the following week.
- 82.3% of visits were new, while 17.7% had previously visited the site either during the week (or the “Coming Soon” holding page that was in place until the launch on the 17th February).
- These visits resulted in a total of 21,657 page views which equates to an average of 4.86 pages per session.
- There were also 1,415 views of the films on the website.
- An average session on the website lasted 02:51 minutes.

**User Demographics**
- From the available data the site was most popular among 25-34 year olds (27%), but attracted a range of different aged users.
- The significant 35-64 cohort (51%) should contain a significant proportion of parents.
- The smaller number of 18-24 year olds (9%), the lowest proportion of any age group, is somewhat disappointing.

**User Geography**
- The site was visited by users in a total 95 countries worldwide, with the vast majority from Canada (55%), the U.S. (24%) and the UK (6%).
• The major Canadian cities dominated the most popular user locations, with Calgary (6.8%), Toronto (6.4%), Montreal (5.94%) and Ottawa (5.1%) leading the way.

• Canadians made a total of 3,727 visits to the Extreme Dialogue Website.

• Visitors primarily used the website in English (80.9%), with French (11.6%) representing a smaller but significant proportion of visitors.

• The percentage of new sessions from Canadians at 98% was significantly higher than the international average at 80.52%.

User Behavior
• Most users accessed the site via computer (61.52%), mobile phones (25.70%) and tablets (12.78%) justifying the decision to build the site with mobile compatibility.

• 4,460 users started at the homepage (77.6%) and filtered out from there to other pages.

• The homepage represents the largest proportion of total page views (44.5%).

• The “Daniel Gallant” (14.3%) and the “About” (12%) pages outperformed the “Christiane Boudreau” (10.5%) and “Get Involved” (7.9%) pages.

Traffic Sources
• 38% of users arrive directly at the website via the URL.

• Those originating from elsewhere arrive via referral links on external websites (27%), search engines (20%) or social media (15%).

• Most of the referrals from external websites originated from links in media coverage (85%), with the rest coming from the ISD website (15%).

• Search engine traffic was dominated by Google (91%), with Bing (5%) and Yahoo (4%) trailing considerably.

• On social media Twitter (59%) was the top performer, followed by Facebook (38%), with the remainder coming from others such as LinkedIn, YouTube and Google+ (3%).

• Those that came to the site via searches almost exclusively used the keywords “Extreme Dialogue” (99.9%) or variations of it (i.e. added spaces, “.org” or used incorrect spellings) to find the site, suggesting that the name of the project is memorable and users largely knew what they were looking for and were able to find it.

Findings
• By attracting visitors from over 95 countries worldwide the website achieved significant global reach and exposure for the project. However, the website’s most engaged users were Canadian.

• The bounces rates and user behaviour statistics achieved by the website suggests that it is highly effective at hooking users and maintaining their interest or curiosity, with the majority of users visiting the majority of pages.
• A majority of users also knew what they were looking for and were able to find it easily, with a large proportion of users arriving directly or via searches (57.6%) point to effective SEO.

• The project’s social media accounts and links from other websites (42.4%) were also important.

• The fact that 91% of users were 25 years of age or older suggest the website was most effective for reaching the halo audience of teachers and parents (as well as others such as journalists, education and CVE practitioners).

• The decision to build a mobile and tablet compatible website was justified by the volume of visitors that made use of this functionality (38.5%).

• Overall, the findings suggest that the website was effectively designed to promote the project, encourage user engagement and appear readily in search results.
YouTube

Overview

YouTube acted as the primary platform for the project’s video content. The films were hosted on YouTube and then embedded on the website (and in some news articles) and shared on social media. This approach allowed ISD and SecDev to trace all views of the films, regardless of whether they were viewed on YouTube or elsewhere online.

The films on the Extreme Dialogue YouTube channel were viewed 50,673 times during the first week of the campaign. This represents a total of 2,933 hours or 122 days of viewing time and an impressive average viewing time of 3:30 minutes (with films ranging from 7.5 to 9 minutes). As the graph below shows, the vast majority of these views were accrued during the first four days that the films were available and paid advertising was running.

![View of Extreme Dialogue Videos on YouTube](chart)

Viewer Retention

- Unpaid viewers, on average, watched the films longer than those attracted through advertising.

- As total views began to drop off after the 18th February (above), average viewing times began to increase (below).

![Average View Duration (% of av. film length viewed)](chart)
Views and Viewer Retention by Video

- **Christianne Boudreau**” and “Daniel Gallant (Explicit)” were by far the most popular films as they were supported by paid advertising and therefore accounted for 92% of total views on the channel.

- “Christianne Interview I” and “Daniel Gallant (Clean)” were the next most popular, receiving 3.5% and 1.1% respectively. The remaining films all received 0.5% or less of the total views.

- The **English language films outperformed their French equivalents** across the board in terms of views.

Viewer Demographics

- The vast majority of viewers in Canada fell into the 18-24 category (78%) as these viewers were targeted through paid advertising.

- 35-44 years old formed the next largest cohort (7.9%), followed by 25034 (6%) and 45-54 (3.9%).

- A significant majority of viewers on the YouTube channel were male (68%).

- While the fact that only 1.5% of views came from those under 18 is disappointing, it is somewhat expected as it is not possible to target advertising at that demographic.

Viewer Geography

- During the first week of the campaign 92% of viewers (46,760) were located in Canada.

- The remaining viewers were spread mostly between the U.S. (4.1% - 2,090) and the U.K. (1.2% - 616).

Playback Locations

- On YouTube films were viewed predominantly on either their own “watch page” (i.e. the unique page/URL that contains the film) or via in-stream ads.

- These locations achieved average view durations (3.08 & 3.25 respectively) similar to the overall average (3.30) as they collectively provided 95% of the total views.

- 5.4% of views that were gained via embedded videos on other websites (primarily extremedialogue.org and media organisations) achieved a considerably higher average view duration of 5.35, suggesting that those viewers were more engaged with the content of the films than those attracted through advertising.

Traffic Sources

- **Advertising accounted for 89% of total views** during the first week of the campaign.

- This proportion of paid views also corresponds with findings on previous campaigns that ISD has run, where ads accounted for 88% of total views.

- The fact that the proportion of minutes watched from advertising was only 86% reinforces the findings that views achieved via advertising are of marginally lower ‘quality’ than unpaid views, and that these viewers are slightly less engaged with the content.

Viewer Devices

- YouTube viewers largely mirrored visitors to the Extreme Dialogue website in terms of the devices that were used.
• Computers accounted for 60% of YouTube views, with mobile phones (23%), tablets (14%) and games consoles (2.2%) providing the rest that could be identified.

**Viewer Engagement**

• The Extreme Dialogue YouTube channel attracted a net total of **73 subscribers** (78 subscribed, 5 unsubscribed) as well as **53 likes, 6 dislikes and 6 favourites**.

• The **films were shared 55 times, added by users to playlists 43 times and received 22 comments.**

• The “Christianne Boudreau” film was the top individual performer, garnering 30 likes, 14 comments and 25 shares alone.

• Facebook was the dominant platform for sharing the films, accounting for 81% of all shares, with Twitter, Google+, Gmail, WhatsApp and Tumblr also being used.

**Film Annotations**

• The annotations added at the start and end of each film garnered a total of 189 clicks and 821 closes, and only accounted for 0.3% of total views.

• This represents a 0.75% click-through rate and a close rate of 2.89%, suggesting that the **annotations were not an especially effective method for driving additional views** and viewers were almost four times more likely to close the annotations than click them.

**YouTube Advertising**

The main **films were advertised to youth in target cities** (Calgary, London, Ottawa, and Windsor) and **parents and teachers across Canada** using both **In-stream and In-display YouTube ads**. Between 16th-20th February a total of **24 individual ads** were used, enabling a comparison of relative performance and an indication of which audiences were most receptive to the films, per view. These views were the result of **over 2.3 million impressions** (i.e. the number of times ads appeared on users screens), and an average view rate (i.e. the percentage of people who watched your video after they first saw the ad) of 1.69.6 Adverts also generated an **additional 1,962 earned views** (i.e. when a user views the video ad and then watches another video or videos on the Extreme Dialogue YouTube channel).

**Ad Targeting**

• Whilst view volumes largely correlated with ad spending, interestingly the ads targeted at youth achieved a higher average view rate (2.30%) that those targeted at teachers (1.27%) and parents (1.26%).

• This suggests that **younger users were more likely to watch the films that either teachers or parents**.

**Ad Content**

• When comparing the two films, the **Christianne Boudreau film achieved a higher number of views and impressions than the Daniel Gallant film.**

• Both were allocated the same original budget but this was exhausted quicker by the Christianne film as the ads were served to more users. It remains unclear why ads for different content (in this case the two films) but with identical targeting criteria are served at different rates.

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6 There was a large disparity between the view rates from In-stream and In-display advertising so the average rate is somewhat unrepresentative.
**Viewer Geography**
- Ads aimed at young people in the four target cities resulted in significantly different view rates, with London (9.43%), Windsor (7.53%) and Calgary (5.05%) far outstripping Ottawa (1.04%) and the ads targeted at parents and teachers across Canada (1.2%).

**Ad Type**
*In-stream ads proved considerably more effective than In-display ads*, accounting for 89% of all advertising views and a disproportionately high 98% of the total minutes users spent watching the films. This was reflected in the average view duration of 40.5% for In-stream and a disappointing 4.4% for In-display ads.

![In-stream ads](image1)
![In-display search ads](image2)
![In-display sidebar ads](image3)
![In-display banner/overlay ads](image4)

The view rates for In-stream ads ranged between 11.83 and 25.89%, whereas In-display ads performed extremely poorly in comparison, with view rates between 0.09 and 0.24%. In-display ads were also twice as expensive per view (£0.12), suggesting that *in-display ads are both more expensive per view and less likely to attract views and retain viewers*. This largely confirms previous ISD findings.

![In-stream ads](image5)

**User Ad Exposure**
- Average impression frequency is the number of times that an average user is exposed to a video ad over a given time period.
- *Extreme Dialogue ads averaged an average impression frequency of 2.99*, meaning that the typical user was served an ad almost three times during the paid ad period.
- This suggests that *ad spending was either concentrated over too short a period of time, or that the audiences that were targeted were too small* and therefore over-saturated.
Viewer Engagement

- Paid advertising produced a total of 39 subscribers, 24 shares and 12 likes. These represented 53% of total subscriptions, 44% of shares and 23% of likes.

Findings

- YouTube generated an impressively large number of impressions and views for a counter-narrative campaign.

- Although advertising accounted for 89% of views, unpaid or organic views still numbered in the thousands which compares favourably with the all-time views of some other counter-narrative efforts.

- The fact that the majority of views originated from advertising, while unsurprising, reinforces the difficulty of attracting target audiences organically, especially in a short period of time.

- When advertising on YouTube it is typically both more expensive and less effective to target broader, less-specific audiences.

- The over-exposure of ads to some users was an unexpected consequence of front-loading the advertising budget during the first few days of the campaign.

- Ads generated a disappointing level of engagement with the films and the YouTube channel when compared to organic viewers, although 1,962 users did go on to view multiple videos.

- As well as producing a disproportionately smaller number of likes, shares, comments and channel subscriptions, ad viewers were also more difficult to retain.

- The Extreme Dialogue campaign has also emphasised the fact that views can be a misleading representation of the success of a campaign unless qualified by viewer retention rates and engagement statistics.

- The quality of views must be considered to fully understand the impact of counter-narrative content on YouTube.

- Overall YouTube proved to be the most useful platform for reaching the targeted youth demographic and represents the most promising avenue for disseminating counter-narrative video content to a younger audience.
Facebook

Overview

Facebook was the primary social media platform used for building and sustaining an audience for the project. The Extreme Dialogue Facebook Page received 946 likes during the first week of the campaign. The graph below shows the breakdown of paid versus organic page likes, as well as page unlikes during that period. The advertising budget for Facebook was spread more evenly than the YouTube allocation, resulting in a more consistent distribution of engagements during the course of the week.

![Facebook Likes (Paid & Organic)](image)

User Engagement

- Likes (either of the Extreme Dialogue page or content) occurred mostly via ads (63.1%), followed by page likes (13.9%), post likes on the Extreme Dialogue page (13%) and page suggestions (6.7%).

- The proportion of paid likes (63.1%) was considerably lower than the proportion of paid views on YouTube (89%), although there was a smaller budget allocated to Facebook advertising.

- The majority of organic, unpaid traffic to the page that originated from outside Facebook came from the project website and an article that linked to the page in *The Globe and Mail*.

User Demographics

- Disappointingly the 13-17 age group represented less than 1% of total page likes, although the decision was taken not to advertise to this age group due to potential privacy concerns.

- The more even distribution in the ages of Extreme Dialogue page fans than film viewers on YouTube suggests that Facebook may be more effective at reaching the project’s older halo audiences – teachers and parents. The page received the highest proportion of likes from the 35-44 (20%) age group.

- In contrast to the majority male audiences on both the Extreme Dialogue website and YouTube channel, and despite the lack of gender bias in terms of ad targeting, 66% of those that liked the Facebook page were female.
**User Locations**
- The vast majority of users that liked the page were located in Canada (981), with the UK (57) and the US (43) the only other countries recording double digits.
- Within Canada there was a relatively even geographical spread, with the most page likes coming from Toronto (62), Montreal (55) and Calgary (51). London, UK (33) was the only city in the top-10 from outside Canada.

**Post Stats**
- Data from posts on the Extreme Dialogue page again reveals the contrasting effectiveness between organic and paid methods in driving engagement among users.
- Organic posts required a mere 26 impressions per user engagement, whereas boosted posts required 1179 impressions to generate a single like, comment or share.
- This suggests that while boosted posts generate significant numbers of impressions they were not particularly effective in converting this reach into user engagement.

**Facebook Advertising**
- Four different Facebook ads were used to attract both parents and teachers across Canada to the project Facebook page, while boosted posts containing each film were targeted at youth aged 18-24 in the four target cities.
- Facebook ads were served over 504,000 times to 362,500 unique users during the paid advertising period, resulting in a disappointing 1835 clicks.
- Clicks on ads resulted in 923 actions (likes, shares and comments) from 916 unique users, at an average cost of £1.19 per action.

**Reach & User Ad Exposure**
- The average user was exposed to 1.39 Extreme Dialogue related ads.
- On Facebook the Extreme Dialogue campaign resulted in extensive reach during and immediately after the paid ad period from 16th-21st February.
- Organic reach achieved a high of 501 users for a post before the start of paid ads on 17th February.
- The initiation of paid ads saw reach explode to 106,485 users, continuing at levels well higher than 100,000 until 25th February and in the tens of thousands until 2nd March.
- This four day extension of higher viewership after the paid ad period ceased points to the added benefit of enacting paid ads.
- Paid ads did result in increased likes by both males and females in the 18-24 age range. On 16th February there were just six likes of the Extreme Dialogue page by females and 18 likes by males in this age range. At the end of the paid ad campaign, on 25th February these numbers increased significantly, with 108 likes by females and 102 likes by males in the 18-24 demographic.
- Aggregated Facebook likes in Canada, by Canadian city, and gender in the 18-24 demographic, all show the limitations of paid ads. This information, like that for YouTube, is representative of the need to increase organic reach and to develop a paid ad strategy which is staggered over time.
Ad Placement
Facebook ads can be placed in three different locations, in desktop and mobile news feeds and the right-hand side column or sidebar. Although ads placed in users’ news feeds were clicked on more often and resulted in a higher number of actions per click than the equivalent ads placed in the right column, they carried both a higher cost per click and cost per action. This suggests that users are more likely to click on content in their news feeds (more “natural” advertising i.e. included alongside other stories) than the right column (reserved exclusively for ad content), and these users are more committal and more inclined to like, share or comment on the page or ad content.

News feed ads were therefore more effective at encouraging user engagement but did come at a higher price and should therefore be used sparingly. Right column ads represent better value for money, producing both lower costs per click and per action, but are more clearly presented as advertised content and therefore may not be appropriate for all forms of counter-narrative content.

Ad Content
All the Facebook ads featured text and images related to either the project itself or Christianne or Daniel’s stories, enabling a comparison across the various different types of content. Ads featuring Christianne proved the most successful (and were therefore allocated a higher budget), with both the highest click-through rate (0.67%) and the lowest costs per click (£0.53) and costs per action (£0.84). For comparison, ads featuring Daniel had a considerably lower click-through rate (0.26%) and proved far more expensive in generating user engagement in terms of costs per action (£2.13).

The data shows that ads featuring Christianne were more cost effective and drove higher levels of user engagement. This could be a result of the current high levels of interest in the subject matter (ISIS rather than far-right) and/or the response evoked in viewers by the film itself. Ads with a description of the project performed relatively poorly, suggesting that personal stories are more enticing to users.

News Feed & Right Column Facebook Ads

Whilst there is an argument for allocating even more resources to the most effective ads in future campaigns, this would have disproportionately pushed one film over the other. And, while this may have proved more cost effective, Extreme Dialogue is intended to have a cross-ideological scope and it was therefore important to promote stories that many in the project’s target audiences would have less prior familiarity with.

Ad Targeting
As on YouTube, ads on Facebook were targeted at youth, parents and teachers. Parents represented better value than youth, generating more engagement at lower costs. Parent ads had a click-through rate of 0.46%, almost double the 0.26% achieved by youth ads. 55.6% of the clicks from parents resulted in an action, compared to only 41.8% of clicks among youth. Ads targeted at parents had a lower cost per click (£0.50) than youth (£0.77), and generated actions by users at around half the price.
(£0.89 and £1.85 per action by parents and youth respectively). The data suggests that, at least on Facebook, parents as an audience were comparatively more attracted by Extreme Dialogue ads and then more engaged by the project and/or the films.

In comparison to parents and youth, ads targeted at teachers proved surprisingly and prohibitively expensive. A variety of different approaches were tried to target teachers. Initially ads were targeted at those that had self-reported their occupation as a teacher (an estimated potential reach of 60,000). This approach was ineffective so ads were retargeted at those that had self-reported studying “Education”. The change failed to have the desired effect so the remaining budget for teachers was then reallocated towards parents and youth.

Although click-through rates for teacher ads (0.39%) were relatively consistent with the youth and parent ads, they were much more expensive per click (£1.14) and per action generated (£11.96). These results suggest that although the teacher ads attracted clicks at a similar rate to the others, Facebook charged a much higher premium to advertise to teachers (due to a considerably smaller pool of potential users) and therefore it was not viable to continue the ads. The high cost per action and low percentage of clicks resulting actions (9.5%) could point to a lack of interest in the project and/or films among teachers, although the sample size was considerably smaller than either the youth or parent groups so this may not be a significant result.

**Boosted Posts vs. Ads**

Facebook ads proved more effective than boosted posts across the board. They had a higher click-through rate (0.45% to 0.22%) and resulted in a higher proportion of users taking actions once they had clicked (53.2% to 40.6%). As well as being more effective, ads also represented better value than boosted posts with lower costs per click (£0.58 to £0.67) and costs per action (£1.09 to £1.65).

![Facebook Ads vs. Boosted Posts]

The content of the posts (text and thumbnail image) is also an important factor, with previous ISD studies showing that more recognisable or controversial images (e.g. ISIS black flag vs. counter-narrative project branding/images) combined with provocative text generate the most responses from users. Our ability to create more enticing ads was somewhat constrained however, with certain keywords (e.g. Neo-Nazi, ISIS) being rejected during the automated Facebook ad review process. Neither the Extreme Dialogue branding nor screenshots from the films were likely to be a recognised by users, limiting the effectiveness of the images available for use in the campaign.

**Facebook Network Assessment**

Previously identified community groups on Facebook were assessed for the presence of Extreme Dialogue content or discussion related to the issues of counter-extremism and de-radicalization. SecDev assessed 233 community pages from London (47), Ottawa (83), Windsor (80) and Calgary (23), selected from previously conducted studies on relevant audiences and in the case of Calgary, additional qualitative analysis. These Facebook pages were composed of community groups that

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7 Ottawa Facebook Audience/Community Assessment, London Facebook Audience/Community Assessment, and Windsor Facebook Audience/Community Assessment
played important roles in their communities. Out of the 233 pages it was determined that only two had posts related to Extreme Dialogue within the past five months and that none of these pages include Extreme Dialogue content.

The lack of Extreme Dialogue content highlights the shift in approach to targeting taken prior to the launch. Instead of focusing advertising and organic outreach at youth and community groups it was decided that the campaign would instead directly target youth, parents and teachers. The 233 Facebook pages identified in London, Ottawa, Windsor and Calgary are however broadly representative of youth and community organizations in each city and the lack of Extreme Dialogue content on these pages or discussion around the campaign is therefore a disappointment. Alternative strategies would be required to reach these groups, primarily via organic outreach and direct engagement, including joint events, educational sessions or social media campaigns.

Findings

- **Facebook was more effective for targeting older users, with ads targeted at parents outperforming those aimed at youth.**

- The reasons for the difficulties experienced in targeting teachers remain unclear and will require additional experimentation and testing in future campaigns in order to identify the targeting criteria that make ads targeted at teachers more viable.

- **Ads in the right column were more cost effective than those in news feeds** and should therefore be used unless there is a need for content to appear less like advertising or there are no budgetary constraints (i.e. with in-kind advertising support from social media companies).

- **Boosted posts proved less effective than ads** and should therefore be avoided in future campaigns.

- In comparison to YouTube, **Facebook proved a more appropriate social network for organic outreach and engagement**, perhaps due to the more ingrained culture of participation, interaction and sharing on the platform.
Twitter

Overview

Whilst the Extreme Dialogue Twitter account was not supported with paid advertising it still attracted 222 followers and 119 mentions in tweets from other accounts during February, the month of the launch. This engagement was the result of 21,100 impressions and 3,272 profile visits, generated by only 29 tweets from the account.

![Number of Followers on Profile]

Whilst ads were not used, Twitter data shows a related increase in discussion during the launch and paid ad period. Increased activity by the Extreme Dialogue Twitter account during the launch did however result in a substantial increase in replies and mentions.

![Extreme Dialogue Account Output (green) & Replies/Mentions from Others (gray)]

With the end of the launch and paid ad period Twitter outputs and associated engagement decreased significantly. On average, engagement was most successful from 12:00 to 22:00 UTC, highlighting the need to target Twitter outputs during this time. By comparison, an average tweet resulted in roughly six types of engagement, while tweets made at 12:00 UTC resulted in 70 types of engagement.
In terms of youth engagement, **Twitter resulted in the least engagement with users aged 29 and under.** Users under 24 comprised only 4.13% of Extreme Dialogue’s Twitter audience, while those 30 and over accounted for the majority of viewers.

**Twitter Network Assessment**

For Twitter SecDev undertook a network analysis, using Gephi visualization software to display the results in a digestible format in order to understand which online communities were penetrated by Extreme Dialogue content and whether those communities were related to the campaign’s mandate. This allowed SecDev to understand the central users (represented by nodes) in each community (represented by clusters of nodes) and their activity (represented by lines) as they related to the Extreme Dialogue campaign.
SecDev identified six communities which shared Extreme Dialogue content between 16th February and 16th March on Twitter using social network analysis. It was determined that the majority of users who interacted with Extreme Dialogue content came from the fields of counter-extremism and de-radicalization.

Of the six communities the three largest: Extreme Dialogue Core; Christianne Boudreau Centric; and, General Counter-Extremism, were the most engaged with Extreme Dialogue content. These communities were largely composed of members in Extreme Dialogue’s larger social network. The remaining three communities: CBC Radio One Segment; US Military Community; and, Middle East Affairs were dominated by a single Extreme Dialogue story or related tweet. False positives were also present, with the US Military Community and Middle East Affairs using the Extreme Dialogue hashtag in tweets that were unrelated to the campaign. Almost all the discussion surrounding the Extreme Dialogue campaign were favourable, with only the General Counter-Extremism network displaying any negativity towards Extreme Dialogue’s efforts.

**Conversations on Twitter related to Extreme Dialogue remained insular overall.** Those discussing the initiative were within Extreme Dialogue’s network or related institutions focusing on the issues of counter-extremism and de-radicalization. Discussions outside of these networks were not significant and **highlight the need to initiate conversations around the initiative beyond those directly related to the subject matter.**
Findings

- Overall Twitter proved more useful for interacting with those that are potentially useful advocates for the project but do not fall within the projects’ primary target audiences.

- The lack of younger users that interact with these networks perhaps suggests that CVE practitioners in general need to make more efforts to engage youth on Twitter.

- As with other platforms examined in this study, an organic reach strategy that includes constant tweeting about the campaign and themes related to counter-extremism and de-radicalization will be beneficial to move discussion around Extreme Dialogue to a wider audience.

- These initiatives should be staggered over time in order to create continued engagement with Extreme Dialogue products. Furthermore, as shown previously, higher levels of outputs by the Extreme Dialogue Twitter account results in higher exposure.

- To this extent the Twitter account should remain active and engaging, discussing not only the Extreme Dialogue initiative but related news, events and programs.
News Media Comments Analysis

In total over 240 stories featured or discussed Extreme Dialogue across television, radio, print and online media platforms, including eight out of the 10 news organisations that feature in the top 100 most visited websites in Canada. Between 13th February and 6th March, news articles that included the films embedded within the text generated an impressive 5,319 views, or 9.8% of the total views (including advertising) during that period.

The project launch event at the University of Calgary was covered by various Canadian news organisations, with CBC, CTV, Global News and the Calgary Herald all in attendance. As well as the coverage of the launch event, the project was previewed in a national print exclusive in the Toronto Star prior to the launch and the films and website being released publically. On the morning of the launch ISD’s Rachel Briggs spoke to CTV News’ Canada AM breakfast news programme and op-eds by Rachel and Christianne were published in the Calgary Herald and The Globe and Mail respectively.

Following this initial interest other stories and interviews appeared throughout the day in The National Post, Yahoo! News, Metro and a number of other publications. CBC Radio’s current affairs discussion show ‘The Current’ devoted a 22 minute segment to Extreme Dialogue and the difficulties of combatting extremist propaganda and creating effective counter-narrative content. Many stories were also republished in local news outlets across Canada and the project was also mentioned in US, UK, Irish, Australian, Danish and Czech media.

Over the course of the week the project was also featured in major online publications Vice and Huffington Post Canada, both of which embedded the main films on their websites, earning 1000s of additional viewers. Due to the attention the project received during ISD’s presentation at the White House CVE Summit, Christianne was also interviewed live by CNN.

SecDev was able to track the comments made by users on news articles which featured Extreme Dialogue content. To understand the impact of paid ads on news comments this section provides an analysis of comments from 13th-20th February. It then moves on to assess the entire period, from 13th February to 6th March, in which comments were made on Extreme Dialogue articles.

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During the paid ad period a total of 56 comments were made on news articles that covered the Extreme Dialogue campaign. Of these comments roughly 66% were in support of the campaign. Many of these positive comments during this period and particularly those that dealt with the case of Christianne Boudreau focused on the need to prevent the radicalization of youth.

Others who expressed a negative view of the program during the paid ad period believed either that the program was futile and a waste of money, held issue with Islam and its teachings, or that radicalized individuals were mentally ill and could not be reformed.

There were a total of 149 news comments related to the Extreme Dialogue campaign from 13th February until 6th March. The overwhelming number of these comments were in support of the campaign, while a minority of comments, roughly 25%, took a negative approach to the initiative. Many of these supportive comments appeared below the article ISIS recruitment: former white supremacist Daniel Gallant fights radicalization on CBC’s website, pointing to the importance of adopting a cross-ideological approach.

Negative comments surrounding the Extreme Dialogue campaign seemed to take a hard line on dealing with those deemed by some commenters as “terrorists”. Others blatantly took issue with the
fact the Daniel Gallant was previously an extremist, while some called for a stronger legal and policing approach to terrorism and labelled any dialogue as futile.

News comments both during the paid ad period and from 13th February to 6th March highlight some interesting elements. By and large those who had read the articles expressed a positive view of the Extreme Dialogue campaign, the individuals featured in each video and toward the adoption of a softer approach to counter-extremism and de-radicalization. As noted above, many of the commenters explicitly mentioned that these articles had influenced them positively and that they came to view the Extreme Dialogue approach as beneficial, particularly when compared with the more legalistic and policing approach advocated by the current government. Overall, the overwhelmingly supportive nature of comments directly referencing the Extreme Dialogue campaign should be viewed as a success. Those who took the time to comment on the campaign largely saw it as a beneficial approach to dealing with the threat of extremism and would like to see the spirit of the initiative adopted by the Canadian government.

![Figure 3: A breakdown of news comment topics](image)

**News Comment Themes**

Articles covering the Extreme Dialogue campaign also sparked discussion and in many cases, debate, over themes related to the issues of extremism and terrorism. From 13th February to 6th March a total of 1,184 comments were made. Within these comments four primary themes exist: domestic politics, domestic radicalization, international relations and religion. Of these themes domestic radicalization, an issue close to the Extreme Dialogue campaign, made up about half of the conversation. Negative and neutral comments combined dominated the conversation, with 28% of commenters expressing a positive view on the fight against extremism.

Domestic politics also ranked high among commenters, with a fourth of individuals commenting on the political process and the stances of major parties in Canada and the United States on terrorism and domestic radicalization. The majority of these commentators had a negative view of Canadian and American politics, constituting half of the total comments, with the remainder largely classified as neutral. The third most prevalent theme discussed in the comment section, discussed by roughly 15% of commentators, was religion. Negative views around Islam and in some cases, organized religion, dominated this conversation. Such comments represent a disturbing trend and the need to develop an open, public dialogue around radicalization and inter-faith learning. International relations rounded on the comment themes and was dominated by negative and neutral comments, at 39 each.
A total of 155 comments, around 13% of those covered, were unrelated to any of the above categories and did not hold any significant commentary on the Extreme Dialogue campaign or themes covered above. Comments not related directly to the campaign were overwhelmingly negative, with the bulk of others being neutral, which is somewhat typical for news comments sections. Positive comments were only slightly dominate in the case of domestic radicalization topics, with 30% of commenters taking an optimistic view compared to almost 28% of commenters taking a negative position.

During the paid ad period and slightly before, from 13th – 25th February there were a total of 400 categorized comments, 379 of which fit into the categories of domestic radicalization religion, international relations and domestic politics. As with the overarching period from 13th February to 6th March, those commenting at this time also gravitated towards discussions around the issue of domestic radicalization. Over 50% of commentators discussed this issue, with an equal number, 61 comments, taking positive and negative approaches to the topic. Of the negative comments, many took issue with a softer approach to radicalization.

Religion was the second most popular topic during the paid ad period, with slightly over half of the comments taking a negative approach to the Islamic religion or religion in general and only 10% taking a favourable position. Those commenting on international relations took a negative stance on world issues and Canada's international role 46% of the time, with zero positive comments related to the theme. With regards to domestic politics, out of 37 comments related to the issue, there were 15 negative comments and only one characterized as positive.

As with the entire period in which comments were tracked, the paid period also experienced an overwhelming number of negative comments. The sole category to defy this trend, as mentioned above, was domestic radicalization, with an equal number of positive and negative comments.

Findings

- An accomplishment of the Extreme Dialogue campaign is that outside of direct reference to the initiative it was also able to spark a wider debate around the issue of domestic radicalization, one of the original aims of the campaign.

- Also, given that many admitted that the campaign had changed their view of domestic radicalization or created empathy for former radicals and their families showed that the Extreme Dialogue challenged the beliefs of individuals who previously held strong negative views on the topic.
• An undesirable aspect should also be acknowledged, in addition to conversation around
domestic radicalization, Extreme Dialogue coverage did spark unconstructive partisan
debate over domestic politics and the handling of terrorism, in addition to bigoted
statements against Islam.

• While this is not an issue with the campaign itself, in the latter case it highlights the need for
more education around the Muslim faith and religion in general, a possible avenue for
future developed of Extreme Dialogue or related campaigns that was also highlighted in
feedback received from participants in the training sessions held in June 2015.

YouTube Comments
SecDev collected comments from Extreme Dialogue’s YouTube channel between 13th February and 6th
March 2015. Unsurprisingly the two main videos on the YouTube channel that were supported by paid
advertising, “Christianne Boudreau” and “Daniel Gallant (Explicit)”, received the most comments. Of the 33 comments from 22 users collected across all videos, 17 were characterized as positive, 13
were negative, and three were neutral. ISD chose to moderate comments prior to allowing them to
appear underneath the videos primarily to insulate youth from extreme or offensive comments and
far-right YouTube users. Comments that were withheld were however retained.

Videos featuring Christianne Boudreau received the largest portion of positive commentary, while
those featuring Daniel Gallant received the vast majority of negative commentary. Overall, videos
featuring Christianne had a total of 10 positive comments and 2 negative comments, whereas those
featuring Daniel had a total of 11 negative comments and seven positive comments. Positive
comments were liked 17 times by other users, with no dislikes, although many of the negative
comments were not published so could not be liked or disliked by other users.

In terms of positive comments, individuals typically denounced radical interpretations of Islam and
noted their empathy and support of both Daniel and Christianne for overcoming their struggles
associated with radicalization.

The negative comments largely consisted of personal attacks, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism or remarks
regarding the white supremacist movement or ISIS. Eight of the 13 negative comments originated
from four users that directly expressed extreme far-right sentiments or had recently watched Neo-
Nazi or white supremacy related videos. One user posted multiple comments attempting to discredit
Daniel, linking to a blog post from the perspective of a member of the Canadian white-supremacist
movement (see Far-Right Reaction). The negative comments received from extreme far-right
supporters are sadly relatively typical of the reaction to former extremists among those still subscribed
to extreme ideologies.

Overall, only a very small percentage of viewer commented on the Extreme Dialogue films. The
positive and negative comments produced by YouTube users typically expressed strong convictions
for or against the project and the subjects of each video, suggesting that these were among the most emotionally engaged viewers.

**Facebook Comments**

SecDev collected comments from the Extreme Dialogue Facebook page between 29th January and 7th March. Of the 50 comments collected 16 were categorized as positive, zero were negative and 34 were neutral.

In comparison to the comments made on news reports, Facebook comments tended to be much shorter, with about half of these comments containing no text aside from a notification that these users had shared an Extreme Dialogue post. The gender breakdown of the commenters, with 24 females and 16 males, also points to higher interaction with the content by women on the Facebook. Comments on Facebook displayed a personal connection to the subjects of the videos as well.

The Christianne Boudreau and Daniel Gallant videos were the most popular posts on the Extreme Dialogue page, with Christianne Boudreau’s video liked 46 times and shared 14 times. Daniel Gallant’s video received 45 likes and was shared 6 times during the period of observation. One important point to be noted is that some of the Facebook commenters are likely to be those involved or associated with the Extreme Dialogue campaign or ISD, although a larger number would have been attracted through advertising. This would partially help to explain the positive nature of comments when compared with those from news reports. News articles reach a wider audience outside supporters of the Extreme Dialogue initiative and its target audiences, and there tended therefore to be fewer positive comments. Like other platforms covered in the study, this data points to the need to develop organic reach beyond the insular community of counter-extremism and de-radicalization professionals.

**Far-Right Reaction**

The Daniel Gallant films were embedded by members on the far-right Stormfront and Iron March forums, resulting in discussions of Daniel’s story and film views from Canada, the US and Australia, all with higher than average view durations. The project also triggered a post on a Canadian far-right blog, Vinland Awake!, that has been viewed 3,259 times to date. This blog post was also linked to by one of the four far-right influenced users that commented on the film directly on YouTube. Unsurprisingly the sentiments expressed in the posts and comments were entirely negative. Having not actively targeted those already expressing extreme views online, the fact that the project was picked up by far-right blogs and forums suggests the project was able to achieve considerable reach beyond the primary target audiences as a result of media coverage and social media activity.
Extreme Dialogue Related Posts on Far-right Websites

(Clockwise from top left: Iron March, Vinland Awake! & Stormfront)
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Campaign Overview

The website proved effective at promoting the project and encouraged user engagement with the content. It quickly climbed in search results suggesting that the project was memorably named and the site content could be efficiently indexed or “crawled” by search engines. The website was more popular among slightly older audiences (25+), whereas youth tended to be found more on social media platforms.

Conversely, YouTube was the most effective for reaching 18-24 year olds, with advertising generating an impressively large number of impressions and views among the campaign’s primary target audience. The data does however highlight the difficulty of attracting younger audiences organically. When compared to organic viewers, ad viewers were more difficult to retain and engage with a disappointing level of likes, comments and shares of the films. The strong absolute viewer durations do however serve as a strong endorsement of the content of the films, with the average viewer watching several minutes of footage.

Facebook was the most effective platform for targeting older users as the ads targeting parents performed better than those aimed at youth. When compared to YouTube, Facebook also proved the social network most suited to organic outreach and engagement. Although paid ads on Facebook did result in extensive reach during the week-long launch period, after paid ads ceased the residual effects were not sustained. The overwhelming sentiments of comments on the Extreme Dialogue page were positive or neutral but did not spark a wider discussion. The community organisations identified during the Target Audience Analysis stage did not interact with the campaign, although this was to be expected due to changes in the target audiences during the campaign planning stage.

The Extreme Dialogue Twitter account proved most effective at interacting with users from outside the project’s target audiences. On Twitter the conversation around the campaign remained quite insular with the majority of users having an interest in the project but originating from existing ISD networks, the broader CVE Twitter community or journalists interested in covering the launch or reporting on the project. High levels of output from the account consistently resulted in increased engagement but this same level of output could not be sustained beyond the initial launch period.

Across platforms paid advertising was successful in providing the campaign with initial momentum. Ads generated a high number of views and likes in the first few days of the campaign. This may have contributed to driving the high levels of media interest which in turn expanded the project’s reach, especially outside of the campaign’s predefined target audiences. This momentum however was not sustained by sufficient unpaid or organic reach and engagement and the residual effects of ads on both YouTube and Facebook disappointingly did not last beyond the first week of the campaign.

The campaign highlighted the importance of having a flexible budget in order to maximise the impact of advertising. By not adhering rigidly to a predefined budget ISD was able to avoid allocating funds to ads that were not performing while largely maintaining the required balance between the different platforms and target audiences where needed. The chart below illustrates how allocations shifted towards the more effective YouTube in-stream and Facebook ads, and away from the less effective YouTube In-display ads and boosted Facebook posts during the course of the campaign.
As outlined above, the budget could have been more evenly allocated over a longer period of time. Difficulties experienced with targeting on Facebook also meant that fewer teachers were reached with ads than originally planned. As a result however, the campaign reached a greater number of parents (primarily mothers) instead.

It is difficult to fully evaluate the campaign in terms of value for money. Ads generated significant exposure but not sustained interaction. Spending resulted in short-term brand recognition among target audiences and the wider Canadian public (via media coverage) but did not necessarily represent a solid long-term investment. The campaign was able to build a base of fans and followers on Facebook and Twitter respectively. Since the launch campaign ended however these audiences have not been especially active outside periods of project activity (e.g. Extreme Dialogue training in June 2015) and additional media coverage. It remains to be seen whether these audiences are “dormant” and can be re-engaged through higher levels of output from the project accounts and new film content.

It proved difficult to make the most of the budget allocated to the campaign due to the broad targeting criteria employed. When targeting less well defined target audiences there is no guarantee that the audience has interest in the topic. As a result the costs per click on Facebook and costs per view on YouTube were considerably higher than would be expected for commercial users of social media advertising. They were also marginally higher than the costs associated with previous ISD counter-narrative campaigns, although these campaigns were targeted at a more specific audiences.

Targeting was effective in so far as the campaign achieved high numbers of views and likes from the target audiences of youth and parents, and to a lesser extent, teachers. However, as stated previously above, the targeted audiences were not engaged sufficiently. The campaign showed that advertising is more expensive and less effective when using less well defined targeting criteria. In future targeting should therefore be further refined and make use of the more detailed criteria available on both YouTube and Facebook.

The large number of news stories featuring Extreme Dialogue were effective in amplifying the message of the campaign and introduced the project to a national audience across multiple mediums. Embedded videos in news articles were the most important unpaid source of views other than the project website, reinforcing the power maintained by traditional sources in the dissemination of media on a large scale. The visibility of the project also led to an initial surge in requests from journalists and educators, as well as offers of support, feedback from the public, and requests for help from those concerned about radicalization or seeking support. The impact of the media should however not be overstated. While spikes in traffic and views have coincided with news stories since
the launch, again this has not resulted in sustainable engagement with news audiences on ongoing basis.

SecDev’s analysis of news comments showed that the majority of commenters that referenced the project were supportive of the approach taken and appreciated hearing the perspectives of those personally impacted by violent extremism. The campaign was also able meet one of the original objectives of the project by catalysing a wider discussion around domestic radicalization in Canada as well as various other issues related to extremism, terrorism and security.

On social media comments tended to be more focused on the project or personal messages praising or criticising Christianne and Daniel. Comments were vetted prior to publication on YouTube with offensive, extreme or threatening comments removed to protect the film’s younger viewers. This however may have stifled discussions and proved counter-productive in terms of encouraging engagement and should therefore be reconsidered for future campaigns.

**Final Campaign Assessment**

The campaign aimed to amplify high-quality, impactful counter-narrative content (owned media) with an extensive press and online advertising campaign (paid media) to provide the campaign with initial momentum and attract significant exposure, coverage and engagement (earned media) around the launch. While the campaign was successful in terms of generating exposure and coverage, it was less successful in converting this into the regular levels of engagement hoped for beyond the launch period.

The project's owned media content performed well overall. The average viewing times and viewer retention rates of the films suggests that audiences found them engaging and there is potential for the use of medium length counter-narrative videos (around 4-10 minutes) online. Similarly, the project website achieved solid user engagement figures in terms of average pages per session and time spent on the site.
Paid advertising delivered mixed results, achieving large numbers of ad impressions and views from the project’s target audiences but failing to deliver engagement consistently. The paid campaign built on previous ISD efforts and was successful in reinforcing understandings of the most effective tactics in terms of ad type, placement and content on YouTube and Facebook. With the assistance of professional media support to inform relevant press about the launch, generate stories and manage enquiries, the press campaign proved highly effective, resulting in significant earned media in the form of news coverage that was broadly positive or neutral.

Questions remain as to whether it is cost-effective to target advertising at broad audiences with counter-narrative content in future campaigns. Extreme Dialogue was targeted at a broad audience because it is an inherently preventative initiative that is explicitly aimed at all youth rather than those deemed “at-risk”. Advertising platforms on social media however are designed to offer high levels of granularity and audience segmentation, and are attractive to commercial advertisers for this reason. By not targeting highly specific audiences ISD was unable to take full advantage of the services these platforms offer and targeting refinements should be made in future Extreme Dialogue campaigns. However it would contradict the ethos of the project to target more specific “at-risk” audiences and those expressing extreme views online, and could potentially prove counter-productive as the films were not made with these audiences in mind.

The campaign also highlighted the need to attain a more complete understanding of which approaches could be used to better engage younger audiences. Some platforms do not allow advertising to certain age groups which, combined with the potential for inaccurate self-reporting of age, somewhat limits the scope for effectively targeting advertising and measuring results to younger audiences on these platforms.

The primary disappointment during the campaign was the lack of social media engagement, especially from youth, the project’s primary target audience. Sharing behaviour, seen as the most valuable form of user engagement (or endorsement), did not occur at sufficient scale to maintain the momentum of the campaign, pointing to the difficulty of targeting counter-narrative content at a broad audience and remaining in the spotlight without content truly going “viral”. Despite currently occupying a prominent position in news coverage, issues surrounding extremism and radicalisation are still perhaps distant concerns to the majority of Canadians. ISD was unable to sustain the level of input required to engage consistently and effectively with audiences on social media through organic means. This has proved a challenge with previous counter-narrative initiatives, and will remain a significant obstacle to sustainability for future efforts without additional resourcing.

The reach and engagement data captured during the campaign is extensive and enables for in-depth analysis of many aspects of user demographics and online behaviours. Paid advertising enables further insights into audience preferences and provides a larger quantitative data set from which to draw solid conclusions. In short, it is relatively straightforward to ascertain who (in the broadest sense) is watching, liking or clicking, where they are doing it and for how long. What remains a challenge however is identifying the impact, if any, that counter-narrative campaigns could have on audiences’ attitudes and offline behaviour. The lack of qualitative data available (with the exception of user comments which were broadly encouraging but not necessarily a representative sample of users or their views) severely limits the possibilities for measuring this type of impact online without additional resources to apply more in-depth qualitative methodologies.

When evaluating the campaign against the original objectives it comfortably met the 10% target of views and interactions from target audiences, although considering the impact of paid advertising this objective in hindsight was not ambitious enough. The second objective was partially achieved, with video content being widely consumed but not shared. The campaign was highly successful in attracting positive media coverage to build awareness of the project, meeting the third objective. Finally, although sufficient data was collected to enable an in-depth analysis, considerable gaps remain in terms of the qualitative data that can be gathered and further testing and investigation is also required in some areas.
Since the launch ISD has made efforts to increase output from the project’s social media accounts, build links with similar projects and increase direct outreach to school boards and educational bodies. It has however proved difficult to sustain public interest in the project without new content outside of the spikes associated with intermittent news coverage.

**Campaigning Best Practice & Lessons Learned**

There are a number of **essential components** that should be central to any future online counter-narrative campaigns;

- Fundamentally a campaign requires a **memorable brand and strong content**, ideally in high enough quality for rebroadcast or embedding in news articles.

- Campaigns should have a **clearly defined strategy to meet set objectives**, regardless of whether it is aimed at raising awareness of an issue, resource or support service or competing more directly with extremist propaganda.

- Any strategy must take into account the campaign’s **target audiences** and consider how best to reach them in terms of **platforms, mediums and tactics**.

- Depending on availability, **resources need to be appropriately allocated** between paid and organic methods, including media support if possible.

- The campaign ought to have a **framework for evaluation in-built** from the start, with analytics services established to collect data.

- When completed the results should be examined to **assess performance**, inform future campaigns or ongoing engagement and **refine strategies and tactics**.

The analysis and evaluation of the Extreme Dialogue campaign did highlighted a number of improvements that could be made to the ongoing promotion and dissemination strategy for Extreme Dialogue, but that could also be applied to other online counter-narrative initiatives;

- **Paid Advertising**: When using paid advertising, spending should more evenly distributed over time in order to keep content relevant, to take advantage of any residual effects in terms of user reach and engagement and avoid over-exposing users to campaign ads. The impression frequency of ads should be closely monitored when paid advertising is running to ensure that users are not being alienated and spending is allocated effectively. However, depending on the time-scales and objectives of the campaign, heavier spending may be required for a short period to provide initial momentum and attract media coverage. This should be combined with greater use of organic outreach tactics to encourage user engagement among advertising audiences during the initial campaign but also in the long-term.

- **Organic Outreach**: As with previous campaigns run by ISD, higher levels of user engagement have proved elusive. This again points to the need for improved organic reach and more consistent interaction with users, both in terms of quality and volume. Organic promotion should be directly targeted at institutions and individuals that would benefit from or have an interest in the program and staggered over time to maintain a steady level of activity and retain audiences. Resource and time constraints should however to be considered in order to prioritise the types of tactics that are likely to be most effective.
• **Metrics:** The “quality” of certain metrics must be considered. Absolute numbers of views or impressions can be misleading representations of the success of a campaign unless they are qualified by view or retention rates and other engagement statistics. Comparisons across platforms should also be carefully considered as certain metrics are not necessarily equivalent. For example, costs per view on YouTube and costs per like on Facebook should not be seen as comparable metrics hence the significant differences in prices during the campaign. A view of a video on YouTube is a one off interaction with a user, whereas Facebook likes are more equivalent to subscribers on YouTube in that the user can then be reached directly with additional content in future. As this type of behaviour is more uncommon on YouTube, Facebook ads represent the more sustainable paid avenue for building an audience, although as the campaign shows this is no guarantee of consistent long-term engagement.

• **Media:** Media coverage provides excellent exposure but does not necessarily convert into views and engagement online. The most useful reports in this sense where those including the Extreme Dialogue films. Users are more likely to view content that is readily available rather than proactively seek it out elsewhere online. In future campaigns journalists should be encouraged to include embedded video where possible. Media coverage received since the launch has resulted in spikes in online interest on the website and social media platforms. Projects should therefore aim to continue conducting interviews and releasing new content as often as possible to maintain interest.
ISD’s experiences of counter-narrative campaigning to date have shown that building sustainable initiatives remains a considerable challenge. There are a number of avenues through which governments and social networks could support existing and future counter-narrative campaigns by civil society organisations;

There is a need for consistent in-kind advertising support from social media companies suitable for counter-narrative campaigning purposes. A small monthly in-kind budget would allow campaigns to maintain exposure and engagement at a moderate but consistent level. This could then be supplemented by organic methods to ensure that users attracted via advertising remain engaged. There are a number of strong existing counter-narrative campaigns but too often they do not have the necessary resources or funding to disseminate their message effectively to the appropriate audiences. Many of the more specific audiences, keywords or URLs that could be used to target counter-narrative content through advertising are unlikely to attract large sums in advertising revenue as they would not be in high demand to commercial advertisers.

Automated review processes for ads have caused issues on a number of platforms. Perhaps understandably, certain extremism related terms appear to be blocked from inclusion in ads (which have to be approved prior to going “live”). However, these are often the terms that are most likely to attract views or clicks, and in the right context (e.g. “Former neo-Nazi reveals how he renounced extremism”) can promote a positive counter-narrative message. Many of the ads used in the campaign had to be rephrased and diluted and as a result were less cost effective in generating clicks, views and likes than they could have been.

The social media companies could also offer technical advertising support by having a specifically employed member of staff to support counter-narrative initiatives from civil society organisations and individuals. This could include both ongoing training and support during campaigns to ensure ads are approved and targeting criteria, ad content and placement are cost-effective. Support from other private sector experts in campaigning, online advertising and media support would also help to maximise the impact of counter-narrative campaigns.

National and local government and law-enforcement agencies are often constrained in their ability to contribute to certain types of CVE programs, including counter-narrative campaigns. However, as Extreme Dialogue has shown, it is possible for governments and law-enforcement agencies to fund, support or endorse more up-stream initiatives. Civil society counter-narratives intended for more specific audiences (that may not consider the state credible) can be supported through training, capacity building or the sourcing of private sector partners to develop technical, production, communications or campaigning skills. As previously mentioned, there are ongoing challenges associated with qualitatively evaluating the impact of online counter-narrative content. Governments could therefore invest in researching methodological approaches that could fill this gap or provide support to existing initiatives aiming to measure their impact online. Governments should also continue to work with social networks to strengthen content removal processes when appropriate and disrupt existing online networks of extremists, recruiters and their supporters and encourage participation in counter-narrative production and campaigning from the private sector more broadly.
**GLOSSARY**

**Average Impression Frequency**: the number of times that an average user is exposed to an ad over a given time period.

**Average View Rate**: the percentage of users that watched the video after they first saw the associated ad.

**Bounce Rate**: the percentage of single-webpage visits or visits in which the user left the site from without interacting with the page.

**Click-through Rate**: the number of users that click on an ad out of the total number of users that are exposed to the ad.

**Drop-off rates**: the number of users interacting with a webpage in some way (e.g. scrolled down or clicked on embedded content) and then leaving the website.

**Earned View**: when a user views a video advert and then watches another video or videos on the associated YouTube channel.

**Embedded Content**: content that is hosted on one website but is then included on pages of other external websites (e.g. YouTube videos or Prezis).

**Engagement**: the level of user interaction with websites, online content, and social media accounts.

**Facebook Ads**: a text and image based advert that appears in pre-defined target audiences’ newsfeeds and side-bars.

**Facebook Boosted Posts**: posts that have been promoted to appear in selected target audiences’ news feeds.

**Impressions**: the number of times content or adverts appeared on users screens.

**Organic**: user reach or engagement on websites or social media platforms generated from searches and/or as a result of unpaid dissemination strategies and tactics.

**Reach**: the number of users exposed to content or advertising online.

**Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)**: the process of manipulating aspects of a website or webpage to maximise its visibility in the results of search engines (e.g. submitting the website to directory services, designing website architecture and content for search engine “crawlers”).

**YouTube Annotations & Banner Overlays**: Customisable text and/or image based “pop-ups” that can be added to owned videos or paid for through advertising.

**YouTube In-display Ads**: the advertised video thumbnail and text is displayed adjacent to other YouTube content in the side-bar, search results or in a banner overlay.

**YouTube In-stream Ads**: the advertised video is displayed prior to other YouTube content, with viewers unable to skip the video for a compulsory minimum of 5 seconds.

**YouTube Watch Page**: the unique YouTube webpage or URL that contains the vid
Extreme Dialogue: Project & Partners

Launched across Canada in February 2015, Extreme Dialogue aims to reduce the appeal of extremism among young people and offer a positive alternative to the increasing amounts of extremist material and propaganda available on the Internet and social media platforms.

A series of short documentary films tell the personal stories of Canadians profoundly affected by violent extremism; a former member of the extreme far-right and a mother whose son was killed fighting for ISIS in Syria. The films are accompanied by a set of educational resources that can be used with young people in classrooms or community settings and are intended to build resilience to extremism through active discussion and enhanced critical thinking.

Funded by Public Safety Canada via the Kanishka Project, the project is a collaboration between the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, film-makers Duckrabbit, the educational charity Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace and the SecDev Foundation.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) is an independent ‘think and do tank’ working with leaders in government, business, civil society and academia to develop cross-border responses to the major geo-strategic, social and security challenges of our time.

Combining research and policy advisory work, with innovative delivery programmes, specialised task forces, cross-sector partnerships and networks, ISD works to counter global extremism, bridge inter-communal divides and enhance Europe’s capacity to act effectively in the global arena.

The SecDev Foundation

The SecDev Foundation is a Canadian-based think-do tank that works at the cross-roads of security and development – because you can’t have one without the other.

We work with local stakeholders in countries and regions affected by conflict, insecurity and fragility in the Middle East, Latin America, Eurasia, Africa and Asia. We use evidence-based research to extend and empower local knowledge and resilience. Our aim is to build a better world through open intelligence and empowerment.