D.RAD – Exhibition Conceptual Framework

COMPLICATING THE NARRATIVE

(in a time of false simplicity)

(Working title)

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Background

One of the common threads woven through our project findings so far, and among all investigated organisations and individuals who engage with violent radicalisation, extremism and hate speech is the need to simplify a message of fear, pride and belonging. From nostalgic ideologies of British imperialism and collected notions of shared values and beliefs of authentic national identity and culture - to fear of losing such identities (- and a return in the imagination to a place that celebrated those values of community, solidarity and cohesion), similar messages emerge across all channels of extremism. The representation of self in all these contexts is essentially the same, namely that of a victim fighting back against a perceived threatening other.

The concept of the other highlights how groups and societies create a sense of belonging, identity, and social status by constructing social categories as binary opposites and is fundamental to the way in which we establish societal identity categories. Zygmunt Bauman argues that identities are set up as dichotomies: the opposite or deviation of the norm i.e. stranger is the other of the native. The enemy is the other of friend. Them is the other of 'us'.

> "The 'other' side depends upon the first side for its enforced isolation – and equally, the first depends on the other for its self-assertion" (Bauman 1991:14).

Such definitions of self and others have significance in that they are tied to rewards and punishment (which may be material or symbolic), with the prospect of benefit or loss as a consequence of identity claims (Okolie 2003:2). Elias and Scotson's Established and Outsiders (1964[1965]), offers an understanding of positive and negative community group identities and the 'forces' involved to deny equal legitimacy to individuals of 'othered' groups. This is because identity means very little without the 'other'. It is rarely claimed for its own sake and so, defining a group, defines others. In Goodall et al's (2017) discussion of religious based us-versus-them contexts, individual religious beliefs are argued as less important than religious group belonging. Religious group belonging has more prominence, more importance than individual religious beliefs. In a similar sense cultural, political, and national group identity has the potential to have a stronger hold over the individual than their own individual cultural, political, and national beliefs or identity.

The Stigma of Othering

We should understand othering as the stigmatising of one group by another. Stigma is often understood as a mark of questioned or shunned identity (or inhumanity) Goffman (1963). However, it can also be understood as a process of labelling, stereotyping, separating, discrimination, and status loss (Link and Phelan, 2001). In general, what stigma demonstrates is a means by which a group can become a representation of "otherness" to another group (McCordic, 2012). It represents the value and worth by stigmatisers about those they stigmatize, and in Bourdieuian terms, it is a form of symbolic power. Imogen Tyler examines the role of stigma politics in producing toxic climates of fear and hatred that are dividing communities and societies. She argues that state cultivated stigma changes the way people think about themselves and others – thus disrupting cohesion, corroding compassion, and weakening social solidarities (Tyler 2020).

Communities, housing estates, and even countries can be known to suffer 'Territorial stigmatisation' (Wacquant, 2007; Kyneswood 2019) in that these places are seen as a possible threat, rather than a place of belonging. Additionally, those who reside in these places are equally viewed as threats to 'stable belonging' (Kyneswood, 2019). Stigma is then something that people practice upon others.

The need or urge to condemn others, as evidenced by violent extremist groups, is a form of stigmatisation and can be witnessed within the often-derogatory characterisation of certain communities and negative cultural markers that mark members of the 'othered group' as dangerous (Bailey, G, 2016 in Bhopal, K. & Deuchar, R. 2016). This has also been evidenced within early D.Rad reports[1].

Engaging Emotion

People can be drawn into the stigmatising of others to an extent where it becomes all-encompassing and where the stigmatiser surrenders themselves to the emotional attachment of hating or disliking the stigmatised other. Individuals can also be drawn to radicalisation and extremist ideas because they are angry or fearful about something. However, the root cause of much societal anger and frustration: poverty, alienation, hopelessness, frustration, vulnerability, angst, confusion - all the ingredients for exploitation of extremist groups, is often shared with many others across all sectors of society – albeit not equally, nor with similar levels of emotional attachment. What drives these often socially held concerns toward more extremist views is what some scientists call the 3N influence: need, narrative and network (Bélanger et al. 2019; Kruglanski et al. 2018; Lobato et al. 2021). Through joining

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[1] https://dradproject.com/?page_id=2352

such groups, individuals can "address the basic need to be respected by others, they can establish a new narrative that gives their life meaning, and they also can experience the social benefits of being part of a network of people where their views are validated by others" (Gómez et al. 2021:2). Modelled on a minority of the best/ worst concept (Elias and Scotson 1994[1965]), and selectively choosing from narrow religious or nationalist doctrines, extremist groups rely on simple binary ideological them-us interpretations of their grievances.

On a psychological level, once anger and fear are involved in grievances – especially where a threat of a perceived other is involved, it is almost impossible to feel a certain curiosity about the other. The opportunity to think logically or even empathically about a situation one feels one is in is denied by a hyper-emotional state, and without the capability of rational thought, a very simplified 'us versus them' rhetoric becomes prominent – one that is resistant to change (Coleman, 2015). Once caught up in such hyper-emotional conditions the victim status takes prominence, leading to a polarised understanding of each side in relation to the other. These polarised views are simple, powerful and due to their simple, somewhat coherent nature, they easily gather support from others. A 'single story' (Ngozi Adichie2009) of the other side emerges that classifies the other as only one thing: A threatening other.

Simplifying the narrative

"Show a people as one thing – only one thing and that is what they become"

Chimamanda Ngozi (Adichie 2009)

Media reporting of related narratives, and state actors' public speech of extremist events equally over-simplify extremist narratives to an extent that causes a rise in fear within a general public. Polarised views garner support by appealing to simple narratives that provide simple solutions (Terhaag 2020). This type of reporting over-values the human capacity for reasoned logic while undervaluing the strength of emotion: pride, fear and the human need to belong (Ripley 2019). Most people naturally feel deeply uncomfortable in the midst of social conflict and have a desired need to feel better. A natural reaction to this (conflict) is to "reduce that tension by seeking coherence through simplification" (Coleman 2011). Superficial narratives succumb to this urge to simplify, 'gently warping reality until one side looks good and the other looks evil' (Ripley, 2019. para 38). This very categorical good-versus-bad perspective allows the 'good' to commit anything against the 'bad'.

In terms of social media communication and its use of informal and familiar imagery and music, fact and truth risk becoming a fusion of emotion and fact. Individuals become less able to detach emotionally from stories they are absorbing, leading to an increasingly emotional involvement - to the point where emotion and fact become interdependent of one another (Malcolm 2021). Social media

platforms accentuate this because their very nature, and their use of imagery, hashtags and emoticons have a symbolic social power able to create complex sets of ideas quickly and simply that can be shared widely across shared topics. Additionally, imagery and video in these contexts engenders a more emotionally orientated form of communication and allows 'ordinary' people to generate 'news' alongside professionals and experts, and where the 'simple/binary narrative engages viewers on an emotional level with stories and imagery that feel familiar and that they can relate to[2] - rather than facts and figures that can often sit at an academic distance from one's own lived experiences.

Online communities

As digital connectivity has increased, there have been concerns regarding increased isolation and individualism as people negotiate new meanings of self and communities Sherry Turkle (2011) has discussed fears that people immerse themselves in virtual worlds, isolating themselves to the point of being physically present in one space, yet mentally and emotionally engaged elsewhere. While this may be true for some avid users of digital media, it must also be acknowledged that the capacity for online digital connections to transcend space and time boundaries can be said to have contributed to the lengthening and deepening of social connectivity across the globe, and while this can be a source of good in that various social media platforms shape the sharing process through offering apps that allow families and friends to show that they are safe during events such as the Paris bombing or incidents of natural disaster, or more recently, the Covid pandemic, online communities can, on the other hand, act as echo chambers where people gather to listen to views from 'people like us'. This can be especially true within the online presence of more secret or closed extreme radicalisation and hate groups where the sharing of views is accompanied by the sharing of skills: 'to produce their own "alternative media" but also to recruit and train like-minded individuals'[3]

Unlike physical gatherings, where people must make plans, travel and 'turn-up', online activities can be accessed from almost anywhere. Because physical presence is not required, there can be, within certain groups, a lack of self-restraint present, and where there are an almost 'no rules' presence – where some individuals feel entitled to say things that they would not, in most cases, say to another person in the physical world.

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[2] D.Rad Report D5.1 https://dradproject.com/?page_id=2355

[3] See D.Rad report D5.1 (Ferenczi et al, 2021:5) https://dradproject.com/?publications=cultural-drivers-of-radicalisation-in-the-uk

Physical places of coming-togetherness

> *There is a fundamental reason why arts, sports and culture have a vital role to play in rescuing public space from a dangerous decline: because it is a part of that space. We don't only debate our values in parliament, the media or online, we do it in everyday life, through our cultural choices and artistic activities.*
>
> (Matarasso 2016:4).

Within understandings of challenging otherness, it is the everyday micro interactions that occur between individuals that are argued as the underpinnings of belonging. Realising that you find something of yourself in the other as well as something of the other in yourself can be a realisation that impacts deeply on our consciousness and outlook on the rest of our lives. This is of particular importance in contested communities because it embeds the realisation of connectivity within the microcosm of the everyday. When given the opportunity to be in creative spaces where reflection and reflexivity occur, people have the opportunity to interpret the world *together*, ultimately leading to alternative interpretations and reinterpretations that can challenge prejudicial stereotypes about 'others' - and ultimately facilitate a pathway, albeit at micro level, to more inclusive futures. This marks a stark difference between online communities, where individuals often congregate with people who share similar views, and where anonymity in online social exchange is a popular option. Getting to know others, generally insists on some form of introduction and a level of sharing of personal information between two or more people. Observing someone's body language, style of clothing, or even listening to someone's voice allows us to make connections with each other.

When we embark on activities together, we connect and learn about one another. Getting together to create, cook, dance, play, or even just chat, can be considered sources of vital information that provoke reflection that are necessary to the interdependencies that build healthy societies. This is not trivial, and it can be argued that thinking creatively and imaginatively can drive broader political imaginations (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016; Gauntlett, 2011). When given the opportunity to reflect and imagine *together*, human beings can be innovative *together*, discover (and voice) alternatives to existing assumptions - and, in this sense can plan better futures for themselves and others. In this sense, we can understand that knowledge production is not only historically, culturally, and geographically located, but also embodied in people themselves – in their minds and imagination (Pahl and Crompton 2018) and in the ways they express themselves.

These types of physical connections may not evoke the same immediate emotional responses as the online world – which utilises the symbolic social power of hash-tags, imagery and emoticons to share messages widely and quickly, however getting together in physical settings offers a more complex,

multidimensional and holistic view of others' narratives and experiences – while also providing opportunity for the 'Need, Narrative and Networking' influences found in online spaces (mentioned above on p2). There is something to be said for the slower paced, embodied experiences that take place in these types of physical gatherings that allows one to comprehend the more nuanced, complex and multi-factional elements of human existence.

Complicating the narrative in a time of false simplicity

As part of this exciting project, D.Rad will utilise the universal language of art as a means of exploring the concept of 'Complicating the narrative', while also engaging with findings from project reports. These works will culminate in an exhibition of works in Paris and Belgrade. The core concepts of the exhibition are that of complicating violent extremist binary narratives of the other: to disrupt toxic narratives and shine a light on commonalties between, and the complexities of, perceived them-and-us characters, including highlighting shared grievances, but also how the fear of the other feeds not only one's own imagined cause, but paradoxically, the 'other side' also. Complicating the narrative means finding and including the details that don't fit a coherent narrative — on purpose - and exploring how stories and narratives of the other can unite or divide us. It means exploring common spaces where tensions and harmonies exist simultaneously.

Our curated research exhibition aims to get at the slippery, difficult-to-determine characteristics of the binary narrative often portrayed by extremist hate groups, and to challenge the power relations of group identity while offering viewers an opportunity to reflect on the human capacity for pride *and* humility: the interdependence of involvement and detachment and being able to see oneself from a distance as one might be perceived by others (Malcolm, 2021). The exhibition artworks should challenge the single 'us-versus-them' story and unpick the overlapping narratives of individual and shared identity. Across all sectors of the global world, individuals share common interests: the clothes that they wear, the music they listen to, the movies they watch and the technologies they prefer. We have shared favourite authors, styles of clothing, favourite foods, and hobbies, and far from being situated in simple binary positions, human beings share commonalities in the very ways in which we live our lives. The exhibition should endeavour to compare, negotiate and reflect the self and others – and discover how others' worlds of meaning might differ, and/or correspond to one's own'.

Artistic Contributions

In short, the artists/artworks should endeavor to reinvent, re-vigour and complicate narratives around...

- Identity (group & self/othering)

- 'Getting-to-know-each other' in shared spaces, and the everyday micro interactions that occur between individuals that are argued as the underpinnings of belonging - including the harmonies and tensions that exist is such spaces.
- The ways in which different resources and environments (e.g. social media/physical spaces/common spaces) aid (or impede) the single story/binary narrative.
- Challenging the symbolic power of negative online imagery (hash-tags, emoticons, video, etc) to make use of these in everyday physical settings – for more inclusive purposes.

D.Rad will engage with artists to develop a showcase of works that explore the related concepts to counter the appeal of efforts to divide societies into 'us-versus-them'. <u>There is an underlying element of D.Rad, that explores how what happens in the physical spaces and communities affects the online (and vice-versa), so there is an emphasis that artists' should engage with 'real' in-person communities within their works.</u>

Artists will be asked to advance the ideas already woven through our reports and to interpret and communicate this curatorial conceptual framework to a broad international public. The media should aim at interpreting the concept in relation to our existing material, and can include painting, aesthetic interpretations with photography, collage, digital prints, poetry, music, film and collage techniques – and in collaboration with members of communities.

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