



Practice Sheet

Project Title

ExitUSA

Location

Country: The United States and Canada.

Duration

The programme was launched by Life After Hate in 2014 and is on-going.

Keywords

Disengagement - Exit programme - deradicalisation - far right - formers - interventions - counter-narratives

Background

ExitUSA is a programme of Life After Hate (LAH), a non-profit NGO incorporated in 2011. Founded and staffed by former members of the violent far-right extremist movement in the USA, LAH was, in part, inspired by Exit Sweden's success. Today, using ExitUSA as a vehicle, the LAH team assists individuals wishing to disengage from violent far-right extremism using a variety of online social media platforms and strategies. It actively reaches out to individuals who are involved in the extreme far-right and offer them one-on-one mentoring and a support group gathering people who have successfully disengaged.

Radicalised individuals are also often referred to LAH by professionals across sectors —from government officials to law enforcement to concerned family members—who hold different stakes in the counterterrorism and deradicalisation field(s). As such, the ExitUSA programme offers a chorus of credible voices and is uniquely positioned to connect radicalised individuals with the social services they need to become non-violent *formers*.

Objectives

The objective of ExitUSA is the deradicalisation and disengagement of individuals from the extreme far-right.

Target Group

The programme targets current and past members of far-right extremist groups.

Strategy and activities

Intervention

When a person joins a violent extremist movement, they ‘excommunicate’ themselves from their existing social ties (friends, family and mainstream society) and enter the new social environment of the extremist group.

One of the foremost difficulties in leaving an extremist group behind is abandoning an entire identity a second time; the radicalised individual disengages from their primary social group, but this time, there is no alternative group waiting to accept them. The friends, family, and other social ties the radicalised individual held previously are often reluctant to welcome them back before trust is re-established.

This leaves the radicalised individual in a dangerous void with no significant social ties to lean on during the deradicalisation process.

In this space, the pain of loneliness often feels worse than the pain and dysfunction of belonging to the extremist group. LAH, by way of its ExitUSA programme, has developed a moderated and vetted online community and protocol to provide a safe and supportive space *with* others on the same journey.

This supportive, non-judgemental approach allows the individual to reconnect with their own humanity and work through misconceptions or experiences that may have played a role in their radicalisation, which in turn inspires the individual to take responsibility for past wrongs and reforge healthy ties with mainstream society.

The ExitUSA programme, akin to Exit Sweden, has been so successful that it is inspiring individuals who now want to contribute to the Exit community by becoming mentors or educated professionals with the skills to work in countering violent extremism and/or disengagement and deradicalisation.

Social Media

LAH has developed a social media strategy utilising online videos, social media platforms, and personal intervention (online and offline) that is designed to have the target audience question their beliefs and involvement in their respective extremist group. The lure of these groups is often based on fantasy, unrealistic ideals and false promises. The strategy is designed to provoke disillusionment and inspire self-reflection leading to a desire to exit the extremist group and to withdraw from violent action and environments.

Research

In 2015, LAH forged a partnership with the Research Triangle Institute International (RTI International)¹, as well as with clinical psychiatrists Drs Pete Simi and Kathy Blee, who are leading specialists in extremism, to engage in a National Institute of Justice-funded study. Nearly 50 former far-right extremists were interviewed with the aim of supporting the ExitUSA programme in its disengagement work and to develop a pilot assessment tool that LAH and others can use to assess what a radicalised individual needs in terms of support and social services to successfully disengage from violent far-right extremism (and potentially

¹ Based in North Carolina, RTI International is one of the world's leading research institutes. A non profit independent organisation, it is dedicated to “improving the human condition.”

other types of violent extremism in the future). This research project will reach completion in 2017.

Partners

Institute for Strategic Dialogue
Against Violent Extremism Network
National Institute of Justice (research arm of the US Department of Justice)
Research Triangle Institute, International
Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)
Jigsaw (formerly Google Ideas)
Facebook
Twitter

Evaluation

In the summer of 2016, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue released a study called “The impact of counter-narratives: Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact.” The study evaluated a pilot project using counter messaging and social media involving LAH/ExitUSA and two other NGOs with differing strategies. The LAH/ExitUSA campaign was deemed the most effective, largely due to the rapid response time to social media engagement as well as the content of the messages.

The report concluded: *“By implementing a methodology that incorporates partnerships, curation, content creation, deployment, and evaluation, this study demonstrates that the use of counternarrative messaging with measurable impact is replicable and scalable, though not without difficulty. Working with multiple partners and campaigns, we now have a much better idea of the interplay between key factors such as geography, language, ideology, audience, and media platforms.”*

Further information

Websites of Exit USA: <http://www.exitusa.org/> and Life After Hate: <http://www.lifefterhate.org/>

This practice sheet was updated in June 2016.