POSSIBILITIES TO COUNTERACT
EXTREMIST DISCOURSE

• • ● • •

ACTION AND PROTECTION FOUNDATION

POSSIBILITIES TO COUNTERACT
EXTREMIST DISCOURSE

POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

ACTION AND PROTECTION FOUNDATION

CONTENTS

•••••

POSSIBILITIES TO COUNTERACT
EXTREMIST DISCOURSE

Introduction

Action and Protection Foundation, media researcher Gábor Bernáth and the Political Capital Institute conducted a research project together titled »*The renewal of human rights (tolerant, democratic) reasoning and making it appealing to the young by means of humor, irony and facts*«. The project was financed by the Norwegian NGO Fund and was completed in April 2016.

Within the framework of the project we examined what possibilities there are to encourage non-violent and non-exclusive public discourse and how to make it more appealing. We identified various strategies for reasoning against extremist speech, and conducted online platform tests. Our project does not suggest that communication and reasoning are able to solve all social problems, but we are sure that the communication processes of public discourse could both help and hinder the solutions of social problems.

We conducted focus group discussions with a number of affected groups. During the over 30 group talks, hundreds of individuals — including young people, employees of NGOs, researchers, journalists, creative professionals, conservative thinkers and activists of groups that are primary targets of discrimination — shared their opinions. The discussions covered issues such as below:

- why does acceptance to discriminatory reasoning grow?
- how much anonymity in comments sections and Web 2.0 communication tools contribute to this growth and to the spread of violent communication? What are the relevant and useful answers to these problems?
- what are the possibilities and what are the limits to the use of legal-rational arguments against exclusion?
- are there any advantages of social inclusion that could be highlighted? and if there are, how could these be communicated?
- what is the platform for positive and emotion-based reasoning? how and where could examples and traditions of inclusion and solidarity be shared?
- to what extent is it possible to make exclusion look ridiculous, challenge prejudices and show their discrepancies?
- are there any communication strategies that participants should avoid because they are ineffective, or even harmful?
- what is needed to make non-discriminatory communication appealing to the young, and to the wider public?
- what would be the possible areas of this?

Based on the information gained from the group talks, we developed different user profiles for reasoning, and set up some tools and strategies for giving counter-arguments. We identified four types of reasoning profiles: 1) rationally offensive/declarative 2) rational questioner/sarcastic, 3) emotionally offensive/declarative, 4) emotional questioner/sarcastic.

The user profiles and reasoning tools were tested on online platforms and also through short campaigns. Altogether 54 tests were carried out on online comment sections. The research was unique due to its real time testing. Our main question was how efficient this profiles and tools could be when reasoning against extremist expressions and arguments. Our preliminary project report and project closure report summarize the findings of our research. The present document is a shortened version of these reports.

We mainly focus on considerations that subscribe to the principles of those who conducted the research, and ideas they believe to be useful for practical purposes.

Reasons that lead to the intensification of hate speech

Participants of the examinations gave very different explanations to the intensification of hate speech in Hungary.

- Discriminatory (especially anti-Semitic and anti-Roma) speech has become a form of rebellion, the language of anti-establishment speech, and a means of defusing tension and expressing discontent, especially among young people.
- Human rights based reasoning that stresses tolerance has lost its persuasive force among young people and has instead become an anti-norm.
- Political processes during the second half of the 2000s (e.g. crippled left wing, deepening political crisis, growing popularity of Jobbik) favored the spread of extremist views.

- The lack of an alternative community that could set different goals and offer different action plans is also a problem. Many believe that the lack of norms and cultural barriers (e.g. in case of sexist or anti-Semitic speech), and the lack of personal development and knowledge also contribute to the intensification of hate speech.
- According to certain participants, taboos and stigmatization helped the spread of extremist views.
- Structural problems of the state, which made it impossible for the government to perform their tasks and duties, has also led to the uncertainty and discontent of the citizens, and therefore to the spread of extremist views.

The role of the media

- According to participants, the media should not treat extremist individuals, and news and issues related to extremism as taboos. These should also be dealt with, but it is important to deal with them appropriately.
- Not only should the media act as an intermediary, but it should also provide people with backgrounds and contexts. It should provide help for people to interpret

the information they receive. One of the most important roles of media is, therefore, to unravel information, instead of simplifying and solely telling about stories, it should thoroughly explore them.
- The media should bear in mind it has several responsibilities: direct influence on public discourse, on word choice, and on creating and reinforcing inclusive language.

Online debate platforms and trolling: blessing or curse?

- Although online platforms that allow people to participate and enter into dialogue are important debate forums, they are the hotbeds of extremist speech and personal remarks.

- It is a sign of the spread and acceptance of extremist speech that earlier extremist views were mainly expressed anonymously, but nowadays many agree to share their discriminatory and aggressive views with their names published as well.

- Some of the main characteristics of internet platforms are the impersonality, the lack of direct contact, and the fact that interaction is limited to written communication. As a result, there comes *"the louder, the more visible"* principle, which primarily influences the outcome and tone of online debates.

- It is debated whether extremist comments should be responded, but we are surely no longer able to quarantine these views.

- The handling of *"trolls"* (who are an imprecise, not clearly definable category of people) is also controversial, yet the majority of participants stated that they should be strongly challenged because most of the time they get scared when they face counterattacks. Furthermore, becoming *"victims of a troll"* may also activate people when they feel other members of the forum sympathize with them.

- A clear lesson learnt from the group talks was that extremist views appearing on online platforms could only be combated if users and/or their opinions moved from anonymity, if there were platforms where users must assume their identities and take up greater responsibilities.

- Another solution would be that previously clarified rules of conduct are developed and are obeyed (e.g. filtering racist comments).

- It is important to note, however, that an extensive restriction of the online freedom of expression would only fuel such types of discourse that would call it *"censorship"* and that would place individuals spreading hate speech in the roles of victims.

Who shall we address?

- During an online debate, the aim is not to convince racist commenters and trolls, but to speak to the passive majority.
- The purpose of reacting to extremist comments is to deliver alternative opinions so that it would not seem that only extremist opinions exist, or those are the dominant and acceptable. Even in the case of taking action

beyond online platforms, people standing in the middle are the main target group: in order to counteract discriminatory speech, we should not convince extremists, but should speak to and obtain the *"silent majority"*. We need topics and initiatives that people like and would voluntarily join, through which we should gradually reach more and more people.

The methodology of testing

In view of the findings of the group discussions, we wanted to test how our reasoning strategies worked in online comment sections. We took three factors into consideration when choosing the online platforms, these were the following:

- the comment section should be active in general, there should be a lot of comments
- all positions of the political spectrum should be represented, but extremist sites are excluded
- commenters should be able to post without logging into their Facebook accounts.

Using the above factors, we decided to conduct tests on Mandiner, 444 and Origo. In the case of 444, new commenting principles have been introduced lately which made testing impossible.

In our research, testers were individuals who tested one of the reasoning strategies in the comment sections. We had looked for people with mature personalities, experience in commenting and reasoning against extremist views. Before starting

their work, testers had received preparation and been showed the different reasoning strategies.

All testers were accompanied by a supervisor, someone who decided on which article had to be commented and who followed the comment threads.

At the beginning, we planned to have comment threads on issues regarding the Jews and the Roma. However, due to the continuous presence of the refugee crisis, in autumn 2015, we decided to include that, too.

Testing was mainly possible in matters regarding the migrants since these articles were less moderated. Moreover, many people were interested in the issue so the number of comments under articles were enough for longer debates to start. Commenting on articles about the Holocaust was usually not allowed. There were only few writings related to the Roma and due to current events, only few people were interested in them.

Strategies of reasoning

Based on the group talks, we took two dimensions into consideration when we developed different reasoning profile models. The first dimension was whether the profile user applied rational or emotional reasoning, the other dimension studied whether statements or questions dominated the reasoning. As a result, four types of user profiles were identified:

1. Rationally offensive/declarative

The reasoning of this profile model is based on facts, data, retrievable and supportable figures. It sheds light on and corrects the logical and factual problems of the other side's reasoning. It does not react to personal comments (or it only states that it would not do so), but it jumps on every single little fault of the other party. It argues and supports its arguments with links and figures when possible. The aim is that the opponent loses their arguments, repeat themselves (to which the tester's reaction would be that *"it has already been discussed"*) react with a rather emotional comment (*"because!"*), or simply stop commenting.

2. Rational questioner/sarcastic

One of the main characteristics of this profile model is intellectual and intellectualizing reasoning. Comments are made as reactions to extremist comments and their aim is to convince the silent and dubious majority. The user profile is intellectual/rational when it uses linear and rational arguments, figures and facts. It is intellectualizing when the comments submitted are intentionally lecturing the opponent and try to make them look anti-intellectual. It is reactive when it responds to content brought up by the other side. This profile's

reasoning is supported by data, figures, facts and research results. It is likely to compare knowledge/ rational thinking with superstitions, prejudice, conspiracy theories and stupidity. It would not stigmatize and condemn the other side itself, but would condemn their thinking. It builds on the stigmatizing power of words like *"superstition"*, *"prejudice"*, *"conspiracy theory"*. It applies (false) Socratic questioning in order for the opponent to find the solution, and by that to show how implausible their reasoning were.

3. Emotionally offensive/declarative

As opposed to other profile models, testers of this one try to have an impact on others by sharing mainly personal emotions, experiences and beliefs. Obviously, there are no user profiles that use only one type of reasoning, but for the sake of testing, our testers try to avoid rational reasoning and asking questions. In their reasoning, they come up with personal examples and try to present positive role models. They refer to basic values that are difficult to challenge. The primary goal of testers with both emotional profile models is to make those who empathize and agree with them enter into dialogue. Other important aims of the reasoning are to create a sober majority in the comment section and win those who are uncertain. It is more important to carefully obtain uncertain users than to convince extremists.

4. Emotional questioner/sarcastic

Instead of rational reasoning, comments made by testers with this profile model focus on emotions. The arguments try to influence emotions, convince others through their feelings, or increase their

doubts. The reasoning does not use logic, but instead shares personal feelings, experiences, beliefs, positive examples, role-models, basic values, persons and authorities with good reputation.

Typically, it only operates with questions and the use of irony. It is not declarative but questioning, it does not use proactive, but reactive tools.

Tools and techniques for online reasoning

Based on information acquired from the group talks, we set up some tools, techniques and basic principles for online reasoning, then we tried to

involve these into our strategies. The following is a summary of all these.

Majority vs. minority, community and solidarity

- It is important to provide extended frameworks that are beyond individual excluded groups that incorporate many of these groups and are able to make their issues the issues of many. This is important because the majority of people think that even though people who take action against discrimination are protecting minorities, they do forget to highlight that doing the same would be beneficial for the majority, too, and that attacks on minorities are attacks on the majority as well.

- Messages should be phrased in a way that stresses the interests of the majority. A possibility to represent and create majorities is the use of communication that builds on non-violence, as those who promote violence are always in minority.
- It is necessary that tolerant and solidarity-based attitude is integrated into the *"values of being Hungarian"*. This could be done by simple messages like *"Home is where rights are"*.

"Detours"

Many believe that counterarguments need so-called *"detours"*. In other words, it is also important to present arguments that are not directly targeted at discriminatory speech or its typical contents.

- Redefining what it means to be *"Hungarian"*, deconstructing the interpretation that being Hungarian depends on one's origin. It is not important who were Hungarians, the focus should be on how we differentiate between Hungarians and non-Hungarians, e. g. how could someone be a persecuted Jew at the time of their emigration, and suddenly be Hungarian again when they became famous. A positive content of *"being Hungarian"* manifested as pride in relation to the Son of Saul, but it did not convince the anti-Semitic commenter:

> Tester (Emotional declarative): I am proud of Hungary for winning an oscar [sic]. If our national football team won, I would also be proud. I would not care about how many of our football players play abroad, how much football players earn, whether we have naturalized African football players, what nationality the referee is, or who the wife of the fifa [sic] chairman is. I would simply be happy for the victory! As I am now happy for the oscar [sic]!
>
> Commenter #1: And we are especially happy for the much-suffered Jewish race winning the Oscar for us.:) for the second time.

- Presenting multi-identities: why would I not be European, if I am Hungarian? why would I not be patriotic just because I believe in multiculturalism?

- Reinforcing the need for doubts: arguing that nothing should be believed straight away, we should always consider the possible reasons and interests behind things.
- Presenting the correlation between democratic values and well-being, referring to basic values: those democracies are successful in Western Europe which consider social solidarity a value. One of our testers with an emotional declarative profile encountered a comment about the Pázmány Péter Catholic University's course on the Holocaust: *"Holocaust seminar: let us turn Jesus on his head."* In the comment thread that followed, our tester referred to different basic values on a number of occasions:

> Tester (Emotional declarative): Wherever you turn Jesus in your mind, I think he is be happy that there is a seminar where people are taught about severe violence and inhumanity. This is how it could be prevented that such things happen again!
>
> Tester (Emotional declarative): I believe Jesus is in favor of love and is against hatred and exclusion. We may argue about data, about events and their causes ... but there is only one thing to do with barbaric brutality, condemn it. In my opinion, a seminar with such, among other, goals is especially "Jesus-like", or let's say humane.

Commenters remained resistant to these values. They referred incoherently to various parts of the New Testament, they questioned whether they talked of the same Jesus, and made anti-Semitic remarks.

- Talking of the more violent public discourse and state failures.

The "silent majority"

- It is key to represent a point of view that the *"silent majority[1]"* also accepts, and to use techniques that create majorities. It is especially important to encourage this group to action and involvement.

- In order to reach this group, it may be necessary to avoid submitting political content: politics should be left behind, we should escape from its traps, we should not react to political messages, to political players, debates should be held on a different level. Our testers tried to use reasoning free of political messages. Most of the time, these comments, like the following two examples, were not responded:

> Commenter #1: The most reasonable and secure place for the accommodation center would be Gyurcsány's villa, which is enclosed by a 5-meter fence.
>
> Tester (Emotional questioner): Do you think it is that simple? You would let it depend on such and such politicians? Can we not just separate this from politics?
> No response
>
> Tester (Emotional questioner): Isn't it terrible that it is always politics that determine how we see this issue? Refugees, at least until their asylum claim is assessed, should be accommodated, don't you think? This attitude makes us Europeans, Christians, and members of an international community, right?

The question suggesting not to mix politics with the issue did not receive any responses. A commenter questioned whether refugees really flee.

Some of our testers sometimes received support and agreement. In the end, however, extremist commenters proved to be stronger and louder, and they took the silence of our testers and their supporters as victory.

- Inactivity and indifference from the silent majority's side are usually not manifestations of support, but of fear and insecurity. This is why, in the name of humanity, it is important to include references to fair treatment. Our testers drew attention to aspects of fair treatment and being humane especially in comment threads concerning migrants, yet these were ineffective most of the time. The majority of reactions to these claimed that *"those who do not behave appropriately",* those who break laws (cross borders, which is believed to be prohibited) cannot expect fair treatment.

---

1 Individuals who feel apathetic towards or have fears of public discourse, and who, probably due to the lack of alternatives, would rather silently *"observe"* happenings, instead of commenting on them.

Arguing positions, language use

- If the aim is to convince our partners in dialogue, it is important to start off with a level playing field, to start arguing from equal positions. Arguing from a hierarchically superior, disdainful position could be counterproductive, which only increases the distance between the partners.

- Instead of using the popular *"we"* and *"they"* positions, we should change to a *"you and I"* mode so that everyone would talk in first person singular, about themselves and their own opinions. This would make opinions more authentic, reduce the amount of conflicts and allow deeper understanding.

Consistent and authentic reasoning

- One of the main characteristics of extremist reasoning is the simplification of topics into binary options (see for example the division of society into individuals with *"anti-migrant"* and *"pro-migrant" stances"*).

- Delivering a subtle point of view and criticizing oversimplification may often be successful. Subtleties include that debates go beyond introducing the positive and the negative sides of an issue.

- A reasoning is authentic if it represents the everyday reality, as well as the fact that it has downsides. Responses to discriminatory comments that do not react to the problems and situations the discriminatory comment brought up, therefore the reaction is against the first commenter's reality, may be counterproductive.

- Besides mentioning negative events and putting them into the right context, it is also

  important to acknowledge positive examples.

- It is key to highlight that not only contradicting views that want to win over one another exist, but there are overlaps and differences that may well coexist.

- It should be kept in mind that the aim is not to be able to love everybody, but to be able to live together and cooperate pragmatically. It is not necessary to completely accept others, but it is important to show respect towards them. Instead of talking about the traumas of the 20th century, people nowadays compete with each other by providing mutually exclusive ideas. Yet, common national history should rather be developed, there should be no narratives pursuing hatred, but different opinions that can coexist and are able to provide a common national framework to the society.

Positive examples, reference persons, authorities[2]

- Reliable reasoning needs positive examples and people that help to justify the denial of some false claims.

- A point of reference could be referring to Christian values, or presenting the Pope as an opinion shaper.

---

2   persons accepted as sources of reliable information on a subject

Lecturing used as a reasoning technique

- An absolute rejection of the other party's opinion and calling them *"stupid"* are ineffective ways of reasoning, and are counterproductive. On the other hand, in the case of extremist opinions, they may be useful to obtain the audience.

- It is much more effective to present and explain counterexamples. Against an offending remark, assertive communication would be powerful: sharing how we feel when we read such comments, but instead of giving our opinion, we would criticize the style of the comments.

Symbols and buzzwords

- Adding positive content to *"being Hungarian"*, and deconstructing the myths created by people with prejudice. These would also help the spread of positive values, which everybody wants to connect to, rather than the present frustration and tension.
- Identities should not be *"anti-identities"* that are against certain things (e.g. anti-Racist), but should be *"pro identities"* that are in favor of a certain view.
- A positive content of *"being Hungarian"* manifested as pride in relation to the Son of Saul, but it did not convince the anti-Semitic commenter:

> Tester (Emotional declarative): I am proud of Hungary for winning an oscar [sic]. If our national football team won, I would also be proud. I would not care about how many of our football players play abroad, how much football players earn, whether we have naturalized African football players, what nationality the referee is, or who the wife of the fifa [sic] chairman is. I would simply be happy for the victory! As I am now happy for the oscar!
>
> Commenter #1: And we are especially happy for the much-suffered Jewish race winning the Oscar for us.:) for the second time.

Tools and techniques to be used outside the online platforms

- Reducing the manifestations of extreme speech is not plausible merely through online platforms. It is vital to rebuild society networks and social connections, provide goals, present examples to follow, and develop personal motivation. Stimulating the areas of solidarity may also reach and provide help to those who belong to mainstream society.
- To that effect, it is necessary to make changes and create programs in local communities as well.

Building communities, encouraging commitment and activism

- The development and maintained network of small groups with strong identities are necessary for people to be able to experience

and live their identities, to fight their fears of a possible loss of identity, and to stop thinking of certain identities as threats.

Involvement and encouragement to action

- One of the strongest manifestations of commitment is taking action. Therefore, those are the successful ways of involvement that stimulate real activity and make it possible

for supporters to actively commit themselves to a case. Many believe that challenging racist expressions is completely ineffective, and they find action as the common denominator.

Low-effort activities as the steps of commitment

- Activities that supporters may join with little effort (which may grow with time) are needed to be able to reach as many people as possible. Not only does commitment strengthen our

identity, it also comes with new relations, security and success, which reduce the personal causes and the frustration that are likely to lead to extremist views.

The presentation and enhancement of positive role models

- Besides presenting low-effort activities to foster people's involvement, it is necessary to have *"someone who sets off and others can follow"* (*"dynamics of an attentive crowd"*: someone needs to start taking action for the others to become active, too). For this reason, it appears that human rights defenders may need to stop asking society to put themselves in minorities' (refugees, the Roma, the gay) shoes.
- It was mentioned a number of times during the group talks that this can be counterproductive. It would be easier to identify with people who are more similar to us: someone from mainstream society

who lives with a refugee, a helper, non-Roma parents who adopted a Roma child.
- Our testers often applied the strategy that they acknowledged the negative experiences of or they partially agreed with a commenter, but they also firmly represented their own beliefs in their posts. Usually, there were commenters who agreed with our testers and supported their views. We do not know whether this was the result of the reasoning strategy or not, but it is definitely an important finding. Other commenters were only moved by expressions of vociferous opinions, but not by the partial agreements to their extremist views.

Local identities

- In the midst of appreciating local identities, it is important to form and influence local public opinion. Firstly, it is because the highest chance to encounter different opinions is in local public discourse (locally we do not connect along ideological divisions). Secondly, it is because there are indeed examples of inclusive local identities (e. g. Pécs is a proud *"multicultural and inclusive city"*). For this to be successful, it is necessary to find and support local opinion formers.

Filtering and dealing with personal tension

- Fostering understanding, filtering and facing intrapersonal frustration are the keys to fighting hate speech. To this end, protected spaces, awareness, professional help, self-reflection, problem solving, stress management and assertive communication competence are needed.

Counterproductive expressions/arguments

- The use of stigmatization, calling others *"stupid"*, contempt and talk from a hierarchically superior position fail to provide room for debate and increase the distance between parties.
- Attacking the other side's identity, even if it is that of the majority, is ineffective. For example, *"Hungarians also rape their daughters"* is not a successful strategy to persuade people that not only the Roma commit crimes.
- The words *"racist"* and *"tolerant"* do not have such strong meanings in wider circles that carry a persuasive force. It would be more effective to talk about positive values that could be associated with Hungarians.
- The role of being a human rights defender, smart and expecting evokes negative feelings in many. Using simplified language and talking of values that are closer to an average citizen are more important.
- Counterarguments should not be presented from elite positions or that of power.

Findings

The main difficulty during testing was the lack of real debates, which also posed a threat to the effectiveness of the testing itself. The moderation of comment sections was also problematic and significantly hindered our research.

Out of the articles on issues regarding the refugees, the Roma and the Jews, articles about the refugees generated the most activism from the audience. Online platform users are very much interested in the issue today, and they usually express their concerns not only with anger but by supporting them with reasons. It took our testers by surprise that the usual response was not *"splutter"*, but actual arguments were presented on a number of occasions.

According to testers, it is key to have a calm tone that is not displaying arrogance: testers were able to find common denominators with people of less extremist views, and they were able to improve the awareness that people do not represent any political or a common liberal point of view of many, but themselves. This awareness also included a realistic view of western societies and the faults of their leaders. We always need to show respect towards our debate partners, even if they do not show respect towards us — by doing so, we basically win half the battle. With regards to rational reasoning, we should not lecture others, because even in the event the other party realizes their errors, it may result in alienation. Feelings of shame would appear to evoke rejection.

Our testing showed that our ideas of the discussions and debates taking place on online platforms do not correspond to reality. Debates usually took long to start, and sometimes comments were made

hours later to a post. Therefore it was indeed hard to debate on an issue. However, when a debate did start, it was not a debate of the community, but just an argument of two commenters. It was rare that a number of people were reacting to each other's post, it was more common that one person received comments from many other people.

A number of reasoning tools and techniques were identified during the group talks, and were also tried by our testers — within the possibilities of their profiles. In general, it would seem these techniques *"did not work"* with extremist commenters. Due to the well-known characteristics of prejudices, extremists were resistant to both rational and emotional based reasoning, and they did everything in order not to give in to others' opinions or change their opinions.

Testers also confirmed the finding of the group talks that it is especially important to remain calm and avoid being arrogant when commenting. On the other hand, it did happen that some commenters misunderstood our testers with rational reasoning profiles, and took the facts presented by the testers as manifestations of being arrogant and pretentious.

Some conclusions of the research are also able to establish new research opportunities. The most significant is to conduct research on Facebook, as testing profile models on the social networking site would be very useful. In the comment sections of different online platforms, the majority of comments are made by the same few people. They are filtered by the fact that registration is required to the sites to be able to post comments, while another filter is interest in reading the press. On the other hand, in different Facebook groups, certain

news items receive a flood of comments free from limits and inhibitions. It would obviously be more challenging to develop profiles but a much less filtered area could be tested.