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This paper presents the outcomes of the 2014 Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Symposium: Partnering to Build Solutions, organised by the Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (PICT), Macquarie University. This event developed the practical and conceptual tools and context needed to provide a unique space within with diverse stakeholders from government, industry, community and academic worked together to build whole-of-society solutions to five current CVE issues. Three overarching themes emerged during the planning and delivery of the Symposium: the validity of a robust model of transdisciplinary engagement; the role of impact and the challenging but critical requirements across the CVE space for evaluation. It is argued that the model of transdisciplinary engagement utilised during the symposium is one best suited to address the latter two issues of impact and evaluation.

Keywords: countering violent extremism; transdisciplinary engagement; public–private partnership

Introduction

The genesis of this paper are the outcomes generated during the Countering Violent Extremism Symposium: Partnering to Build Solutions, organised by the Centre for Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism (PICT), Macquarie University and held in Sydney, Australia on 11–12 September 2014. The two-day round-table symposium sought to build on the collaborative systems approach that forms the bedrock of the work carried out by PICT. It also further developed the unique space within the countering violent extremism (CVE) environment initiated by Curtin University, along with its partners People against Violent Extremism, Hedayah Institute and Macquarie University, during the CVE Research Conference held in November 2013, Perth, Australia. Under the direction of Dr Anne Aly, this earlier event sought to create a much needed space that combined the show-casing of innovative new research with opportunities for diverse networking in order to generate future work programmes at policy, academic and practical levels (see Aly, 2015).

This paper will explore three critical themes that emerged during the planning and delivery of the PICT symposium: the validity of a robust model of transdisciplinary engagement; the role of impact; and the challenging but critical requirements across the CVE space for evaluation. In doing so, the authors argue that solutions for the latter two issues of impact and evaluation are only ever likely

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to emerge through the active involvement of diverse stakeholders within structured holistic frameworks as exemplified during the PICT symposium. This model of engagement drew upon the underpinning values of Systems thinking (Grynkewich & Reifel, 2006; Hodgson, 2012; Manni & Cavana, 2007; Schoenenberger, Schenker-Wicki, & Beck, 2014) and best practice academic and practitioner engagement (Baker, 2013).

We argue that the increasingly interconnected and complex issues involved in CVE including issues around impact and evaluation cannot be solved using singular or even bi-level partnerships. Instead active interdependence is required between stakeholders who view difference and inter- and intra-tensions as a competitive advantage as opposed to an obstacle to be worked around (Plum, 2008).

The model of engagement

CVE represents a deeply contested label and indeed field of research. It is deeply contested in relation to the formulation of a widely accepted strategic definition and, more importantly, to the identification of the disciplines, experts and areas of policy that should be explicitly and implicitly involved in the development, planning and delivery of related activity. Despite these fundamental challenges, incidents such as the recent Martin Place siege in Sydney and the attacks in France against Charlie Hebdo employees and a Kosher supermarket, continue to raise the profile and importance placed on CVE policies, narratives and initiatives. This places greater strain on the different areas of policy, practice and research engaged with the fundamental questions that sit within the CVE environment. It is within such highly interconnected and complex areas, that King and Schneider (1991) highlight the dangers of pursuing solutions in isolation, noting that such activity is likely to "obscure unavoidable unintended consequences arising from the interconnectedness of everything" (pp. 183–192). Paralleling approaches taken within the UK and Canada, the Australian Government recognises the inherent problems of singular approaches to CVE, instead seeking to foster cooperation and engagement with different partners. The *Living Safe Together: Building Community Resilience to Violent Extremism* website (Australian Government, 2015, para. two), the Australian Federal Government's main online presence addressing countering violent extremist narratives, notes that it is actively "working with the research community to strengthen our understanding of the causes of violent extremism and to support us in guiding our countering violent extremism program of work". The same website also notes that efforts against violent extremism represent a "long-term challenge requiring the combined efforts of governments, community groups and individuals". However, often engagement remains relatively two-dimensional with an emphasis on consultation between known entities rather than the formation of a transdisciplinary synergy with its potential to generate innovative knowledge production (Hodgson, 2012).

There is little doubt that models of transdisciplinary engagement pose significant challenges, particularly when dealing with a complex series of world challenges as presented by the CVE environment. In particular, tensions may arise from adopting a multidiscipline perspective highlighting the potential for the misalignment of values resulting from different approaches and underlying ontology's associated with different orientations within disciplines, organisations, institutions and individuals. While these challenges are certainly problematic when managed effectively these

same tensions can also create the innovative creative spaces that are required to address the multidimensional issues contained within the CVE environment. What is required, as noted by Hodgson (2012) is the creation of conditions that enable the "trans" to take place, conditions that demand thoughtful design and appropriate facilitation (p. 519). The academic literature, particularly from within the business, management and risk communities, highlights a number of useful approaches that seek to capture the conditions recommended by Hodgson, including world systems and social capital modelling. Both these models place emphasis on the importance of fostering bonding and bridging relationships with multiple actors, the presence of strong facilitation and the development of shared understandings of the problem space.

Positioning itself within these types of holistic and dynamic approaches to transdisciplinary engagement, the PICT symposium sought to a creative space where the strategic holistic commitment, along with the inherent tensions it engenders, could be harnessed so as to foster the development of dynamic insight, positioned at the operational level, that offered practitioners, academics and policy-maker's substantial pathways that could easily be translated into novel research proposals and/or incorporated into actual policy and community-based initiatives. The framework developed during the planning stages of the symposium maximised the opportunity for experts to actively participate in effective and rigorous debate focused specifically towards the formulation of clearly defined future-facing outcomes, including the identification of knowledge gaps and opportunities to develop more effective, policy, strategy and community-based initiatives.

Five areas of focus

PICT identified five principal stakeholders: the Attorney General's Department (AGD); NSW Police Counter-Terrorism and Operations Group; NSW Community Relations Commission; Massey University (New Zealand); and Curtin University. In collaboration with PICT, each stakeholder identified a critical issue related to the CVE challenges they were currently facing. Over a number of meetings the critical issue was expanded to include a series of detailed questions and most importantly desired outcomes for the stakeholder.

Each issue was debated and discussed by a group of leading experts drawn from across policy, practitioner and community domains during five sessions over a two-day period. Noting the importance of facilitation (Bolton & Galloway, 2014), five experienced facilitators were selected to preside over the round-table debates. Scribes were also provided to collate the information gathered in each session. This also provided the facilitator and stakeholders with the means to reflect and review progress during the symposium.

The five areas of focus were:

(1) Effective policy in the management of foreign fighters (FF), sponsored by the AGD.

Research strongly indicates that community leaders are by far the most influential source of information for those at risk of radicalisation. Community leaders are vital in the Government's efforts to counter violent extremism and mitigate the threat posed by FF. The Australian Government places great emphasis on programmes to

prevent the radicalisation of individuals. However, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have drawn an unprecedented number of Australians. In 2014 the Australian Government has indicated that there are approximately 60 Australians in Syria and Iraq participating in the conflicts. Attention must be turned to managing the risks of returning FF, including through disengagement and de-radicalisation initiatives.

This workshop explored the motivations of FF, as well as appropriate community-based responses undertaken by the Federal Government.

(2) Developing new models of risk assessment dealing with CVE interventions, sponsored by the NSW Police.

Australian law enforcement traditionally has used threat and risk assessments, matrices and models as tools to support the decision-making process. The principles on which these standards are based were founded upon sound rational economic philosophy. Yet the problems they are seeking to analyse are heavily influenced by the complex nature of human activity and subsequent violent extremist threats. The economic approach can therefore lack the flexibility and dynamism at the centre of human-based threat investigations.

This workshop explored these areas to achieve tangible outcomes that have the potential for practical application to law enforcement in particular the Counter Terrorism Command of the NSW Police Force.

(3) The social impacts of violent extremism, sponsored by the NSW Community Relations Commission (CRC).

CVE is traditionally understood as a preventive counterterrorism capability, its interventions aim at different points (some earlier, some later) along the many possible pathways of radicalisation to violence. While it is widely accepted that the "causes" of violent extremism are complex and multiple, the "consequences" of violent extremism are taken as given: in a counterterrorism framework, the "violence" that CVE seeks ultimately to prevent is a domestic terrorist act. But violent extremism can inflict other forms of violence—on the national psyche, on social cohesion—even without an accompanying act of domestic terrorism.

In light of recent events—with traumatic images of terror unleashed on the general public on front pages and through social media; with political and sectarian violence overseas heightening the fears of local Australian communities for their own safety; and with increasingly vocal proponents of fear and hate finding new fuel for their reactive rhetoric—it could be argued that damage has already been done, and that CVE in Australia urgently needs to widen its focus beyond prevention (focused on causes) to include response and recovery measures (focused on consequences). This workshop explored how such a widening of focus could be conceptualised and implemented.

(4) Social media: Understanding what we know and we do not know, sponsored by Curtin University.

The Internet has surfaced as an important and critical tool in the violent extremists' repertoire. For those individuals and groups who seek to spread the message of violent Islamist jihad, the Internet presents as a one stop shop where they can

identify, inform, influence and indoctrinate. Several cases where violent extremist actors and individuals actively joining violent jihad attest that the Internet plays at least some part in the indoctrination process. The exponential growth in the use of the Internet and social media by terrorist actors and violent extremists has generated research interest into terrorism and the Internet. Much of this research is focused on the kinds of messages being spread via the various media platforms that host terroristic content. This research has yielded significant insights into how organisations such as Al Qaeda and ISIS craft their messages, the mediums they use to disseminate their messages and the ways in which they reach their audiences. Yet we are still no closer to understanding why certain messaging appeals to certain people in certain ways and how best to disrupt the process of Internet radicalisation.

This workshop addressed outstanding questions about the relationship between media and violent extremism. Moving beyond conventional approaches that analyse how violent extremist content is presented online, the workshop explored questions around the dynamics of Internet radicalisation and the extent of this phenomenon.

(5) Developing national strategies for sustaining resilient communities in New Zealand, sponsored by Massy University.

Biculturalism, as encompassed in the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, is a cornerstone of New Zealand's identity and system of civic values and has ensured peaceful and resilient communities remarkably free of extremist influences. The recent influx of new migrant and refugee communities will continue to develop and shift the nation's demographic profile. This presents New Zealand's Government and local communities with opportunities and challenges in ensuring that the model of a stable multicultural society rooted in resilient and engaged communities continue to thrive. The New Zealand Government recognises the importance of addressing these opportunities and challenges proactively to ensure that New Zealand's indigenous, *Pakeha*, new migrant, and refugee communities adapt to the coming demographic shifts in ways that continue to foster peaceful, resilient and engaged communities.

This workshop aimed to identify: the initial processes that would need to be put in place to develop a strategy; who must be engaged in any strategy development process; how this can be done effectively; and the most important first steps in laying the groundwork for a strategy. Questions were framed that attempted to: (1) Better understand the value strengthening community resilience can have as a strategic response to the risk of violent extremism; (2) Identify key factors and influences that might work against a national strategy for Sustaining Resilient Communities; (3) Identify both which communities to engage and how governments can learn to work with the complexities of these communities without generating opposition or exacerbating social and cultural tensions; and (4) Begin to identify what we do not know: where is more research/evidence needed and who should provide that?

Strategic findings

The diversity of the topic areas makes it extremely difficult to talk about "high-level" findings in relation to the symposium. Indeed, the very aim of the event was to generate operational to tactical level outcomes rather than deliver sound bites or overviews. Each panel generated a range of insightful outputs that were directly fed back to the stakeholders and included research gaps, policy recommendations, future

models and novel means of community engagement. However, two common issues did emerge across all five workshops and as such appear to represent critical concerns within the CVE environment—impact and evaluation.

Impact

The concept of Impact was most clearly articulated during the sessions hosted by the NSW Community Relations Commission and Curtin University. While the nuances of the concept were slightly different across the two sessions, both highlighted the ongoing importance of improving understandings of and knowledge around the impact of narratives and activities utilised by those seeking to understand and target violent extremism.

Both the NSW Community Relations Commission and the AGD discussions highlighted the concept of impact in relation to a sense that currently within the CVE community that engagement and research is often reactive as opposed to proactive. Developed within a framework of crisis management in response to a critical event, activities and research remain focused on the "why" as opposed to the "so-what" dimension.

Participants within the NSW Community Relations Commission discussions noted an ongoing trend within messaging and related activities from governments, community groups and even violent extremists themselves, that placed emphasis on an "us" and "them" dichotomy. Reacting to an attack or an incident these organisations and groups immediately focused on creating defensive messaging that sought to create and highlight differences between the perpetrators, victims and wider communities. These messages and activities not only highlight but also reinforce a wider narrative around identity politics that contributes and at times exacerbates societal tensions. Even when the messaging/activities are trying to focus on similarities, the starting point is immediately one of difference in the sense that two or three groups are initially recognised. This keeps the narrative tied to the broader discourse of identity politics, ultimately reducing its credibility and impact. These identity-bound narratives were noted as generating significant societal fear particularly within certain community groups in the aftermath of an attack. Participants repeatedly highlighted how the generation of societal fear increased perceptions of mistrust against the government, associated groups as well as community groups and leaders. The approach therefore greatly reduced the impact of the narrative/activities as well as reducing the likelihood of effective dialogue in the future.

The participants highlighted improvements in pre-crisis planning particularly around the fostering of positive relationships between the various groups across government and community that were likely to be disseminating narratives in the wake of a violent extremist attack. Fostering awareness, understanding and strong communication ties between actors involved in the CVE environment would prevent reactive messaging. This would in turn allow for the development of more nuanced messaging and activities that sought to maximise impact by focusing on the "so-what" dimension and the consequences of the incident to the broader community. Shifting the emphasis away from simple dichotomies based on identity towards commonalities and causes was likely to reduce societal fear and the generation of mistrust and defensive stances from individuals as well as communities thereby potentially maximising the impact of narratives/activities within the CVE context.

Curtin University's discussion questions focused on current knowledge and knowledge gaps within the sphere of online violent extremist activity. One of the critical findings emerging from the debates again highlighted the concept of impact. Participants noted how online CVE activities were largely premised on the assumption that online narratives and online activity were directly correlated with offline behaviour, particularly with regard to radicalisation. Most initiatives and research within the violent extremist online space have explored content and distribution and are thus largely reactive in that researchers as well as counter-narratives/content are always reacting to what others are saying and doing. As noted in the CRC and AG's panels' reactive stances have been shown to have less credibility and long-term impact from a CVE perspective amongst a range of target audiences. However, for the participants in the Curtin University panel the primary concern was that these reactive studies and resultant narratives were based on the premise that what occurred online was having a direct impact on the offline behaviour of individuals. So, for example, participants noted that many of the online counter-narratives referencing FF took for granted the notion that an individual who engaged with and potentially disseminated online material produced by Islamic State (IS) or IS sympathisers was then more likely to become radicalised and seek to travel abroad to Syria or Iraq. Participants questioned the legitimacy of this assumption and raised a significant knowledge gap in relation to the level of influence online violent extremist activity and material had in relation to offline violent extremist activity. Filling this knowledge gap was flagged as critical in order to maximise the potential impact of future counter-narratives and engagement initiatives.

Evaluation

Evaluation was the second overarching issue that emerged across all five panels. Intimately linked to the concept of impact, the proliferation of activity within the CVE space raises questions about the effectiveness of programmes, narratives and research. Whether debating processes of risk management or community-driven youth programmes, participants raised concerns about the delivery of timely and consistent evaluations that not only provided assessments on current impact but most importantly helped to guide future initiatives to maximise future impact.

The difficulties of evaluating CVE activities are well understood and appreciated by practitioners and researchers alike (Fink, Romaniuk, & Barakat, 2013). These challenges arise from issues that include but are by no means limited to the lack of clearly articulated and understood baselines; the difficulty of long-term data collection; sensitivities around classification; and biases caused through funding routes. There is also the sheer diversity of the CVE environment itself which precludes the formation of singular methods or standards of evaluator practice as the conceptual and operational challenges involved in evaluations will greatly differ amongst the different areas, actors and activities that have been collectivised under the broad brush of CVE. Yet despite the challenges it is clear that the development and delivery of evaluations are critical to the long-term viability and credibility of CVE and must be given greater emphasis amongst practitioners, policy-makers and researchers alike.

The AGD and NSW Police Panels both provided clear examples of the importance given amongst participants to meeting the challenges of effective evaluation within the CVE environment. The AGD discussions focused on policy

reactions towards FF particularly in relation to the growing number of Australian citizens believed to have or seeking to travel out to fight in Syria and Iraq. Participants noted that to be effective, programmes and initiatives carried out by the government should contain from the very start capacities for independent and continuous evaluation. This would allow initiatives and particularly narratives to be regularly targeted, tested and recalibrated so as to maximise impact and effect on the intended target audience. Participants also noted it would have the additional effect of highlighting potential unintended consequences amongst a broader audience. The requirement for evaluations to be part of a process of continual monitoring reflected the noted challenges of proactively feeding back results and reacting to results in a timely manner within the constraints of policy cycles and more widely government practice. Participants also suggested that a greater emphasis from within government on the importance of an evaluation cycle that paralleled all CVE activities had the potential to disseminate downwards and positively impact on the resources, time and importance given to evaluation amongst practitioners and academics.

Likewise, participants in the NSW Police discussions focused on the feasibility of new risk management processes also emphasised the importance of developing rigorous internal and external evaluations into future risk assessment models. Highlighting the complexity of evaluation, participants flagged a range of different evaluation capabilities within any future risk assessment model. The dynamic nature of the terrorist-risk environment means that models must be continually assessed against impact and effectiveness at a strategic and operational level. However, the model must also importantly include a mechanism for evaluation by the end user. An overly complex risk assessment model while potentially highly effective in conceptualising uncertainties may not actually be effectively understood and utilised by the end user. The reasons for this could range from issues with timeliness, complexity and/or mistrust but a clear evaluation capability would effectively flag these prior to dissemination of a new model. Finally reinforcing the discussions in the AGD sessions, participants reiterated as a significant evaluation challenge the process of feeding back and reacting to findings from evaluations due to the constraints created by the structures of policy and governance within institutions such as the police.

Conclusion

The model utilised throughout the symposium placed emphasis on the delivery of tangible forward-facing outcomes, and on exploring the widening role of academia in the generation of transdisciplinary and practitioner/academic collaborations. Outputs from the symposium were in part non-academic, in that the five hosting organisations were encouraged to use the cooperative space to not merely foster discourse on variously elements of CVE, but to establish and map new take-home perspectives and practices to be implemented in their organisations.

However, the model of practitioner/academic cooperation and facilitation, and in particular the inclusion of stakeholders and experts from the private, public, community and academic domains, does provide a template for further programmes within the CVE space. As CVE is concerned with the wider social context within which extremism and violence is generated and perpetrated, and seeks to create avenues of communication, discussion and collaboration with potentially vulnerable communities, this transdisciplinary and holistic model of engagement suggests

expanded ways in which academics and universities can contribute. More research and continued consideration, however, needs to occur to more fully understand and delineate the wider professional and ethical consequences of universities working within the CVE space, which although focused on "grass roots" action is nevertheless an integrated part of government's counterterrorism response.

Disclosure statement

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