Countering Online Radicalisation in Southeast Asia Through the 5M Framework

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SYNOPSIS

From June to July 2024, the K-Hub PVE Community of Indonesia and the author researched thirty-five Indonesian civil society organisations to study the digital communications strategies used in preventing and countering violent extremism. Through surveys, desk reviews, and focus group discussions, the research identified best practices, challenges faced, and areas for improvement. This analysis evaluates the findings through a "5M Framework" – market receptivity, message, messenger, mechanism, and measurement – focusing on Southeast Asia.

COMMENTARY

Online radicalisation has become a serious threat in Southeast Asia, where extremist groups use digital platforms for recruitment and indoctrination. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore are experiencing increased activity from groups inspired by Al-Qaeda's *Jamaah Islamiyah* (JI) and ISIS's *Jamaah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD), as well as hybrids of both. These groups exploit social media, encrypted messaging apps, and emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) to accelerate radicalisation activities.

From June to July 2024, this author partnered with PeaceGen's K-Hub PVE Community, an information media for preventing violent extremism, in studying thirty-five civil society organisations (CSOs) in Indonesia, building on previous strategic communication workshops with CSOs and governments in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. The research mapped digital communication strategies for preventing and countering violent extremism (PCVE) through desk reviews, surveys, and focus group discussions. The findings highlighted best practices, challenges and gaps CSOs faced and offered recommendations for future development.

The 5M Framework for Effective PCVE Communication

In analysing the findings, the study used a "5M Framework", which provides a structured approach to understanding how CSOs can improve their digital strategies to combat online radicalisation. This framework, which is inspired by and builds upon RSIS Dean Kumar Ramakrishna's earlier "4M Way" approach published in the New England Journal of Public Policy in 2019, encompasses five key pillars: Market Receptivity, Message, Messenger, Mechanism, and Measurement".

Market Receptivity: Understanding the Audience

This element of market receptivity in the 5M Framework emphasises the understanding of the audience. While Southeast Asian CSOs usually get their audience right, they often miss younger individuals vulnerable to radicalisation. Extremist groups in Indonesia exploit narratives of injustice to recruit youth. A recent case involved a 19-year-old from Malang who was radicalised online and trained to carry out suicide bombings in eight months. He had joined a paid global Telegram group using his own funds and utilised AI to propagandise. CSOs need to enhance their audience analysis to develop targeted interventions for at-risk youth.

Message: Crafting Clear and Impactful Narratives

The content of the message is critical to shaping public perceptions and influencing behaviour. Although the study highlighted gaps in the CSOs' ability to craft powerful, relatable stories, it identified several examples that successfully utilised counter-narratives. A notable finding was the effectiveness of certain religious narratives. A former jihadist who goes by the acronym BY, credited his de-radicalisation journey to the online sermons of Gus Baha.

Gus Baha is a popular cleric from Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), a mainstream Muslim organisation in Indonesia with almost a hundred million adherents. Known for his deep knowledge of the Quran and classical Islamic texts, Gus Baha has gained a wide following due to his ability to explain complex religious ideas using simple, relatable examples from everyday life. His sermons have proven effective in de-radicalising individuals like BY, showcasing the potential of positive religious messaging.

To achieve broader success, CSOs should develop messages to counter extremist content by addressing the emotional, social, and political triggers it exploits. In the Philippines, where poverty and economic disparities fuel grievances, CSOs can craft messages that promote social justice, economic empowerment, and community resilience to prevent exploitation by extremist narratives.

Messenger: Choosing Credible Influencers

One of the key insights from the research is the importance of using credible voices as messengers. The effectiveness of Gus Baha's online sermons in de-radicalising individuals shows how influential figures can sway those on the path to extremism. Southeast Asia's unique religious and cultural landscape requires messengers trusted by the community and can communicate authentically across different segments of society.

CSOs must identify and empower these messengers, whether they are religious leaders, local influencers, or even former extremists who have renounced violence. For example, Islamic scholars and community leaders can play a critical role in dissuading youth from extremist ideologies. At the same time, former militants can offer personal testimonies to counter recruitment narratives.

Mechanism: Selecting the Right Platforms

The mechanism can make or break the effectiveness of a PCVE campaign. According to the study, CSOs have a mixed record in choosing the right platforms. While most CSOs have a solid social media presence, some struggle to engage on platforms such as encrypted messaging apps favoured by younger audiences or where extremist groups are most active.

CSOs need to diversify their platforms and ensure that they reach target audiences. In Indonesia and Malaysia, where apps like WhatsApp and Telegram are widely used, counter-extremism efforts must penetrate these channels. In the Philippines, where social media is also dominant, campaigns can be strengthened through platforms like Facebook and TikTok. These platforms can amplify efforts in capacity building and logistical support. Young people should also be engaged to help identify favoured social media platforms for reaching out to at-risk groups.

Measurement: Tracking Impact and Outcomes

Finally, the 5M Framework underscores the importance of measurement. CSOs often face challenges in assessing the impact of their digital PCVE campaigns. While the research indicates that some organisations track basic metrics such as engagement rates and content reach, there is still a significant gap in evaluating the real-world effectiveness of these campaigns in influencing attitudes and behaviours.

To address this, CSOs should adopt more robust monitoring and evaluation tools, using data analytics and surveys to assess the long-term impact of their campaigns. For example, the success of Gus Baha's sermons in influencing individuals like BY suggests that tracking de-radicalisation cases should be prioritised, over the long term if necessary. By applying these lessons widely, CSOs can better understand the effectiveness of their interventions and adjust their strategies accordingly.

The Role of Multilateral Organisations: Global and Regional Support

At the global level, the United Nations Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism provides a comprehensive framework for states and non-state actors to prevent the spread of extremism through social, political, educational, and digital channels. This document stresses the importance of counter-narratives, community engagement, and the integration of gender perspectives into PCVE efforts.

The UN also advocates strengthening the digital capacities of local actors, particularly CSOs, to counter the sophisticated online radicalisation strategies employed by terrorist organisations.

At the regional level, ASEAN can be pivotal in coordinating efforts across Southeast Asia to prevent violent extremism. ASEAN's Manila Declaration to Counter the Rise of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism emphasises regional cooperation, capacity-building, and the sharing of best practices among member states.

The declaration encourages collaboration between governments, civil society, and regional bodies to address radicalisation, particularly in the digital sphere. The UN and ASEAN can provide technical support, funding, and capacity-building programmes to ensure CSOs are well-equipped to combat extremism. Moreover, they can foster collaboration between member states and local organisations, facilitating the exchange of knowledge and effective practices.

Empowering CSOs for the Future

The study by the author and the K-Hub PVE Community offers valuable insights into the current state of PCVE digital communication strategies in Southeast Asia. With the rise of online radicalisation, CSOs must continue refining their approaches using frameworks like the 5M model to ensure that their efforts are impactful.

Southeast Asia presents unique challenges for combating violent extremism through digital channels. By improving audience analysis, crafting compelling messages, leveraging credible messengers, utilising diverse platforms, and enhancing impact measurement, CSOs can play a central role in preventing online radicalisation and promoting security across the region. With sustained commitment and cross-border collaboration, the lessons learned can be replicated globally, offering a roadmap for other regions facing similar challenges in the digital age.

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