The Grievance Hunters: Extremists Exploit Crises to Bolster Their Image

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SYNOPSIS

Violent extremist groups exploit societal grievances, including climate-related disasters, to gain legitimacy and recruit members by positioning themselves as the true protectors of vulnerable communities. Strategic communication, including AI-driven tools, is essential to counter extremist narratives and build resilience against manipulation. There is an urgent need for proactive, transmedia storytelling approaches to address both climate change and violent extremism, ultimately strengthening trust and promoting community unity.

COMMENTARY

In the wake of a devastating earthquake or a catastrophic flood, when homes are reduced to rubble, and families are left to fend for themselves, who arrives first to help? Often, it's not just government agencies or humanitarian organisations – it's extremist groups seizing the moment to embed themselves in the social fabric of vulnerable communities. The act may seem benevolent on the surface, but beneath it lies a calculated strategy: grievance hunting.

Violent extremist groups have long perfected the art of capitalising on crisis. In times of disaster, when trust in the state is low, these groups step in, positioning themselves as saviours who truly care. They distribute aid, provide shelter, and lend a helping hand – earning trust, legitimacy, and, ultimately, new recruits. In the process, they foster ideological loyalty and strengthen their influence within the distressed communities.

In Indonesia, this pattern is all too familiar. Groups like Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), Jamaah Ansharusyariah (JAS), and the erstwhile Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) have

consistently leveraged natural disasters to reinforce their presence. Before its disbandment, JI actively encouraged its members to volunteer in disaster relief efforts.

While official aid efforts were often slowed by bureaucracy, JI members swiftly delivered assistance to affected areas, cultivating an image of themselves as both humanitarian responders and leaders. This tactic allowed them to reshape public perception – not as a terrorist organisation, but as a movement that truly cared.

During the Cianjur earthquake in November 2022, JAD-affiliated charities such as Bikhum Khoirul Ummah and Muhzatul Ummah used relief efforts as a gateway to attract sympathisers and reinforce their ideological narratives. By positioning themselves as first responders, these groups gained public trust and legitimacy, making it easier to recruit new members.

They framed their aid as an obligation of faith, strengthening communal ties within their ideological sphere. At the same time, they controlled the narrative by interpreting the disaster through a religious lens, often claiming it was divine punishment for moral corruption. This messaging not only deepened divisions but also reinforced their purist ideology.

Financially, these crises served as opportunities for extremist networks to mobilise resources. Crowdfunding and donation drives were channelled through affiliated accounts, sustaining their operations beyond disaster relief.

Moreover, rather than relying on official aid channels, these groups established parallel relief networks, drawing individuals from mainstream institutions and increasing allegiance to extremist ecosystems. Aid distribution was often prioritised for those who shared their beliefs, further entrenching sectarian divides and creating a sense of exclusivity among beneficiaries.

This exploitation extends beyond direct aid efforts. In December 2024, the Ansharu Syariah network held a tree-planting event in Blitar, East Java, presenting themselves as environmental protectors. While on the surface, this may have seemed like an ecological initiative, the underlying objective was clear: to garner community trust and expand their ideological influence.

Similarly, their involvement in local disaster relief efforts following extreme weather conditions in East Java served as yet another opportunity to reinforce their presence as an indispensable force within the community.

This trend is not unique to Indonesia. Globally, groups like al-Shabaab in Somalia and Boko Haram in Nigeria have all employed similar strategies. They recognise that narrative control is paramount in times of crisis. By positioning themselves as the answer to a community's suffering, they attract recruits, consolidate power, and erode the authority of the state.

The Role of Strategic Communication

The digital age has amplified these dynamics. Extremist groups are no longer constrained by traditional media barriers; they have direct access to their target

audiences through social media and AI-driven tools. Propaganda is now produced and distributed at an unprecedented scale, with generative AI enabling the creation of high-quality, manipulative content designed to shape public opinion and fuel disinformation.

White supremacist groups in the West have already used AI to fabricate false narratives about climate policies and migration. Closer to home, extremist groups have also taken a similar approach. Online platforms have been leveraged to spread conspiracy theories linking climate disasters to foreign influence or Western-backed policies, stoking an "us vs them" mentality. This digital propaganda, combined with their on-the-ground humanitarian efforts, reinforces their overarching strategy of grievance exploitation.

If extremist groups thrive on fear, insecurity, and distrust, then countering them requires a robust, proactive communication strategy that pre-empts their narratives before they take hold.

A Blueprint for Countering Extremist Narratives

Strategic communication is the key to disrupting extremist exploitation. Instead of reacting to crises after they occur, efforts must be made to build resilience within communities beforehand.

Understanding the audience is the first step. Identifying at-risk individuals, understanding their concerns, and mapping their information sources are essential for crafting messages that resonate. Effective counternarratives must be rooted in strong, relatable storytelling – ones that reinforce community solidarity, shared humanity, and resilience against extremist rhetoric.

The credibility of the messenger is just as crucial as the message itself. Former extremists, trusted local leaders, and religious figures must take the lead in challenging extremist narratives. Their voices carry weight and legitimacy, making the counter-messages more persuasive and impactful.

Transmedia storytelling – leveraging various platforms such as documentaries, social media campaigns, and AI-driven tools – ensures that counter-narratives reach diverse audiences. Not everyone consumes information the same way, so a multi-platform approach maximises the effectiveness of strategic communication efforts.

Finally, continuous evaluation is critical. Monitoring how audiences engage with counter-narratives allows for adaptive strategies that remain effective over time. This ensures that efforts to counter extremist exploitation remain dynamic and responsive to evolving threats.

Conclusion: The Power of Proactive Communication

The exploitation of climate-related crises by extremist groups is not just a challenge for governments – it is a global security threat. As extreme weather events become more frequent, the ability to control the narrative will determine whether communities remain resilient or fall victim to extremist manipulation. Strategic communication is no longer just a tool; it is a necessity.

By embracing transmedia storytelling and proactive engagement, governments and organisations can effectively counter extremist propaganda, ensuring that communities are equipped to resist violent ideologies. The battle against extremism is not merely about countering harmful ideas; it is about fostering trust, strengthening social cohesion, and preventing the exploitation of suffering for ideological gain. In the war for hearts and minds, those who shape the narrative will ultimately prevail.

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