

Extremism Threatened. Radio “Narratives” Intervened.

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A radio drama set in a fictional city might seem a whimsical tool for countering a challenge as grave as violent extremism, but a field experiment in Burkina Faso, in West Africa, suggests that narrative interventions using storytelling may provide impactful solutions for shifting behavioral intentions, beliefs, and attitudes.

In a recent [article in *Psychological Science*](#), Rezarta Bilali (New York University) described a cluster-randomized controlled trial conducted in 132 villages in the Sahell region of Burkina Faso, where violent attacks by groups affiliated with Al Qaeda have doubled every year since 2015. Although much of the extremist threat is thought to come from neighboring countries, at least one group is homegrown, founded by a local preacher whose sermons were disseminated by radio. The government responded to the increased violence by increasing the presence of security forces, but mutual mistrust between the population and these forces undermined the collaboration essential to this strategy.

In Bilali’s study, 2,904 individuals gathered with others from their village for 12 weekly listening sessions involving a radio drama set in a fictional city with high levels of corruption, low employment, frequent terror attacks by armed groups, and a difficult relationship between community members and police. Each session lasted about an hour, and facilitators played four to five episodes in each session, or 52 episodes in all. The plot consisted of three intertwined storylines, including one highlighting the dangers and consequences of violent extremism and one emphasizing the importance of police–community collaboration as a pathway to address violent extremism. The storylines’ goals were to denounce and reduce support for violent extremism and to raise awareness about the importance of police–community collaboration for fighting violent extremism, as well as about issues that prevent collaboration.

Compared with a “radio-as-usual” control condition, the [narrative intervention](#) reduced participants’ justification of violence, increased their intentions to collaborate with the police, and made them more likely to identify addressing violent extremism as a government priority. Results involving the latter two outcomes were particularly promising: On average, participants in the intervention condition were 9% more likely to freely recommend collaboration with security forces for combating violent extremism and 17% more likely to name violent extremism as a priority for the government to address.

The intervention did not address all beliefs about or attitudes toward addressing violence; it did not make participants more likely to see the police as fair or trustworthy, for example. But it suggested that narratives can be used for social change, which can be good but also harmful. That is, extremist narratives “can help people make sense of their reality, gain power and prestige, fulfill the need for significance and meaning, and become part of something larger than themselves,” Bilali wrote. But these needs “can also be attained through narratives that promote [prosocial behaviors and values](#) rather than violence,” especially if those alternative narratives resonate with and acknowledge people’s grievances.

What explains the potential power of narrative interventions, and how can they be used more broadly to change beliefs and behavior for the better? Reviewing previous studies, Bilali noted that inserting fictional prescriptive messages into entertaining stories has been shown to help people understand existing realities, imagine new realities, and take critical stances on sensitive issues and social challenges. “However, it is not known whether such awareness-raising narratives can influence attitudes and behaviors.”

One goal of her study was to examine that possibility by extending on prior research. Analyses of participants’ self-reports, facilitator reports, and group discussions converged on a few key processes that may help explain the results, including the simple fact that in most group discussions, participants condemned violence and approved of actions that promote peace. These discussions also underscored the power of social norms; for example, participants’ reactions during and after the group listening sessions “reinforced a social norm that approves of police collaboration, which likely increased collaboration intentions,” Bilali wrote.

Bilali noted limitations of her study, including the fact that it did not assess long-term effects (e.g., the persistence of intentions to collaborate) or whether intentions transformed into actual behaviors in real-world scenarios. More research is needed to investigate the power of narratives in countering violent extremism, as well whether narrative interventions could influence groups in power positions, such as police.

Reference

Bilali, R. (2022). Fighting violent extremism with narrative intervention: Evidence from a field experiment in West Africa. *Psychological Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211031895>