

**British Council All Party Parliamentary Group**  
**Building Resilience to Radicalisation in the Middle East and North Africa Inquiry**

Written evidence submitted by BBC Media Action, June 2017

**Introduction**

1. BBC Media Action is the BBC's international charity. We use the power of media and communication to help reduce poverty and support people in understanding their rights. We work with over 100 media partners across the world. Last year over 100 million people watched or listened to the programmes we supported.
2. Our work supports the development of inclusive states and societies – helping populations that feel disengaged and excluded from society to raise their voice and access opportunities, supporting inclusive identities, and reducing the acceptance of violence as a legitimate way to resolve disputes. While we do not exist to use media or communication strategies to counter violent extremism, much of our work is highly relevant to addressing the drivers of extremism thereby creating a more hostile environment for violent extremism to take hold.
3. Trusted and independent media can make societies that are vulnerable to violent extremism more resistant to the phenomenon. Well-produced media content catches people's attention, resonates with audiences and influences opinions on complex issues. Such complex issues include many 'drivers' of violent extremism, including: corruption, political injustice, marginalisation, lack of economic opportunity and struggles with identity. The media can help people critically think about and discuss these issues, which is so important to how they relate to the grievance narratives promoted by violent extremist groups.
4. BBC Media Action is concerned that the debate on communication and countering violent extremism is leading the international community toward using communication in ways that lack evidence of impact and away from the established evidence base for alternative approaches that has been developed by the media development community.

**Counter-narrative initiatives**

5. Many communication interventions on countering violent extremism are focused on “counter-narratives”. Over the past few years it is in these initiatives where much of the resources have been focused. The evidence base supporting the

effectiveness of some counter narrative approaches, including strategic communication initiatives, is limited.

6. A 2016 Partnership for Conflict, Crime & Security Research (PaCCS) review of the evidence base around countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies concluded that there was a lack of evidence that counter-narratives work.<sup>1</sup> As the report put it, "*The theory that the messages, myths, promises, objectives, glamour and other enticements propagated via Violent Extremist narratives can be replaced with, or dismantled by, an alternative set of communications is an assumption that remains unproven.*" The report suggests that because reactive counter-narrative strategies do not deal with why the extremist narrative gains traction in the first place, it is sceptical that evidence will be generated in the future.
7. In March 2016 UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre and the Governance and Peacebuilding Cluster in the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support hosted a Global Meeting on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity. The report from that meeting concluded that evidence indicates that a range of media strategies do not work.<sup>2</sup> These include:
  - Controlling media in the name of preventing terrorism (partly because controlling media enables corruption, which in turn fosters radicalisation);
  - Using politically anchored counter-narratives or counter propaganda, which is often seen as partial, dishonest and condescending;
  - Strategies that seek to persuade or 'message' rather than inform; and
  - Media content that does not reflect a range of public opinion and diverse (including angry) voices.
8. BBC Media Action is concerned that a strategic communication approach has often been favoured without supporting evidence at the expense of other efforts designed to support free and independent media and other information efforts that might be more effective at reducing violent extremism.

## **Alternative approaches to media, communication and countering violent extremism**

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<sup>1</sup> See evidence base review by Dr Katherine Ferguson <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>  
Dr Ferguson was hosted by BBC Media Action during her research

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/democratic-governance/preventing-violent-extremism-through-promoting-inclusive-develop.html>

9. And there are alternatives to these approaches. Alternatives rooted in independence, scale and audience trust – including:

- Creating trusted platforms for public debate so those who are politically or economically marginalised feel their issues are being aired and addressed (see [Bangladesh](#), [Kenya](#)). This is particularly important for young people, who are often not well represented by national media (see [Tunisia](#), [Tanzania](#))
- Helping those who disagree or who are different from each other to discuss their differences peacefully and better understand each other (see [Afghanistan](#));
- Providing trusted information and challenging rumour and misinformation in conflict situations ([Libya](#), [Iraq](#))
- Using drama to break down social, religious or other tensions in society and fostering greater understanding of “the other” (see [Syria](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Somalia](#) and [Nigeria](#));
- Supporting community and other media to facilitate independent, trusted and inclusive dialogue, produce conflict sensitive broadcasting and tackle hate speech at a local level.

10. BBC Media Action has a growing evidence base for the impact of its work on patterns of knowledge, discussion, attitudes and political participation. An evaluation of the impact of BBC Media Action supported broadcasting across seven countries and reaching more than 190 million people concluded that BBC Media Action’s audiences know more, discuss more and participate more in politics than people who don’t listen to and/or watch its programmes.

11. As the PACCS report referenced in paragraph 5 concludes “*The theoretical foundations for these alternative approaches are supported by a stronger and more established research base, drawn from the multi-disciplinary fields of development, peace building, and social cohesion.*” There is a “*growing evidence base [that] suggests that radio and television drama addressing issues of identity, reconciliation and tolerance have a positive an impact on public attitudes and behaviour.*”

12. This is in the context of an increasingly strong evidence base for the impact of media and communication initiatives. The World Development Report 2017 described media as an “*indispensable component of citizen empowerment and collective action*” a “*key actor*” on transparency, playing an “*important role*” in reshaping preferences and social norms within societies and a “*central role*” as

an agent of accountability.<sup>3</sup> Recent DFID evidence reviews on [anti-corruption](#) and [conflict prevention](#) have put media at the higher end of impact evidence. Having said all that BBC Media Action and the broader media development community acknowledge there remains more to do to establish a conclusive evidence base that these approaches are effective at countering violent extremism.

## Effective media and communication programming

13. BBC Media Action has extensive experience of delivering media and communication in fragile settings, afflicted by violence and violent extremist groups. We conclude effective communication initiatives in this area require:

- ***Understanding of the issues:*** As several of the organisations that have contributed to this inquiry have stated the issues around extremism, radicalisation and violence are both complex and localised. There is not a single explanation for violence. BBC Media Action conducts extensive research so we can understand how to engage people on complex issues that affect their lives. This includes how people experience what are often considered drivers of violent extremism. Our research has shown that frustration with a lack of opportunities (both economic and the chance to express one's voice), crises of identity formation and growing exposure to violence can all feed support for violent groups, from the criminal to the religiously extreme. These conclusions came across strongly in our 2016 research on violence and young people in East Africa.<sup>4</sup>
- ***Embracing complexity:*** Increasingly media-savvy audiences, taking information from multiple sources, are quick to understand when media is promoting a narrow agenda. BBC Media Action supports media to tackle the issues that matter to societies, supporting audiences to access facts and diverse points of view – enabling them to make up their own minds. This nuanced approach tackles drivers of violent extremism and can help create a more hostile environment for violent extremism.
- ***Addressing marginalisation at scale:*** One of the main aims of our work is to reduce fragility and exclusion. Over the last decade, we have built a substantial programme portfolio and have demonstrated impact on difficult issues in fragile places. We increase discussion and dialogue, enabling politically and economically marginalised voices to be heard in public debate.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2017>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/mediaactioninsight/entries/74b2ec98-e1fd-49a5-99e4-f855bf9dcedb>

We support societies to overcome fear of “others” and navigate their differences. Last year, over 100 million people watched or listened to programmes we supported in this area.

14. Media and communication initiatives are consistently underfunded and undervalued by the international development community. Independent media funding has recently constituted approximately 2 percent of total support for good governance by OECD member countries – or less than half a percent of official development assistance overall.<sup>5</sup> As the UNDP conference (see paragraph 7) concluded *“governance strategies in support of media have been largely marginal, thereby leaving the media space in the hands of violent extremist groups.”*

## About BBC Media Action

BBC Media Action is the BBC’s international charity. We use the power of media and communication to help reduce poverty and support people in understanding their rights. Our aim is to inform, connect and empower people around the world. We help people make sense of events, engage in dialogue and take action to improve their lives.

We work in partnership with broadcasters, governments, non-governmental organisations and donors, reaching over 200 million people per year in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe through our debate shows, dramas, radio and TV programmes, social media initiatives, public service announcements, mobile phone services and face-to-face communication.

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<sup>5</sup> Eduardo González Cauhapé-Cazaux and Shanthi Kalathil, Official Development Assistance for Media: Figures and Findings (Center for International Media Assistance and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015). <https://www.oecd.org/dac/governance-peace/docs/CIMA.pdf>