4 Ways To Turn The Neo-Nazi Agenda On Its Head

Sometimes humor and acceptance are more powerful than confrontation.

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How do you fight right-wing extremism without resorting to aggression or provocation? After a decade of working on the re-education of former neo-Nazis in Germany, I still struggle with that question.

As I watched events unfold in Charlottesville, Virginia, similar questions were being brought up in the United States. The immediate aftermath of that violent night — and the chaos that followed — unleashed a new set of raw emotions across the country. People who saw what happened as contrary to what America stands for wondered how they could battle these white supremacists, neo-Nazis and racists effectively without sinking to their level. Many are still wondering if not physical confrontation, then what?
It may give Americans some solace to know that Germany has come up with an alternative — one that I believe is worth emulating.

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For years, an annual neo-Nazi march has been held in the town of Wunsiedel, Germany, where I often work, and where the grave of Adolf Hitler’s deputy Rudolf Hess was located until 2011. Because of its historical significance, neo-Nazis flocked here and held commemorative marches. Similar to some of the rallies seen in the U.S., these extremists walked through the streets carrying flags and signs representing their agenda, often with the goal of provoking their opponents to intense frustration and even violence.

But such reactions aren’t so common in Wunsiedel anymore, in part because German citizens and organizations like mine — EXIT Germany — took it upon themselves to find another method of resistance: humor.

Today, Wunsiedel is famous for being the place that pranked neo-Nazis by turning their own march into a charity walkathon. In 2014, townsfolk cheered the neo-Nazis on as they walked, knowing that each step meant more money donated to an organization that opposed the very agenda they were there marching for.

Many people I talk to find it bizarre at first, but I truly do believe this to be an effective form of subversion. Irony, absurdity and humor are often the best resources to change the narrative of neo-Nazism for the better.

Americans trying to figure out what to do post-Charlottesville should take a page from Wunsiedel. These methods of resistance have worked for this town — and for Germany more generally. Here are four ways to fight right-wing extremists and turn their agenda on its head.
#1. Rewrite the rules

It’s easy to brand right-wing extremists as “the other,” but alienating them won’t help.

For anyone who considers himself relatively open-minded to diversity, the natural reaction to racist chants at right-wing extremist marches like those in Charlottesville may be to write those people off as revolting, inhuman, beneath what it means to be a worthwhile member of society. But to do that would be a mistake. As hard as it may be, you can’t look at the actions of neo-Nazis and white supremacists and brand them as “the other.” Instead, you need to rewrite the rules — show empathy and listen to their grievances when mainstream society expects you to do the opposite.

The only way to truly fight back and change the reality is to understand where these people are coming from — to study the communication and interaction of these right-wing extremist groups. If you want to change lives and perspectives, you need to be able to target their base, their audience. You need to analyze them, to know about the specific symbolism or codes of ethics they believe in, and be able to use those to change the narrative and engage more directly with extremist members on an individual level.

This is where we have seen some shortcomings in the ways some activists in the U.S. have handled recent events. Given the turbulent and unsettling history with white supremacists, the frustration is understandable and even justified. But blindly counterprotesting without a deep knowledge of the mindset of the other side often alienates right-wing extremists and serves little purpose in changing hearts and minds in the long run. It just gives them what they want — more attention and more controversy.

Instead, tackle the issue on a personal level. Use this as a moment to show them that while you may not respect the values of their organization, you recognize them as an individual with their own set of struggles and will not dismiss them entirely as a result.

#2. Turn their agenda in your favor on the ground

In many cases, as we saw with Charlottesville, the first course of action many take is to try and legally shut down white supremacist groups and take away their permits to organize. However, this can prove difficult under laws of free speech. So when one cannot legally prevent right-wing extremists from organizing, let them demonstrate, but channel their efforts to benefit your own instead.

This is what we did in Germany, in Wunsiedel. The idea behind Nazis against Nazis, is that with every step of their march, the extremists inadvertently unlocked funds raised against their cause. As a result, we subverted their real purpose.

The program, a form of counterprotest, presented the neo-Nazis with a dilemma: abandon the demonstration or go ahead with the knowledge that they would be raising money for an organization that is working against their cause. As a result, their exclusive narrative was satirically and peacefully counteracted.

This activity, which has quickly spread to many different cities in Germany and Sweden, could likely be applied to U.S. rallies like the one in Charlottesville. In Germany alone, more than 47,000 euros have been donated to projects working to help refugees and neo-Nazi prevention as a result of this project’s resistance efforts.
#3. Convert online hate into support for marginalized groups

The internet has become a big way to spread hate, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be used for the opposite.

In today’s digitally driven, social media-dominated age, countering extremists like neo-Nazis and white supremacists requires more than just ground fighting. In fact, some would argue that the majority of these groups coordinate their efforts online. So how does one combat right-wing extremism in the digital space?

Yet again, the answer is to turn their own hate against them — a digital continuation of the “Nazis against Nazis” counterprotest idea, if you will.

In Germany, we launched, Donate the Hate, an initiative that allows various larger financial partners, such as media companies, professional soccer teams and independent online users to make it possible for us to transform hate speech on Facebook into involuntary donations against far-right and other xenophobic causes. For every intolerant comment encountered, a euro from the sponsor fund goes to a refugee project. The more hatred, the more donations, placing the extremists in another dilemma: either they stop xenophobic comments, or with every new post, they send money directly to causes that combat their xenophobic interests.

After a year and a half, the system has collected more than 50,000 euros of donations. And beyond just the monetary help it has provided to refugees and efforts fighting neo-Nazism in Germany, a friendly comment is issued in response to each hateful one, thanking each commenter personally for their donation to the cause. This hopefully opens people up to a friendly opposing perspective that they are not used to.

In a place like the U.S., where political party polarization is increasingly prevalent in spaces like Twitter, this positive online response to hate is as significant as it is refreshing. It yet again throws the perpetrator of hate off guard, and in doing so, often makes them more willing to read into
the causes of the other side since they’ve ultimately invested themselves in it one way or another.

#4. Show them that they will be welcomed back into society

But even with all this money raised from prank charity marches and social media trolling, how does one change the hearts and minds of those invested in right-wing extremist causes in the long term?

This brings us back to the first point — empathy. How do we make those shows of compassion more tangible? In order to ensure our little efforts hold weight, those leaving extremist groups need to be aware that they have a place in society if they choose to take it, that there’s a chance to actually change if they want to. And that there are organizations willing to help them.

In the aftermath of Charlottesville, it’s easy to see the distaste for the white supremacists protesters — just look at the numerous articles detailing the need to take the movement down. One online campaign worked tirelessly to identify and publicly shame those who had participated in the rally. And even if we are showing empathy on a personal level, organizational alienation such as this still pushes right-wing extremists back into the comfort of their extremist groups.

While outing these people may give us satisfaction in the short term — and even lead to arrests of those spouting hatred — from the extremist’s perspective, it also solidifies for many of them the thought that they are increasingly isolated from a mainstream, diversity-embracing society.

One way we can show them otherwise is through organizations like the one I work for, EXIT Germany, which focuses on giving right-wing extremists an outlet and support system to escape neo-Nazi culture. Providing spaces like ours for right-wing extremists to feel they can leave and reintegrate into society without judgment is incredibly important. I have seen firsthand how such programs provide an out to many former extremists who felt like the groups they were a part of were the only place they would ever find acceptance.

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For instance, in the summer of 2011, we distributed T-shirts for free with a skull, right-wing flags and the words “hardcore rebels” at the right-wing rock festival Rock for Germany. At first glance,
the shirt seemed to support the sentiments of right-wing rock fans. But the surprise effect became visible after the T-shirt was washed. A different message appeared: “What your T-shirt can do, you also can do — We help you to free yourself from right-wing extremism.”

The goal here was to ensure that members of these extremist groups know that they have options like EXIT Germany to turn to — even if they aren’t looking — which will provide a non-judgmental space for them to grow and change outside of the neo-Nazi community. This is particularly true for many of the youth who have not yet firmly settled in the neo-Nazi scene just yet.

It is important to note that while at first small things like the shirt may get scoffs from those who read it, the message sticks with them and eventually has an impact. In fact, even though the program was only implemented once, the number of people who have called EXIT Germany asking for help to leave the right-wing extremist movement has tripled.

These four resistance efforts together convey a message that works because they challenge right-wing extremists by shocking them at their very core. The offer of help from the outside in a witty and kind way goes a long way simply because members of extremist groups are often unused to it and don’t expect it.

In such contentious times, I urge U.S activists to take note of these lessons and empower themselves to allow love and acceptance to triumph over hate. Some already have, and this gives me hope. There is no doubt that white supremacists in cities like Charlottesville and online spaces will expect to be met with hostile aggression and hate. Break those barriers down, and construct a whole new narrative. One that recognizes the absurdity of the situation and allows them to feel welcome back in society. One of compassion, of understanding and maybe even forgiveness. One that reminds all of us that, in the end, we are all human.