

The 60 Days of PVE Campaign: Lessons on Organizing an Online, Peer-to-Peer, Counter-radicalization Program

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Abstract

Combating violent extremism can involve organizing Peer-to-Peer (P2P) preventing violent extremism (PVE) programs and social media campaigns. While hundreds of PVE campaigns have been launched around the world in recent months and years, very few of these campaigns have actually been reviewed, analyzed, or assessed in any systematic way. Metrics of success and failure have yet to be fully developed, and very little is publically known as to what might differentiate a great and successful P2P campaign from a mediocre one. This article will provide first-hand insight on orchestrating a publically funded, university-based, online, peer-to-peer PVE campaign – *60 Days of PVE* – based on the experience of a group of Canadian graduate students. The article provides an account of the group’s approach to PVE. It highlights the entirety of the group’s campaign, from theory and conceptualization to branding, media strategy, and evaluation, and describes the campaign’s core objectives and implementation. The article also analyzes the campaign’s digital footprint and reach using data gleaned from social media. Finally, the article discusses the challenges and difficulties the group faced in running their campaign, lessons that are pertinent for others contemplating a similar endeavour.

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Introduction

The rise and fall of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) along with the travel of tens of thousands of self-radicalized individuals around the world – to say

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nothing of the continued prevalence of “leaderless Jihad” in Europe and North America – has forced academics, community activists, and policy makers alike to reconsider and re-evaluate the processes and counter-processes of violent radicalization. The phenomenon of radicalization is necessarily complex: researchers have resigned themselves to the fact that there is no single factor or common characteristic that leads a particular individual to facilitate or participate in political violence and terrorism (Gurski, 2017; Bourrie, 2016; Kumar and Mandal, 2014; Wilner and Dubouloz, 2011). Instead, a host of reasons are provided, ranging from personal and political grievances, mental health issues, poverty, lack of inclusion, a thirst for adventure, a desire to belong, a susceptibility to propaganda, and so on. Though no single theory of, or approach to, radicalization has yet garnered widespread and general acceptance among academics and practitioners, counter-measures to the processes of violent radicalization have nonetheless been developed and applied around the globe, often in an ad-hoc and hasty matter. Part of the response to combat the lure of extremist ideology has involved recruiting individuals and groups to run Peer-to-Peer (P2P) preventing violent extremism (PVE) programs. These PVE campaigns, while at times haphazardly applied and largely untested, seek to halt individuals at numerous stages within the radicalization process – from pre- to post-adoption of extremist ideologies – by providing them with alternative discourses and narratives, along with other relevant information, that might convince and compel them not to support violence (Innes, Roberts, and Lowe, 2017). Hundreds of PVE campaigns have been launched around the globe over the past three years, often with direct state and private sector support (EdVenture Partners 2017). And yet, to date, very few of these campaigns have actually been reviewed, analyzed, or assessed in any rigorous or academic manner (Finn et. al., 2016; Macnair and Frank, 2017). Metrics of success and failure have yet to be fully developed; very little is publically known as to what might differentiate a great and successful P2P campaign from a mediocre one. And best (even good) practices, along with abject failures, too, have only just begun to be published (Hedayah 2016). In sum, lessons learned are found wanting.

This article seeks to remedy this situation by providing first-hand insight on running a publically funded, university-based, online, peer-to-peer PVE campaign. The article is based on the experience of a group of ten graduate students from the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada – herein referred to as the P2P group – who between January and April 2017, developed and orchestrated an original, English-language PVE campaign as part of the 2017 *Facebook Global Digital Challenge*.³ The article provides a detailed account of the group's approach to PVE and an assessment of its campaign. The group's PVE campaign was designed with both short- and long-term initiatives in mind. The first part of the initiative – a social media blitz titled *60 days of PVE* (<https://www.facebook.com/60DaysOfPVE/>) – was developed to run for three months, roughly the length of a typical Canadian university semester. The data gathered therein, along with the material created during the campaign itself, was simultaneously posted and hosted on another website – www.thePVEproject.com – designed with the intention of establishing a longer-term repository and platform that might assist Carleton University students and groups looking to expand upon the PVE campaign in the future.

The article highlights the entirety of the P2P group's campaign, from theory and conceptualization, to branding, media strategy, and evaluation. The article begins with a summary of the relevant academic literature on PVE that the group used in formulating the genesis of their campaign. It then turns towards a discussion of the branding process and a description of the campaign's core objectives. That is followed with a detailed exploration of how the campaign was actually implemented, with a critical review of how external contributors to the campaign – i.e. “credible voices” – were selected, vetted, and promoted. Next, the article provides a qualitative and quantitative breakdown of the campaign's real-time success and failure. The article ends with a discussion of the challenges and difficulties

³ The NPSIA team was one of five Canadian universities and colleges to participate in the 2017 campaign. A handful of other Canadian institutions took part in 2015 and 2016. The NPSIA team's work was entirely funded by the *Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge* run by EdVenture. The group received US\$2000 from EdVenture and US\$500 worth of advertising credit from Facebook to be used on the social media platform.

the student group faced in running their campaign, lessons that are pertinent for others contemplating a similar endeavour.

Grounding the Campaign: How Theory Informed Practice

Due to the relatively short time-span of both planning and executing the PVE campaign, the group's first immediate challenge was to find reliable research that both explained and supported the larger peer-to-peer initiative. From the onset the campaign was to be launched in Canada, which directed the group towards Canadian relevant material, including that produced by various Canadian governments, academics, and NGOs on the issue of domestic radicalization and political extremism.⁴ In this regard, the group benefited from participating in several in-class, closed-door roundtable discussions held at Carlton University with Canadian federal public servants from Public Safety Canada and Global Affairs Canada with deep professional knowledge and awareness of PVE issues. These informal speaking events helped guide the group towards relevant literature, and informed how they defined their terms: radicalization as “the process of taking radical views and putting them into action” (“What is violent extremism”, Public Safety, 2015). From there, the group derived six over-arching lessons from the expansive literature on PVE that ultimately informed the campaign.

First, despite the fact that many people who access social media content will occasionally interact with violent extremist material, the majority of viewers do not become violent extremists themselves. Accordingly, following the work of Benjamin Ducol *et. al.*, (2016), the group focused its attention on the “exposure mechanisms” to violent extremism, the first steps on the pathway to violent behavior. The P2P group's rationale for highlighting

⁴ By European standards, Canada faces a limited (though acute) terrorism and radicalization challenge. Since 2001, only a handful of deadly terrorist attacks – all rudimentary in nature – have been successfully carried out in Canada by Canadian or foreign nationals, though a larger subset of plots have been foiled and thwarted. A range of disparate motivations have inspired perpetrators, including Salafi Jihadi, right wing, nationalist, and radical environmentalist sentiments and beliefs. Canadian intelligence estimates suggest that roughly 200 Canadian foreign fighters and militant sympathisers have travelled overseas to join a variety of censured groups, including those with links to the PKK, Hezbollah, al Qaeda, and ISIS.

these initial stages of radicalization was to generate, promote, and disseminate online content that countered material used to lure individuals towards a violent or extremist cause. As J.M. Berger (2016) illustrates, the individual at the early stages of the pathway to violent extremism tends to stay online, engaging with numerous news sources to examine the validity of the ideology they are beginning to interact with. The logic behind the group's approach was thus to target these individuals by creating a fact-based Canadian platform and narrative that would act as a form of digital intervention before the individual was able to partially or fully adopt a violent extremist ideology. The content shared during the campaign would likewise help counter the proliferation of "fake news" within social media more broadly by providing accessible and user-friendly academic research in short and concise messages (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, and Zammit, 2017). Given the prolific distribution of hate-filled online rhetoric that actively encourages violent extremism from disparate ideologies, the P2P group felt it necessary to provide information that actively countered these online voices.

Second, despite the broad and difficult objective of the PVE campaign, the P2P group was attuned to the numerous ethical challenges inherent to their work, and sought to explore ways to address the disparate forms of violent rhetoric evident online, rather than focus on a single, religious or ideological source or narrative. Violent, extremist, and hateful rhetoric online has countless sources. As Twitter's own transparency reports state, nearly 380,000 accounts were removed for promoting terrorism and political violence in 2016 ("Twitter Transparency", 2016). Despite Twitter's attempts, however, hate rhetoric is still prolific on its platform. For illustration, J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan (2015, p.51) found "between 65,000 and 95,000 ISIS supporters" on Twitter alone even after specific accounts had been flagged and deleted by Twitter. Daesh-supporters are not alone, of course. Right-wing extremist groups have a robust presence online as well. Stormfront, an online platform for white nationalists and "racial realists and idealists" whose motto is "every month is white history month," boasts approximately 290,000 members, nearly one million posts, and over 730,000 threads (Wong et al., 2015, p.52). And obviously, these figures hold for but two social media platforms of the thousands available online. Extremist rhetoric is pervasive. In

sum, working alone, the P2P group faced insurmountable difficulties in realistically countering the tsunami of digital content supporting violence and terrorism. But as part of a larger, bottom-up, global initiative tied to Facebook's *Digital Challenge*, the P2P group was joined by thousands of similar campaigns and websites, each contributing to a swelling amount of PVE content and material. At least, this was the logic the P2P group internalized while formulating its campaign.

Third, the P2P group faced a difficulty related to PVE more specially. Shahram Akbarzadeh (2013) argues that the main priority of most PVE campaigns directed against "Islamism" and "radical Islamism" is on providing educational initiatives meant to halt individuals with sympathies towards terrorist groups like Daesh. Many Islamic communities within Australia, however, are themselves focused on improving unemployment and feelings of alienation among Australian Muslims (Akbarzadeh, 2013). The idea that PVE education about "moderate Islam" will promote a safer society in no way addresses Akbarzadeh's findings about the systemic issues that many Muslims in Australia – the very target of these PVE campaigns – actually face on a regularly basis (2013, p.462). In sum, PVE campaigns risk spectacularly missing their mark. This is as true in Australia as it is in Canada.

Fourth, given these various challenges, the P2P group decided to anchor its campaign on providing what Omar Ashour (2010) calls "credible voices" against extremism. Ashour (2010) argues that credible voices are people deemed to be trustworthy within a particular community or target audience. The P2P group's campaign sought to identify and disseminate these voices. And more specifically, as local knowledge is often deemed more trustworthy and may translate more effectively online, the P2P group pulled voices from people and organizations from across Canada. Likewise, the group borrowed other insights suggesting that PVE campaigns are similar in form, function, and structure to other community and social campaigns sustained through social media; a formula for success – or going viral – exists. Merlyna Lim (2013) articulates this phenomenon and illustrates that to create successful online material, the message must contain a:

light package (content that can be enjoyed without spending too much time, can be understood without deep reflection, and usually has a hype-based component), *headline appetite* (a condition where information is condensed to accommodate a short attention span and oneliner conversations) and *trailer vision* (an oversimplified, hyped and sensationalised story rather than a substantial one or the oversimplified representation of actual information) (Lim, 2013, p.638).

The P2P group crafted its messages and content so that it was short, easy to comprehend, direct and visually appealing. Using Lim's formula the group used Facebook as its primary social media platform. Facebook was chosen not only to make better use of the advertising credit the P2P group received as part of the *Digital Challenge*, but also because Facebook has a wide user base with the campaign's target demographic and intended audience (Briggs and Feve, 2011; Lim, 2013).

Fifth, the P2P group also relied upon the burgeoning literature on counter-narratives, as it relates to political violence specifically, while formulating and tailoring the campaign itself (Braddock & Dillard, 2016). A number of recently published practical guides and handbooks for creating digitally-based counter-narrative material were consulted (Tuck and Silverman 2016; Radicalisation Awareness Network 2015; Zeiger 2016). The P2P group applied lessons culled from this literature to help shape its messaging, content, and delivery. For instance, the group sought to ensure its material was deemed trustworthy by the target audience, tailored its thematic messaging to mirror or match content used to promote radical or violent material online, and stylized its online content with the expectation that it would be immediately accessible and readily shared across Facebook and other digital platforms (Braddock and Horgan, 2016).

Finally, the P2P group based its campaign concept on the idea of utilizing a public health model approach to PVE. According to The National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control (2015), the model suggests that it is important to understand and define basic questions associated with violence in general while also identifying the stages associated with creating a long-term and widespread solution to the problem. The approach does not focus solely on violent extremism, but instead treats the phenomenon as being similar to other forms

of violence that governments and communities must contend with on a regular basis. The public health approach contains four stages: 1) Define the problem; 2) Identify risk and protective factors; 3) Develop and test prevention strategies; and 4) Assure widespread adoption (National Center for Injury Prevention, 2015). The model is appropriate for PVE because the macro-level approach encouraged by the first two stages of the process includes an all-encompassing assessment of numerous individuals and groups effected by the phenomenon under investigation. Stage One asks researches to consider the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the situation in general. Stage Two then asks whether there is a way to halt the phenomenon from taking place by introducing a remedy to the overall situation. The P2P group's PVE campaign was primarily focused on addressing these two stages, partly because the relatively short duration of the campaign itself meant that Stages Three and Four – testing the strategy and assuring adoption – could not feasibly be accomplished, and because the group had no ability to implement or even guide Canadian PVE policy in any direct way. The target of the campaign were men and women between the ages of 16 and 25. Due to the online nature of the campaign, the P2P group determined that this demographic was the most appropriate target, because as a cohort it has proven highly susceptible to extremist rhetoric and is especially active on various social media platforms (Gurski, 2017; Ozimek and Bierhoff, 2016).

Branding the Campaign: Turning an Idea into a Message

With its general approach and methodology decided, the group's next challenge was in developing a brand that appealed to its target audience. The P2P group began the branding process by conducting two, English-language focus groups with a culturally diverse group of graduate students at Carleton University. Roughly 40 individuals participated in these exercises. The expectation was that feedback provided by focus group participants would serve to improve the P2P group's content, material, style, and overall strategy. Participants were asked to comment on some of the material, imagery, graphics, and content used in the campaign. The major issue raised by participants involved the use of the "PVE" acronym in

the campaign's title. Many students admitted to first thinking that PVE sounded like a sexually transmitted disease, or another health-related issue, and were confused to discover upon further engaging with the material that it had anything to do with preventing extremist violence. The P2P group responded to this criticism by adding two hashtags to all of its social media posts – #IWantToStopViolence and #EngageWithPrevention – in order to immediately add appropriate context to the use of PVE in its title. The first hashtag was a purposefully benign message that a majority of viewers would immediately be willing to accept at face value – Who does not want to stop violence? – while the second hashtag was a more aggressive call to action to participate in the campaign itself – We want you to engage in prevention.

Next, the group hired a graphic designer to generate three separate campaign logos. The ubiquitous peace hand-sign gesture was chosen to represent the 'V' within PVE in order to better tie the potentially confusing use of the acronym with a political or social phenomenon in viewers' minds. Color-scheme was also carefully selected: certain colours, especially bright red and yellow, did not test well with focus group participants. Powder blue was deemed the most appropriate. Figure One presents the campaign's final choices in campaign logos.

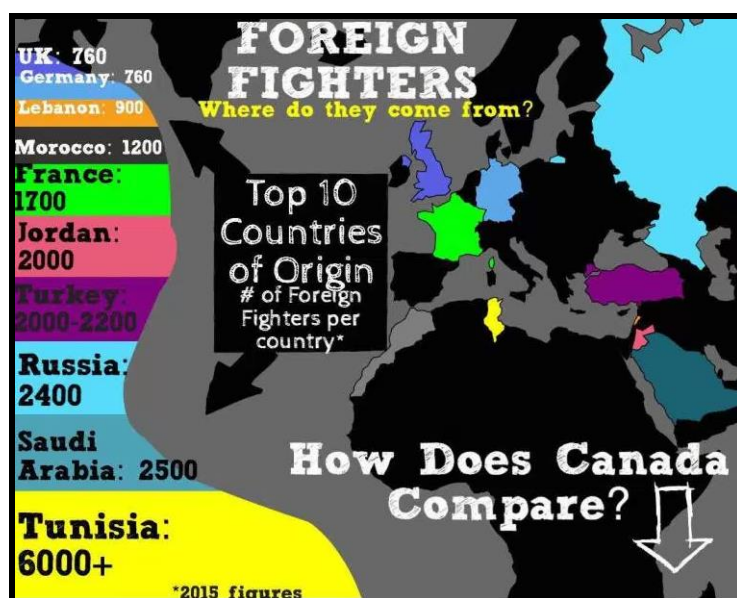
Figure One: *60DaysofPVE* and *The PVE Project* Logos





The P2P group also created several infographics, within which a lot of relevant information could be easily and appealingly portrayed. While the group sought to create attractive visual content brimming with colour and imagery, 30 percent of focus group respondents found the more visually complex graphics the least informative and most difficult to follow. As a result, the P2P group chose colour schemes that did not detract from the infographic's overall message. Figure Two is one example of an infographic used during the campaign.

Figure Two: *60DaysofPVE* Infographic



Keeping to Lim's (2013) formula, the group next created several mock Facebook posts with written content that varied in terms of character count. The group tried to stay as close in length to the 140 character limit established by Twitter to engage most effectively with viewers. However, this was not always possible. Again, focus group respondents noted a strong preference for quick, single sentence posts; they were likely to not only read the content, but were also more willing to "like" and "share" the content as well. Further, 92 percent of respondents agreed that a single-sentence post linked to a relevant news article from a reputable national or international source had a higher chance of being "liked" and "shared" by viewers. Figure Three provides an example of this type of post. In sum, based on its pre-campaign research, the P2P group determined that short, snappy posts linked to images, videos, and news sources that provided a brief synopsis to an event or issue, were the most attractive to individuals in its wider target audience.

Figure Three: Simple sentence post linked to a picture and news article



The Campaign's Objective: Thematic Engagement on a Daily Basis

The *60 Days of PVE* campaign included two sets of objectives. At the macro-level, the team sought to establish and run a unique, Canadian-themed, PVE initiative within a three-month timeframe, and create the online foundation – via www.thePVEproject.com – upon which future, similar social media campaigns could be launched. At the micro-level, the P2P group sought to accomplish other, more-limited objectives, including:

- *Post and share accurate and timely information:* To counteract growing online skepticism involving “fake news” the group sought to provide peer-reviewed, expert, and academic research related to PVE, along with reports and statistics provided by credible community organizations.
- *Utilize a Public Health Model:* The campaign took a broad initiative with PVE. Not only did the group seek to undermine extremist narratives, but its posts were also meant to disseminate public information on warning signs of people potentially on a violent extremist trajectory. The P2P group sought to infuse the campaign with information for individuals looking for further support. For instance, social alienation is a common theme highlighted by experts as a possible causal factor leading to extremism (Leiken, 2012). It was for this reason that details of support groups and agencies that help victims of bullying, racism, homophobia, and transphobia – along with toll-free telephone numbers and contact information – were included in the content published during the campaign.
- *Disseminate credible voices of community members, activists, religious leaders, and scholars:* The inclusion of a variety of credible voices was a key component of the campaign. Given the short timeframe of the project, the P2P group sought to quickly establish itself as a reliable resource of PVE-related content by developing and

providing original content with credible experts of PVE, who both lent the campaign their ideas and provided it with their official and open support.

The P2P group subdivided its *60 Days of PVE* campaign into ten themes, each corresponding to a given week within the campaign itself. Information on each theme was first disseminated on the *60 Days of PVE* Facebook page, which was also used to cite and share credible news sources linked to the specific theme and/or other content related to an evolving event or PVE story. Written excerpts and videos featuring the campaign's credible voices were also posted to the Facebook page. In total, the P2P group created over 140 unique Facebook posts during *60 Days of PVE*. All of the original content was then duplicated on the project's website, www.thePVEproject.com, which also housed further information about the campaign itself, links to other PVE organizations and relevant literature, and contact information for support groups. The latter information was provided under several thematic sub-headings, including, Reporting Problematic Behaviour, Interfaith/Intercultural Dialogue, Victim of Hate Crime/Discrimination, and Support Networks (immigrant services and community health centres, etc.).

The P2P group set out its thematic objectives with great sensitivity: the group was acutely aware of the numerous ways in which its campaign could lead to forms of "othering" and create feelings of exclusion within certain community groups. As John Cohen explains, there is a sense of over-policing experienced by some groups (particularly Muslim groups) who are constantly sought after and singled out during PVE campaigns. What this means in practice is that PVE initiatives may actually alienate certain individuals and groups (Cohen, 2016). Given the potential for this pitfall, the P2P group's campaign focused on all forms of violent extremism, including right-wing extremism, xenophobia, bullying, homophobia/transphobia, and Daesh-inspired violence. In sum, the group purposefully cast a wide net around PVE, addressing numerous forms of harmful rhetoric, and challenging the many distinct but equally harmful assumptions prevalent within Canadian society. A breakdown of the ten themes follows.

Week One: Trends in Canada

The main objective of week one was to address several key issues and problematic assumptions that could be used and relied upon to promote extremist causes in Canada and abroad. For instance, posts included messages that spoke to the likelihood of Canadians being victimized by terrorism, along with illustrations of the safe and secure way in which Canada had accepted thousands of Syrian refugees since December 2015. The posts were meant to be factual and direct, useful for dispelling ill-informed views and public misperceptions. Figure Four provides a sample of the infographics posted to Facebook for this week.

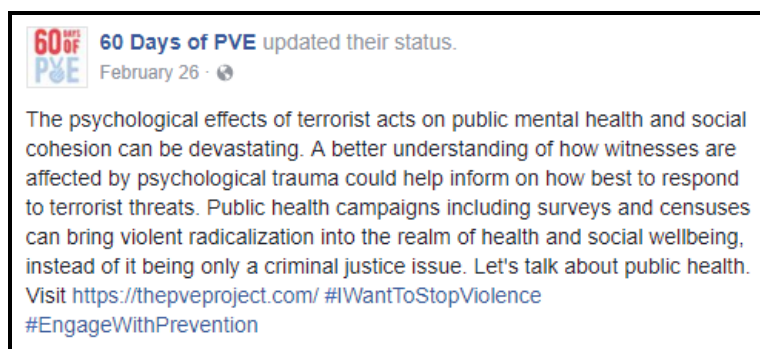
Figure Four: Infographic on Canadian Trends



Week Two: Public Health and PVE

The main focus here was to dispel fears among Canadians that mental illness was causally linked to extremism, that individuals suffering mental health issues were more inclined to join violent groups. And yet, the P2P group also sought to illustrate why greater access to mental health services more broadly, was a net benefit to Canadian welfare and public safety. The point the group was trying to convey was that mental health professionals were at times best positioned and trained to engage with individuals on the pathways to violent extremism. Figure Five showcases the type of post utilized during this week.

Figure Five: Post on Public Health



Week Three: Online Recruitment Strategies

Week three sought to introduce participants of the campaign to the prolific nature of online hate speech. The utilization of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have made the preaching of hate and the selling of extremist ideologies both simpler and much more perverse. To highlight how groups like Daesh and other extremists are active online, the P2P group utilized this week to show just how severe online propaganda in general had become, by highlighting statistics of traffic to extremist web pages for instance. However, the group also provided links and resources on how to report problematic material on various social media platforms, including on Twitter and Facebook, so that viewers were properly equipped to help create a less violent and more tolerant web space. For examples, see Figure Six.

Figure Six: Posts on Online Recruitment



Week 4: Media Literacy

The purpose of week four's material was to provide participants with the tools needed to locate and evaluate credible news and media sources online. At issue is the prevalence of purposefully misinformed material disseminated online, material often referred to as "fake news". Knowledge and truth have become hotly contested, partly as a direct result of the proliferation of "alternative" sources of online information, such as the conspiratorial messaging of "info wars", who create and peddle fake news. These sources of online misinformation have helped spread hateful and racist narratives, which at times can be internalized by audience members who may become increasingly alienated from society. Furthermore, fake news sources have likewise been able to sway audiences and sell them on the "unapologetic truth", which usually contains problematic or false statistics and a bigoted

conclusion. A main thrust of this week's material was to address "fake news" and the distrust of media and traditional authority figures more broadly by providing academic research to aid individuals with determining the validity of an online source (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle, and Zammit, 2016). The P2P group also provided a list of questions viewers of any online content could ask themselves when gauging and determining the content's credibility and reputability.⁵

Figure Seven: Post on Media Literacy

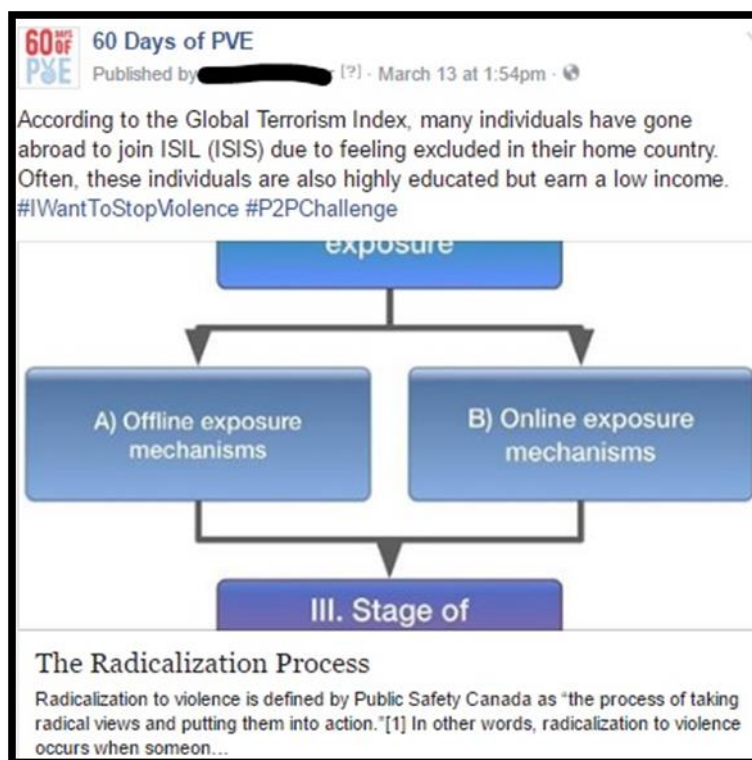


⁵ Questions were added on the PVE Project website under a link titled, "Staying Critical Online". Tips include: *Look for the URL, Look for the date, Be conscious of your bias, Be aware of the site's bias, Is there any evidence for the article or website's claims? Was it taken from somewhere else? Can you find it somewhere else? Can you find it from a more credible source of information?*

Week 5: Foreign Fighters and Lone Actor Terrorism

The theme of week five was primarily on religiously-inspired extremists, notably supporters of Daesh that acted alone in facilitating violence and terrorism (lone actors), or had travelled abroad to engage in terrorism (foreign fighters). Information provided this week focused on some of the factors behind this phenomenon, along with some of the life circumstances of these individuals. The challenge with addressing numerous profiles of extremists is that there is no single or definite life-trajectory for individual foreign fighters or lone actors (Gurski, 2016). To put all of this into some Canadian perspective, the P2P group compared data on foreign fighters and lone actors between Canada and other countries as a way to highlight local and global trends, and to further allay domestic fears.

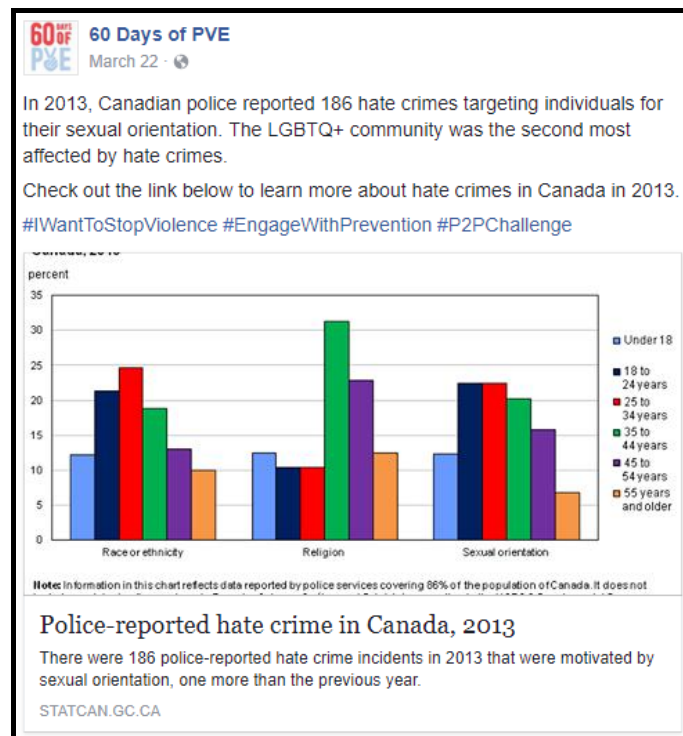
Figure Eight: Post on Foreign Fighters



Week 6: Gender and Sexuality in PVE

The purpose of week six was to illustrate how gender and sexuality relate both to victims of terrorism and to counterterrorism. The roles of gender and sexuality are especially misunderstood by the media, academics, and practitioners when discussing violent extremism. Multiple misconceptions are evident (e.g. that women facilitate, but do not participate, in violent extremism) that are harmful in providing a holistic understanding of political violence. Week six was dedicated to understanding the various ways in which people of all genders and sexualities fit into PVE: as perpetrators, as victims, and as actors of prevention. Some posts, for example, contained information on the women and girls in the lives of violent foreign and domestic extremists. Other information highlighted how mothers actively champion and facilitate violence in their sons' lives (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007). The purpose here was to unpack public stereotypes associated with gender in terrorism.

Figure Nine: Post highlighting Gender/Sexual Discrimination



Week 7: Right-Wing Extremism

Week seven focused on examining the affect right-wing extremism has had in Canada over the past several decades. The material highlighted the growth of domestic right-wing extremist groups and noted the intensified nationalist and populist sentiments in Canada and elsewhere that have surged in recent months and years in part as a response to the global and Syrian refugee crises. The P2P group included a few posts that explored the life circumstances of individuals involved with right-wing violence and terrorism. A central theme embedded within the week's material was that in some countries, including Canada, violent right-wing extremism poses as great a potential threat as Islamist terrorism to public safety, and that there are valid concerns on disproportionate coverage of the latter (Perry and Scrivens, 2016).

Figure Ten: Post on Right-wing Extremism

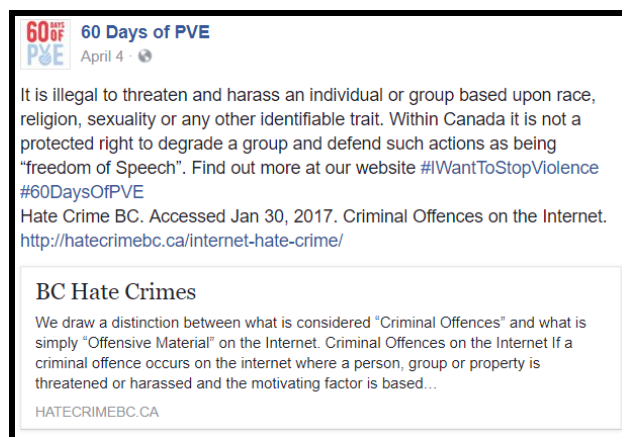


Week 8: Radical Thought and Radical Action

The purpose behind this week was to explore the limits of speech both on and offline. A lively debate pits considerations of hateful rhetoric against the use of “facts” or “truths”. The posts used here highlighted the various ways in which both researchers and demagogues

can encourage hateful or demeaning interpretations of certain people and groups by means that are not considered illegal (Soriat, 2014). At issue is finding the right balance between free expression and freedom from discrimination and libel. The P2P group explored these themes by assessing the limitations placed on Canadian law enforcement when trying to deal with harmful rhetoric (especially online) that is created in the United States, where fewer limits on speech exist (Agarwal, 2011).

Figure Eleven: Post on Radical Thought and Action



Week 9: Deradicalization and Disengagement

As the campaign reached its final weeks, the P2P group shifted gears to illustrate and showcase how individuals involved with violent extremism can walk away from it. The group explained to its audience the meaning of different terms, like “disengagement” and “deradicalization,” and illustrated how and why some individuals involved with violent extremist movements may eventually leave them (Horgan, 2009). The information provided highlighted some of the rationales former extremists used and relied upon to leave radical and violent groups and milieus. The central theme running through this week’s material was the idea that radicalization, even violent radicalization, is at times a two-way process: once an extremist, not always an extremist. Understanding how and why individuals turn their backs on terrorism is a cornerstone of PVE and counter-radicalization.

Figure Twelve: Post on Disengaging from Terrorism

60 Days of PVE
April 5 · 🌐

What makes a person vulnerable to radicalization? There is no one clear answer, but the Center for the Prevention of Radicalization to Violence in Montreal tells us that factors include: social isolation, identity malaise, a troubled adolescence, sensationalized public and media discourse and an existential crisis.

#IWantToStopViolence #EngageWithPrevention #P2PChallenge

Learn more here:... [See More](#)

SOME VULNERABILITY FACTORS

RELATIONAL	PERSONAL	SOCIAL IDENTITY	PSYCHOLOGICAL	EXTERNAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disaffiliation % of contacts in circles Leaving from circle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Troubled adolescence or difficult transition to adulthood Difficult life events (death of a loved one, job loss, etc.) Existential or spiritual crisis (pre- or post-conversion) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other- or self-imposed social isolation Identity malaise Sense of being stigmatized or discriminated due to one's beliefs or origin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychological frailty or disorders Psychological rigidity Episodes of psychological distress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Polarized and polarized societal debates Government positions poorly understood nationally and internationally Highly sensationalized public and media discourse Extremist discourse and propaganda that is not accessible

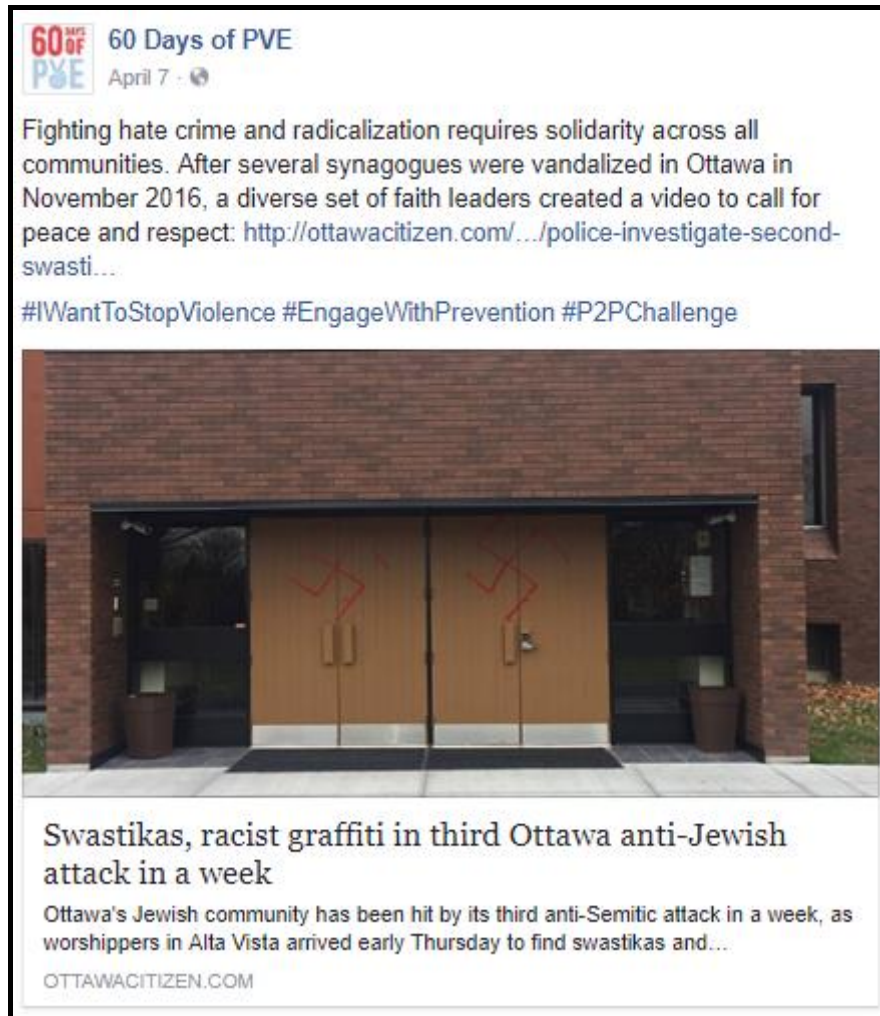
The Radicalization Process - info-radical.org

The process of radicalization leading to violence follows a nonlinear, non-predetermined path, shaped by multiple factors—personal and collective, social and psychological. No single element suffices, in and of itself, to explain the...

Week 10: Inclusion

The final week of the campaign was a call to action, designed to introduce viewers to the various ways in which they could become part of the solution. The assumption here is that rooting out alienation and bigotry from any community requires that ordinary people find ways to interact with others on a more regular basis. Community grows from a sense of shared purpose. The P2P group highlighted material on local community oriented causes that actively contributed to fostering inclusion and cross-cultural or religious dialogue between people from various faiths and backgrounds. By addressing the ways that viewers can make a difference in their community, especially by making others feel welcome as opposed to marginalized, the process of inclusion can help decrease some of the factors that cause alienation and distrust amongst various communities.

Figure Thirteen: Post on Inclusion



Credible Voices: Building Trust through Outreach

One of the greatest considerations that guided the P2P group's community outreach strategy was attempting to balance alienation: The P2P group understood that by choosing to associate themselves with one group or individual, that they would risk alienating themselves and the campaign with an entire other group of people. Reaching out to local police or government personnel, for instance, risked alienating the P2P campaign with certain minority communities and groups. Another related challenge was to recognize that while the P2P group

wanted to use the testimonials and blog posts of some individuals due precisely because of their experience or expertise, doing so could be a risk to the campaign itself. For example, the group recruited Mubin Shaikh to its campaign, who provided a 10-minute video for use online (See Figure Fourteen). The video was the campaign's most popular, viewed nearly 8,500 times.

Figure Fourteen: Mubin Shaikh Video



And yet, Mr. Shaikh is a somewhat controversial and polarizing figure in Canada. A former extremist, Mr. Shaikh worked undercover as an intelligence and police informant during the 2006 “Toronto 18” counterterrorism investigations. The P2P group had to anticipate how best to avoid a potential backlash from its audience by relying on Mr. Shaikh’s message. It did so by explaining the importance and purpose of integrating messages from former extremists into PVE dialogue. Mr. Shaikh provided the group with a second video detailing this logic.

Another factor the P2P group was forced to consider was the negative effect to the campaign of including messages and credible voices addressing only one form of violent extremism. The group’s objective was to treat all forms of extremism equally. In an attempt to

prevent a lopsided focus, the group categorized the type of contributors and credible voices it wanted to attract into three separate categories, including:

- *Local and national community leaders.* This group included ethnic and religious leaders, as well as other leaders from various community organizations. It also included individuals who either wanted to share their stories about how they were impacted by radicalization or violent extremism, or wanted to lend a supportive statement towards multiculturalism.
- *Academics and experts on topics ranging from extremism and radicalization, to community outreach and religion.* Individuals included in this category were those that approach the study of political violence or PVE from a professional or academic interest or position.
- *Former extremists.* Individuals within this group have had a unique experience and could speak to the issue of PVE in ways that others could not. Additionally, not only can these individuals empathize with those in similar positions, but they can also add information and address misconceptions that the general public may have about radicalization.

Not all contributors were comfortable with being filmed. Others did not have the time. Instead, some credible voices offered to write a written contribution. These contributions were posted on the Facebook page as well as the main website under “Testimonials”. All told, the P2P group attracted the written and oral contributions of twelve credible voices.⁶

⁶ Several other people and organizations facilitated the campaign in a variety of ways. Daniel Koehler, Dr. Joshua Kilberg, Dr. Ghayda Hassan, and The Canadian Council for Muslim Women provided feedback on the campaign along with contact information on credible voices. Eric Rosand provided a link to a report he published with the Brookings Institute. And the Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization did provide the campaign with an original video, but it arrived several weeks after the campaign had ended; unfortunately the P2P group was unable to use it.

Participating local and national community leaders included Christianne Boudreau who wrote, “Parents and PVE” (March 10, 2017). Boudreau spoke about the struggle she faced after her son was killed fighting for Daesh. She is a vocal example of a forgotten aspect of extremism: family members who suffer, often silently, while watching a loved one change in dramatic and violent ways. Imam Mohamad Jebara, Chief Imam and Resident Scholar at the Cordova Spiritual Education Center, provided another voice, discussing the relationship between religion, Islam, and terrorism. He stated: “There really is no ultimate truth; that statement itself is erroneous” (March 15, 2017). Rabbi Michael Goldstein, Executive Director of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa, also provided a written piece. Rabbi Goldstein and his congregation were victims of anti-Semitic graffiti, spray-painted on the doors and walls of their synagogue in 2017. In his testimonial Rabbi Goldstein addresses the perpetrator: “To the individual who perpetrated this crime, I would offer him support and love. He is clearly misguided, and on a path of hate that is leading his life in a destructive direction... and that the joy of friendship and love far surpasses the temporary satisfaction he achieved from his hate” (March 31, 2017). Another religious leader that provided a credible voice for the campaign was Rabbi Catherine Clark of the Congregation Or Shalom in London, Ontario. Rabbi Clark explores the effect hate crimes have had not only on the Jewish community, but also on other minority communities within Canada (April 03, 2017). Finally, an anonymous graduate student at Carleton University wrote a testimonial that discussed her experience of both living in fear of hate crimes while also defending her Islamic faith (Anonymous, 2017, February 12).

Academic and expert voices included Dr. Alex Wilner, assistant professor of international affairs at Carleton University (and co-author of this article), who provided the campaign with two video submissions that functioned to introduce viewers to radicalization and PVE. In one video he argues that “PVE starts with all Canadians,” suggesting the link between communal involvement and countering violent extremism (March 14, 2017). Other academics involved in the campaign included Dr. Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, associate

professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, who provided a written testimonial on the role media has in portraying violence and extremism. "Several patterns of coverage are worrisome," she writes, "especially given their influence on our perceptions of extremism" (March 21, 2017). And Dr. Lorne Dawson, University of Waterloo, Ontario, professor and director of the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society (TSAS), revisited the relationship between religion and radicalization. "Recognizing that religion can be a primary motivator for terrorism," he explains, "need not lead to the unwarranted condemnation of Islam" (March 26, 2017). James O. Ellis III, project lead for the Canadian Incident Database, provided a testimonial on the nature of right-wing extremism in Canada, where he argued that: "Canada has been home to a collection of right-wing extremists that have been surprisingly influential in the global movement associated with white supremacy, Neo-Nazism, Identity Christianity, Creativity, skinheads and others" (March 15, 2017). Rebecca Wallace – a PhD candidate at Queen's University – also contributed to the campaign. Her work focused on how media can play a role in challenging the negative stereotypes that are perpetrated against Syrian refugees entering Canada. Wallace wrote that, "news coverage is not static and can project more positive images of refugees in Canada. News media...have the capacity to re-humanize the coverage by dismantling stereotypes of refugees that are driven by threat and fear" (Wallace, March 29, 2017). Finally, Ryan Scrivens, a PhD student in Criminology at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, provided a detailed exploration of Canadian right-wing extremism online. Scrivens addressed the prevalence of extremist websites and debated the pros and cons of shutting them down. He argued that policies aimed solely at removing extremist sites could have negative consequences: "[t]hey just go underground again, to the dark web, or create another web forum...It isn't going to fix the root of the problem" (Scrivens, April 03, 2017). In sum, the academic voices included in the campaign sought to introduce the audience to the disparate debates and complexities involved in studying radicalization and PVE.

Mubin Shaikh was the only former extremist the P2P group managed to interview, despite efforts to secure other participants. Shaikh's video, "Terrorism in Islamic Costume",

spoke to numerous aspects of violent extremism and terrorism in general. At one point Shaikh honed in on the fact that Muslims are disproportionately the victims of terrorism: “Muslims are on the front lines against extremism and terrorists...we are all working together to keep people safe” (March 13, 2017). Despite the value of Shaikh’s contribution, the campaign’s inability to secure and provide similar content from other former extremists was considered a setback by the P2P group.

60 Days of PVE Posts: Quantitative Findings

The P2P group’s social media campaign generated a great deal of data to summarize and analyze. The data lend themselves to quantifying the effects of the campaign. The group created and shared nearly 150 unique posts on the *60 Days of PVE* Facebook page. In total, the campaign’s Facebook page received nearly 1,500 “likes” and an equal number of “follows.” Posts were shared 550 times. And cumulatively, posts had a reach of nearly 75,000 people. Finally, the social media campaign also drove audience participants to the P2P group’s webpage at www.thePVEproject.com: the page received nearly 700 unique visitors, and over 1,700 views. Figure Fifteen provides a breakdown of shares, comments, and reactions to material posted on the Facebook page, while Figure Sixteen provides a snapshot of the views and unique visitors to the campaign website.

Figure Fifteen: Facebook Performance

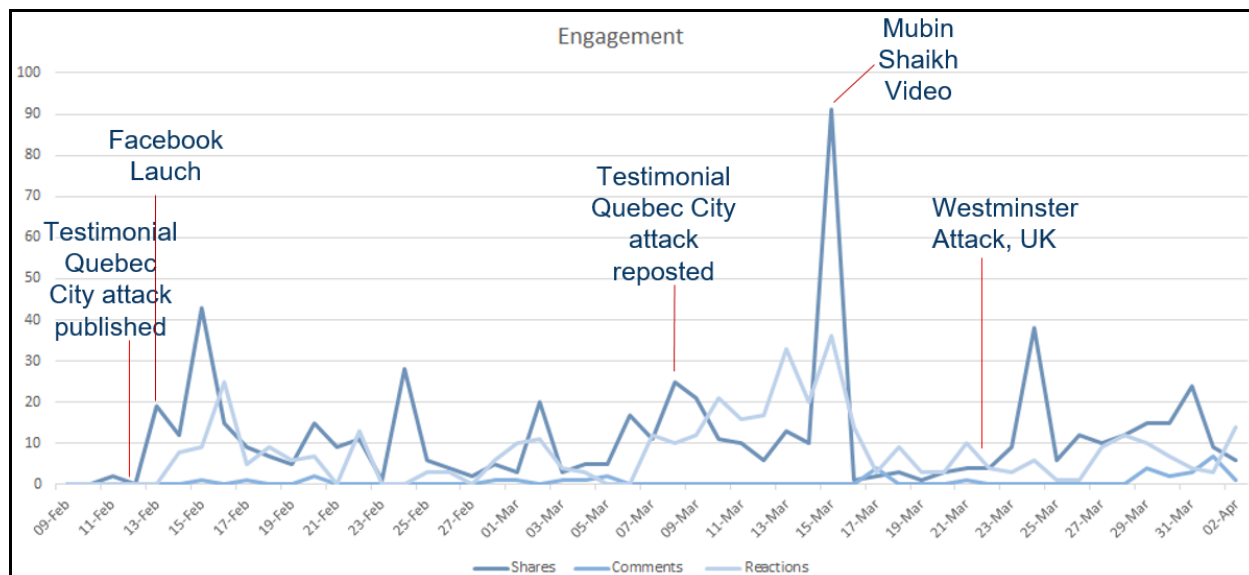
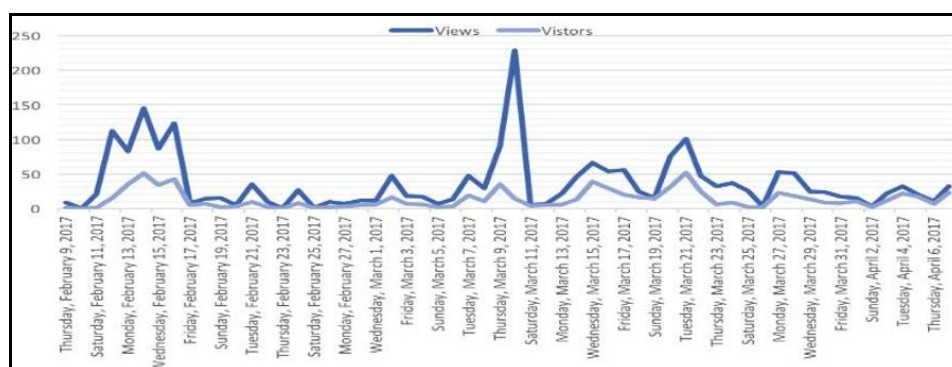


Figure Sixteen: Website Performance



As the graphs illustrate, certain events drove data trends upwards. For instance, the official launch of the Facebook campaign (February 13) drove visits to the website, which had been established a few days prior. That was the intent of the two-pronged approach to the campaign. The publication of the campaign's first testimonial on February 12 also generated a surge of traffic to the webpage even before the Facebook page had been launched. The testimonial was an emotionally moving piece written anonymously by a Carleton University graduate student that described what it was like to live in Canada as a practicing Muslim

following a far-right terrorist attack on a Quebec City mosque, on January 29, 2017, in which six Muslim men were killed. At least part of that initial surge in interest was the result of local university students sharing the post and link to the webpage among themselves in solidarity with the student. The Mubin Shaikh video, posted on March 13, generated another noticeable bump in activity in mid-March; it proved to be the most popular of all posts. And, finally, posts linking to stories referencing the March 22, 2017 Westminster terrorist attacks in the United Kingdom also generated a fair bit of traffic.

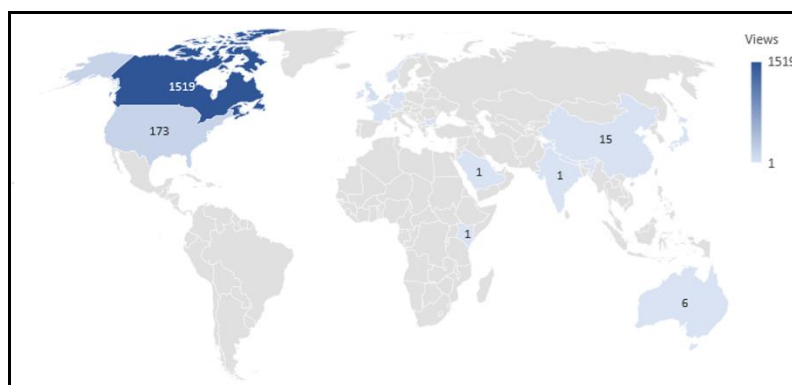
Eleven Facebook posts in particular performed especially well on at least two of three measurements (e.g. reach, clicks, engagement). Figure Seventeen breaks that data down in greater detail. Of interest, eight of these eleven top-producing posts were original material generated by the P2P group for the purposes of the campaign, including four infographics (e.g. *0 Americans*; *Risk Factor*; *Learn More*; *Thinking Critically*), two testimonials (*Disproportionate* and *Quebec* (a reposting of the Carleton student testimonial)), one video (*Mubin Shaikh*), and the launch itself. The P2P group considered the overall popularity of its original content one of the campaign's notable successes. The three remaining top posts included a media link sharing an update following the Westminster attack, and two externally-generated videos on addressing racism (*Witnessing* and *Social Media is Flooded*).

Figure Seventeen: Top Posts

Date	Time	Post	Type	Reach	Click	Engagement
06-Apr	14:00	Disproportionate Media Coverage	Link	1900	55	106
27-Mar	13:12	Westminster Attacks	Link	1700	67	60
13-Mar	15:33	Mubin Shaikh	Video	8300	224	47
10-Mar	13:35	Thinking Critically Online	Photo	465	21	18
09-Mar	13:00	Quebec	Link	2500	50	122
07-Mar	10:30	Witnessing Racism	Video	646	34	8
02-Mar	13:11	Learn more about PVE	Photo	674	46	12
28-Feb	11:41	Social media is flooded	Video	386	36	9
22-Feb	9:00	Risk Factor for Radicalization	Link	599	46	14
16-Feb	13:11	0 Americans killed by terrorists from travel ban countries	Status	619	47	28
13-Feb	15:20	Launch	Status	834	12	38

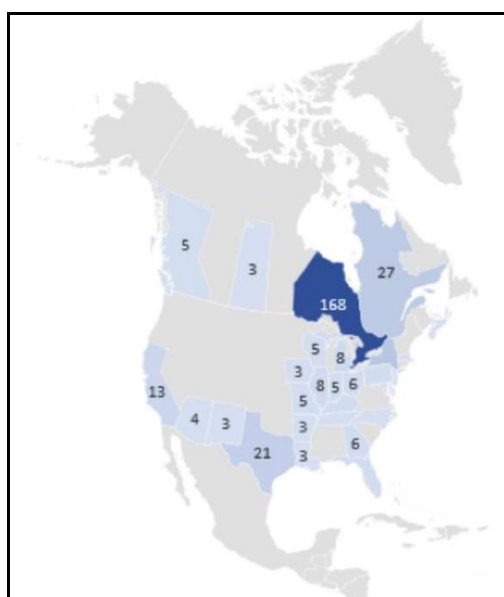
Finally, while the P2P group sought to primarily inform Canadians on issues related to political violence and PVE, the campaign reached a more geographically-dispersed audience than intended. Figure Eighteen breaks down the global scope of the campaign's reach by views of the campaign website.

Figure Eighteen: Website Views Across the World



While the vast majority of the campaign's viewers were Canadian in origin, a disproportionate number of Facebook "likes" came from the United States. A total of 93 "likes" were American in origin, compared to 168 "likes" from Ontario – the province in which the campaign was based – and only another 35 from the rest of Canada. Figure Nineteen provides the regional breakdown.

Figure Nineteen: Facebook "likes" by Region



Challenges and Difficulties: Lessons Learned and Moving Ahead

Despite the campaign's success in creating a brand, running a generally successful and popular social media campaign, and attracting considerable attention, the P2P group faced numerous challenges and difficulties. By way of conclusion, what follows is a discussion of these challenges, which provide a lessons learned framework for groups and individuals interested in orchestrating a similar peer-to-peer PVE social media campaign in the future.

Some challenges were unique to the P2P group itself. For instance, the group had originally wanted to target and engage with a younger audience, including teenagers, both

online and offline. The original concept included running live, educational seminars on PVE with local high school students. However, as a Canadian university-affiliated and student-led initiative, doing so required that the group seek and obtain research ethics approval from the university before engage fully with individuals and minors, a complicated and often time-consuming process. Given time constraints, the P2P group decided against applying for research ethics, and was forced to quickly change tack such that the campaign itself targeted adults only, and engaged with them superficially and exclusively online. Another challenge unique to the P2P group stemmed from the manner in which the project team functioned. The group used a democratic process in all internal discussions and debates, such that decisions were voted upon by all 10 members of the team. The group's decision-making was done during in-person meetings when possible, and via a private Facebook group. Some sensitive debates ensued, especially in discussing and editing content and in responding to posts from viewers. While the group preferred to debate matters and make decisions in-person, the group's size, and its members' conflicting work and academic schedules, became a limiting factor to organizing regular meetings. Ultimately, many important debates were relegated to the online discussion platform, where a degree of nuance in decision-making was lost. It is possible, even perhaps somewhat likely, that other university-based groups may run into similar constraints when establishing their own PVE campaigns.

Timing was another major campaign challenge. As noted, the P2P group's timeline for the campaign was an especially tight one. The group needed to research, develop, launch, and maintain a social media campaign within a three-month timespan, but could only meet in person as an entire group for three hours a week, during class hours. By the time group-members were able to coordinate their first meeting in early January 2017, they discovered that they had less than three weeks to launch the campaign itself. Besides creating a hectic few weeks, the condensed timespan also resulted in significant programming problems. For instance, members of the group were learning about CVE, PVE, and radicalization, all the while designing the structure and content for a social media campaign. Furthermore, few group members had ever run a social media campaign before. The learning curve was steep.

And not only did the group have to create a coherent social media concept, it also had to establish a clear direction for the campaign while juggling a host of other ethical and practical dilemmas. All of this meant that as the group launched its campaign, many core elements of the campaign itself were still being developed and designed. Perhaps the greatest drawback was that the group was unable to “test” material with focus groups during the preliminary planning stages of the campaign; only after the launch was new material vetted with members of the target audience. That ultimately led to some harsh, eye-opening feedback that had to be retroactively applied to the campaign. That proved difficult and awkward to do. However, given the harsh criticism of both the group’s logos and messaging format from both focus groups, the campaign was able to adapt and make appropriate changes. Clearly, the campaign would have benefited greatly from having acquired this feedback prior to launching the project. Finally, as a Canadian campaign headquartered in Ottawa, the country’s capital, the social media campaign really ought to have been conducted in both official languages, French and English. Time constraints, however, forced the group to operate primarily in English, which significantly narrowed the campaign’s appeal and reach within the country. The quantitative analysis presented above illustrates that the campaign fared rather poorly in Quebec, Canada’s predominantly Francophone province.

Another challenge the P2P group faced involved engaging and attracting credible voices to participate in the campaign despite not having any evident credibility of its own, at least at the onset of the campaign. The timeline forced the group to launch the campaign before the community engagement process was set, such that the group’s website and Facebook page were relatively bare with respect to original content and outside contributions. Only the campaign’s logos and a few infographics were completed when the campaign was officially launched. Asking individuals to put their reputation on the line for an organization yet to establish itself proved difficult until the group had proven its ability to attract credible attention. Several prominent local politicians and officials, a few professors, and some community leaders declined to participate in the campaign in the opening weeks. Only after a few testimonials and videos were published did the P2P group break through the invisible

credibility barrier and attract greater community engagement more easily. The content published early in the campaign provided the group with a frame of reference with which to validate its project with other individuals and groups. At that point, the rate of external participation increased and the P2P group was able to more easily solicit material from a range of credible voices.

Another challenge the group encountered was ensuring its content met EdVenture's standards, even though these standards seemed to shift slightly as the campaign wore on. For instance, despite no mention of it in the program rules, EdVenture notified the P2P group several weeks following the social media campaign's launch that all content posted online, including the material generated by credible voices, had to remain apolitical and refrain, under all circumstances, from supporting, condemning, or even *mentioning* any political party in the US or abroad. Herein, the P2P group was asked to edit one of its Facebook posts: "President Trump's proposed travel ban" became the "United States' travel ban". Tweaking 20-word Facebook posts, however, was an easy fix. The more serious problem was ensuring that content provided to the P2P group by credible voices adhered to these standards as well. At the time of EdVenture's notification, the group had already reached out to a number of community leaders, some of whom had agreed to develop content for the campaign. The timing put the P2P group in the precarious position of having to edit, and at times even censure, the work of independent contributors after having secured their participation. Similar problems arose later on during the campaign. For instance, the P2P group was unable to engage with several potential credible voices because of their political affiliations or positions. And the group's working relationship and credibility with other individuals and organizations was likewise hampered because some partners could not fully express themselves on the P2P platform. Finally, an extra burden was placed on members of the P2P group, who had to become extra vigilant when posting external content and media links to the Facebook page. Many well-written, informative pieces on the subject of terrorism and violent extremism were not shared during the campaign because they made direct reference or

allusions to ill-advised, or counterproductive, policies and strategies taken by political organizations inside and outside the United States.

Finally, the group's greatest challenge involved accurately measuring the impact the campaign had on viewers. By what measurement was *60 Days of PVE* a success? Or, a failure? Despite creating a considerable amount of online traffic and attention to its posts and original material, the P2P group was unable to know what effect it had actually had on its target audience. The campaign's statistics, as outlined above, do not tell the whole story. Even if one post was viewed 9,000 times in 24 hours, that metric said little as to the effect the post actually had on viewers. How did the post contribute to a person's knowledge about radicalization, or opinion about political violence? Did the post influence a person's own process of radicalization? How, and in what direction? How does a collection of Facebook "shares" and "likes" translate into altering hearts and minds? With little time and nearly no money with which to conduct surveys with viewers who had engaged with the campaign's content, the P2P group was ultimately unable to gauge whether and how its campaign had any meaningful PVE effect.

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