POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH INNOVATION LAB

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Informed Storytelling on Radicalization, Extremism & Violence Prevention One-Sheet

Violence motivated by hate, ideology, or politics is not random or inevitable. Radicalization unfolds over time through a complex, interruptible process shaped by unmet needs, social isolation, manipulative narratives, and enabling online and offline communities. How violence is portrayed in media matters: simplified or sensational depictions can normalize harm and obscure the many opportunities for prevention and intervention.

Drawing from research by the **Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL)** at American University, this guide offers evidence-informed principles for portraying radicalization, violence, and prevention with nuance, realism, and impact. Violence is not inevitable. Stories that show the full arc—from vulnerability to manipulation to possible intervention and recovery—can reduce harm, counter propaganda, and empower audiences to be part of the solution.

Core Storytelling Principles: Do's and Don'ts

- **Don't portray radicalization as a single moment:**
  Radicalization is a *process*, not a snap decision. Violence is the final act, not the opening scene. Focusing only on the attack erases the upstream causes—grievance, isolation, identity crisis, conspiratorial thinking—and suggests violence is unavoidable. The drama lives in the slow drift and in the missed (or seized) opportunities for intervention by friends, families, educators, and communities.
- **Do show how conspiracy theories create permission for violence:**
  Conspiracy theories offer belonging, identity, and a sense of insider knowledge. Over time, community matters more than belief. These narratives gradually reframe violence as "defense" rather than aggression, casting perpetrators as protectors, heroes, or truth-tellers. This moral licensing fuels harms such as white supremacy, misogyny, antisemitism, political violence, and attacks on democracy.
- **Don't make perpetrators seem exotic, brilliant, or unstoppable:**
  Most extremist violence arises from common, human vulnerabilities—unaddressed mental health needs, trauma, social disconnection—combined with ideologies that justify harm. Portraying perpetrators as masterminds or unreachable extremists obscures the reality that prevention is possible and discourages public action.
- **Do offer warnings and resources:**
  Audiences often recognize themselves or others in these portrayals. Include brief content warnings and normalize intervention. Example language:
    - **Violence Prevention Notice:** Warning signs often appear before violent acts. If someone shows fixation on violence, makes threats, or obsesses over weapons or past attacks, taking action can save lives. Ask direct questions and help connect them to professional support—or contact authorities if danger is immediate.

Violence as a Preventable Public Health Issue | Radicalization and violence can be understood as a **three-stage pathway**, each with prevention opportunities:

1. **Primary Prevention – Before risk escalates**
   Harmful norms, disinformation, and violent ideologies create gateways to violence. Prevention focuses on reshaping social norms, building digital literacy, and strengthening social-emotional skills—especially for youth navigating unsupervised online spaces.
2. **Secondary Prevention – When warning signs appear**
   Individuals experiencing stressors and lacking protective factors may gravitate toward extremist beliefs for meaning or empowerment. Multidisciplinary, relationship-based interventions—family, school, peers, clinicians—can reduce risk by addressing underlying needs and rebuilding connection.
3. **Tertiary Prevention – After violence occurs**
   Rehabilitation and reintegration prevent reoffending. Effective programs address not only ideology, but trauma, mental health, instability, and social supports. Redemption and change are possible; incarceration alone rarely reduces long-term risk.

How PERIL Supports Creators

- Script reviews & narrative consultation
- Character risk profiling and alternative plot pathways
- Realistic portrayals of online ecosystems
- Pre-release narrative risk assessment
- Trainings, workshops, and writers' room support
- Companion discussion guides and curricula

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