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Dealing with Frustration: A Grounded Theory Study of CVE Practitioners

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Understanding how best to proceed in the prevention of violent extremism is a significant concern for researchers and practitioners. This paper draws on interviews with thirty 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) practitioners, using a grounded theory approach focusing on those working at grassroots level, to highlight the way in which these individuals are mining their own personal experiences in their approaches to this work. Driven by a sense of frustration with the 'accepted wisdom', this involves drawing on personal skills and experiences to establish themselves as credible actors, thereby carving a space for themselves within a growing CVE industry. Moving beyond anecdotal evidence using grounded theory, this paper offers a systematic analysis of the experiences of these frontline practitioners. In considering what it is that practitioners are doing, and the context that pushes them to adopt this approach, this research offers significant insights into what is actually happening in the area of practice, contributing to understandings of the prevention landscape as a whole. This paper highlights the tensions between actors operating at different levels within the CVE sphere, with discrepancies in resources and power playing a central role.

Keywords: CVE; grounded theory; frontline practitioners; CVE funding; CVE policy

Countering violent extremism is a major policy preoccupation for governments around the world. While little evidence exists to justify such an approach, CVE has been receiving vast amounts of attention and resources, indicating that efforts in this area are considered worth pursuing. This assumption that CVE works has led to a focus on measuring and evaluating CVE interventions and programmes. Rather than building upon these assumptions, and contributing to the increasing volume of research that takes the importance of CVE as a given, the present research seeks to offer a different perspective. By focusing on grassroots CVE practitioners, this contribution details the issues facing these individuals and, taking a grounded theory approach, details the way in which they are seeking to overcome these issues.[1]

In keeping with the grounded theory methodology, the first section of the paper, rather than a traditional literature review, provides macro-level context to the day-to-day work of the participants in the study, outlining the problems around understandings of CVE, drawing on policy and literature to do so. The following section details the methodology used in this study, elucidating the reasons for choosing grounded theory and focusing on grassroots practitioners. These introductory sections set the scene for a discussion of the way CVE practitioners draw heavily on their own skills and experiences in an effort to neutralise the frustration they feel as a result of poor policy and a lack of resources. In doing so they are creating a space for themselves within the growing 'industry' that is CVE, and seeking to work on their own terms in a manner that they, based on their skills and experiences, see fit. The final section of the paper considers the relevance of these experiences within the broader CVE context, drawing on existing literature. This paper questions the emphasis placed on community actors and community engagement within policy, suggesting that there are increasing tensions between different actors, particularly around issues of resources, power and influences.

1. What is CVE? Contextualising the Study

Despite the fixation on CVE within government policy, there is little consensus as to what constitutes work in this area. Holmer (2013, 2) notes: "[c]ountering violent extremism is a realm of policy, programmes, and interventions designed to

[1] This paper is based on a four-year PhD study completed (2018) at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, and funded by the Irish Research Council. That work details the concepts outlined here in greater depth, and offers specific information about each participant. It is available online at: http://doras.dcu.ie/22591/.

prevent individuals from engaging in violence associated with radical political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and groups". Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit (2016) contend that CVE should be understood as a "policy spectrum". While consulting the policy documents offers little by way of clarification regarding a definition, it does offer an indication of the main points of focus for policymakers.

The aim of the *Prevent* policy in the United Kingdom is "to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" (Home Office 2011, 6). Its approach is "to be seen as focused on extremism; for it is clear that for many who have committed terrorist acts extremism is the foundation, the driver for terrorism" (Home Office 2011, 3). In US policy, violent extremists are described as "individuals who support or commit … violence to further political goals" (Executive Office of the President of the United States 2011). Within these documents there is an emphasis on the notion of 'radicalisation' as the process in which CVE should intervene:

The United States must work to counter violent extremism by dissuading individuals from radicalizing to violence in the first place … recognize when an individual becomes ideologically-motivated to commit violence, and intervene before an individual or a group commits an act of violent extremism (Department of Homeland Security 2016, 1).

Radicalisation also holds a significant place at EU level with "… prevent[ing] people from turning to terrorism by tackling the factors favouring its spread, which can lead to radicalisation and recruitment," a priority (European Commission 2019).

Despite this policy fixation, the idea that there is an identifiable pathway into violence has been widely contested. Notwithstanding criticisms, these understandings of 'radicalisation' have led to a focus within policy on the role of ideology and the ways in which this should be countered, with an emphasis placed on counter-narratives and on the internet as an ideological battleground. "[C]ontesting the online space" features prominently in the UK's Counter-Extremism Strategy (Home Office 2015, 24), and an entire section of the 2016 US *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (SIP) (Executive Office of the President of the United States 2016) is devoted to "Communications and Digital Strategy". Similarly, the EU Internet Forum was developed to help protect the public from the "spread of terrorist material and terrorist exploitation of communication channels to facilitate and direct their activities", the internet being "the most critical battleground" (European Commission 2016).

In the academic context, while a variety of approaches have been taken within discussions of CVE,[2] the preoccupation is with measuring and evaluating programmes, seeking to ascertain what works. The fact that this industry is developing without the work or input of the various actors being grounded in any kind of knowledge base is one of the starkest criticisms that CVE faces. The problems with grounding any action in an evidence base is compounded by questions as to what CVE actually is. This lack of a clear definition, argue McCants and Watts (2012) "not only leads to conflicting and counterproductive programs but also makes it hard to evaluate the CVE agenda as a whole and determine whether it is worthwhile to continue".

While understandings around CVE are difficult to pin down, it is, without doubt, "a rapidly expanding field of practice" (Heydemann 2014, 1). In addition to the widespread policy focus, an ever-increasing number and variety of actors, from government officials and offices to Silicon Valley corporations, from educators, NGOs and private companies to concerned individuals, are seeking to, and indeed are, becoming involved in work in this area.

2. A Grounded Theory Approach

In seeking to gain insight into the day-to-day work around CVE, the present contribution focuses on those working at grassroots level to try and prevent young people from being influenced by a variety of violent extremist ideologies. Given the exploratory nature of the research in question and the desire to allow for issues to arise within the data, as opposed to approaching the project with a specific framework in mind, the decision was taken to adopt a classic grounded theory approach.

Grounded theory is a predominantly inductive method, focussed on the concerns of the participants in a given study. In this case, the interview data of thirty grassroots CVE practitioners was coded and analysed following classic grounded theory principles to identify the participants' main concern and the ways they seek to resolve this concern. To arrive at this point, all the elements that form the grounded theory package were adhered to, that is, data collection, coding, and analysis of interview data through memoing, theoretical sampling and constant comparison. It is through constant

[2] Including in the resilience framework (Weine 2016); educational framework (Aly et al. 2014); peace-building perspectives (Holmer 2013); public health perspective (Harris-Hogan, Barrelle and Zammit 2016; Weine et al. 2016; Weine et al. 2009; Bjørgo 2013); mental health perspective (Weine et al. 2017); and communicative approaches (Archetti 2015).

comparison that the diversity within the data is captured in a grounded theory study (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2008, 114), with theoretical sampling determining which lines of enquiry to follow and where to go next for further data collection based on emergent codes and categories. As such, grounded theory is rooted in the *discovery* of theory from data: via the researcher's engagement with the systematic procedures of grounded theory, codes and concepts emerge, from which a theory is eventually developed. Rather than starting a study with predetermined ideas about the study, or a preconceived theoretical framework, the focus is on following the data to carry out research and conceptualise a problem that is of relevance to individuals working in a given area. The measure of a grounded theory includes the questions: "Does the theory work to explain relevant behaviour in the substantive area of the research? Does it have relevance to the people in the substantive field?" (Glaser 1998, 17).

2.1 Grounded Theory: Arriving at the Substantive Focus and the Participant Group

With a grounded theory study, data analysis begins immediately, once the first pieces of data have been collected. The early analysis in this study contributed to decisions concerning the direction of the study, and the eventual participant group. Early in the study it became clear that there was an issue around the ever-increasing number of actors becoming involved in this area, and the idea of the growth of a CVE industry. The growing emphasis on the use of social media for work in this area was also apparent. The decision was taken to interview a variety of actors, operating at different levels, to explore and compare their experiences of working to counter violent online extremism. However, through early data analysis, a significant gap emerged between the main concerns of those working at government level compared to those working at community level.[3] Returning to grounded theory methodology, Glaser and Strauss ([1967] 2008, 56) suggest that "When beginning his [her] generation of a substantive theory, the sociologist establishes the basic categories and their properties by minimising difference in the comparative groups." CVE policy documents were also reviewed at this stage of the research, with ideas of localism and the unique position of local communities to recognise the threat of violent extremism prominent in UK, US and EU policies. Dolnik (2013, 3) observes that much of the research within the field of terrorism studies relies on a government perspective which brings its own biases, with research skewed by the comparatively easier access to government data and the one-sided nature of research funding. The comparison of interview data with policy data and relevant literature at this stage of the research also contributed to the decision to focus on grassroots CVE practitioners.

Another issue that came up repeatedly in the data at an early stage was the narrow focus on the Muslim community within CVE policy and in reporting of CVE issues. Based on this analysis it was decided that those working at grassroots level to counter *varieties* of extremist messaging should be included in the study. This would provide the opportunity to test whether the codes and categories identified by that stage would be similar, or if the variety of extremism involved would see changes in the patterns within the data. Glaser and Strauss ([1967] 2008, 47, emphasis in original) explain that with theoretical sampling the question is: "*what* groups or subgroups does one turn to *next* in data collection? And for *what* theoretical purpose?" Having followed the early codes and concepts emerging in the data, and using theoretical sampling, actors working to counter violent Islamic extremism, right-wing extremism, and nationalist/loyalist extremism in the context of Northern Ireland emerged as the participants of this study.

In total, interviews were conducted with thirty 'grassroots' CVE practitioners seeking to counter a variety of extremist ideologies. Participants were identified in various ways, including online searches, those encountered at relevant events, conversations with colleagues and recommendations from participants. As 'CVE practitioner' is not a specific set job description, interviewees included former (violent) extremists ('formers'), youth workers, psychologists, artists, writers, musicians, imams, individuals who felt there was an issue in their community but were not motivated to join 'official' efforts, and NGO staff. Interviews were conducted in the United States, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Denmark and Sweden.

2.2 Frustration: A Main Concern of Grassroots CVE Practitioners

Following the grounded theory methodology, the frustration they experience in their day-to-day work emerged as a main concern of those interviewed. Meanings, understandings and perceptions of CVE are determined by bodies such as gov-

[3] In the early stages of this research, interviews and informal discussions were held with a variety of actors, including, for example, US State Department employees and the founder/CEO of US-based EdVenture Partners, coordinators of the industry-government-academia partnership Peer2Peer: Challenging Extremism. See https://edventurepartners.com/peer2peer/.

ernments, media and violent extremist organisations themselves. The parameters within which practitioners work are defined by other actors with vastly more power and resources. This is further compounded by the lack of funding available for their own work.

One participant explains the diverse challenges that leave her feeling stuck. These include the problems caused by government actors: "The government initiated this CVE, it feels as though there's some government intrusion in this and that has also been very counterproductive" and, as a result, the Muslim community "always has to justify itself", leaving many members "on the defensive", thus making her work more difficult. This idea is echoed by participants across the spectrum.

One of the greatest sources of frustration for those interviewed for this study is the limitations and restrictions associated with a lack of resources, with one participant citing the biggest challenge he faces as "lack of governmental support":

> [t]hey [the government] have their preferred people they go to. They've already handpicked the people they want … poverty pimps, you know, issue pimps … They're the ones who are the darlings because they take good photos and they're in the right political party and they're in the right environment. People like me … scare the government. The government doesn't want to touch us. They don't want to touch us because they know that we are also against the government …

The frustration is compounded by the magnitude of the problem and the lack of practical (as opposed to bureaucratic) efforts: "… the difficulty is just the magnitude of the problem, the numbers … we need a lot more people on the ground, not in the office". While practitioners are frustrated by the effects of policy and media, they are stuck with the way things are, to a degree; they cannot overturn policy or escape the media.

3. Mining the Personal to Carve a Space of One's Own

Analysing the interview data via the grounded theory process, as detailed, revealed the way that these grassroots practitioners – who lack the power and resources to tackle the source of frustration head on – draw on their own personal experiences to create a space for themselves within the CVE industry. This is a space from which they can operate in a way that allows them, based on their skills, experience, and knowledge, to control the work they do as opposed to having the terms dictated by others.

3.1 Mining the Personal

Clear throughout the interview data was the fact that the personal is central to everything that the practitioners in this study do. I introduce the idea of "mining the personal" to conceptualise the belief that the individual's personal experience is something unique, special, and significant; it is something from which details, information, and understandings can be extracted for use elsewhere. Mining accesses materials that cannot be created in any other way, they cannot be 'artificially' manufactured. This is how these practitioners feel about their own personal experiences; they cannot be replicated. They result from specific events in these individuals' lives. The value thereof is potentially both economic and knowledge-based. It offers these actors the possibility to earn a living within a growth industry, but also offers the industry a type of knowledge that other actors may not have.

Mining the personal happens in a variety of ways for these participants, beginning with the way these actors become involved in CVE work. Types of personal motivation include: (i) bystander personalising; (ii) personalising responsibility; and (iii) personal involvement. With bystander personalising, a participant is motivated by something they have witnessed or heard about but that does not involve them directly. They identify closely with those who have been involved in an act of violence: according to one participant, "… it was a little bit disconcerting … it really disturbed me that this young person that looked a lot like me and had a very similar background as mine could so easily do something like that". Being motivated to act through personalising responsibility involves witnessing something happening around you, within your community, but feeling that no one else is addressing the issue. Those who should be dealing with it are not doing so, or are not doing so effectively. Participants feel the need to step up and fill the void created by this lack of action. They strongly believe they have something to offer and are driven to take responsibility: "… unfortunately our government hasn't done it, no government has ever done it [dealt with violent extremism], and we're doing it". For some participants, personal involvement is central: *it is personal*. These are instances where individuals feel obliged to act based on their own direct experiences of violent extremism. Former violent extremists ('formers') and survivors of violent extremism are motivated by what has happened in their own lives, and a desire to prevent this happening to others: "We're doing this work [CVE] … because it's our duty … we created this mess and it's our duty to fix it." There are also instances where a participant feels strongly that their community is under at-

tack, in a way that affects them personally, and they are therefore compelled to act: again, it is personal. This comes across in the interview data of both Muslims working in this area and those working with "marginalised and demonised" communities in Northern Ireland.

Mining the personal continues throughout the work of these practitioners. Very often they draw on their own resources to enable them to carry out their work. Almost every participant in this study referred to the difficulties they experience in funding their work; the vast amounts of money set aside for CVE programmes do not appear to be trickling down to them.[4] Participants refer to working in a volunteer capacity and using often ending up out of pocket in trying to get their work done. Even those in paid positions are often left out of pocket, their funding not adequately covering all elements of their work: "Even as a person who does this full-time, I still have to pay out of my own pocket to cover the cost of the registration and travel and everything" [referring to attending a work-relevant event]. Practitioners draw not only on their personal financial resources, but also on their personal time, often working in a voluntary capacity: "At the moment we're confined to what we are doing on a voluntary basis and we will continue to work because we believe in the work that we are actually doing."

Along with drawing on their own resources, a central element to the work involves these practitioners drawing on their personal life experiences and their skills and capacities, often repackaging and repurposing these to different ends. Rather than having to develop a whole new skill set to work in a CVE capacity, these practitioners are taking what they have learnt elsewhere, whether as a lawyer, for example, a business person, a violent extremist or an artist, and bringing these skills to their CVE work. Through mining the personal and emphasising their own experiences, these CVE practitioners are seeking to establish themselves as both credible and authoritative actors in the CVE sphere.

3.2 Carving a Space of One's Own within the CVE Industry

Through mining the personal, these grassroots CVE practitioners are carving a space within the CVE sector from which they can operate on their own terms, as they see fit, drawing on their own knowledge rather than the 'accepted wisdom' of policy-makers, governments and media. They wish to remain independent and carry out their work on their terms. This is a key way in which they deal with the frustrations they suffer at the hands of government and media. Participants create situations whereby they can draw on their skills and knowledge, applying them in the way that they see best fit. Referring to a workshop he had organised, one practitioner writes: "It was my kind of talk, *not a talk on the terms of others*." These practitioners are moving beyond CVE etiquettes; they do not want to be restricted by, or weighted down by unhelpful policy and terminology. Indeed, many of those interviewed eschew the term CVE altogether, or seek to resist the CVE gaze, given its negative connotations. As one practitioner puts it, the government "has issues pending with the community".

To be able to do the work they wish to do, to reach the numbers of people they are seeking to reach, to be as effective as possible, this has financial implications that transcend the ability of participants to simply draw on their own resources. While participants in this study refer to the lack of resources made available to them, they also note the difficulties they would experience in taking funds from certain sources, were they available to them; practitioners do not want to risk their work being tainted by any funding they might receive. One practitioner based in Northern Ireland refers to having been offered funds by the Police Service of Northern Ireland for community development work: "It is too direct," he explains, noting that while community development work may bring indirect benefits for the police force, this cannot be seen as being the aim; the focus remains firmly on young people and improving their lives.

Some practitioners find ways around these issues to some degree, drawing heavily on goodwill and their own connections, and, occasionally, finding support from alternative sources. Examples include crowdsourcing online, alternative financial sponsorship that is not government-tied, or enlisting high-profile supporters to draw attention to their work. Essentially, the individuals interviewed in the course of this research are seeking to be unrestricted in both a financial sense and in terms of having autonomy over the approach they wish to take. They do this by creating situations that al-

[4]Some of the interview data indicates that the situation in Sweden and Denmark is different, with practitioners working in a grassroots manner, but employed by the local municipality and receiving a regular salary. This suggests that government and local government structures may have an effect here. It is important to stress that not everyone interviewed in these countries is in this position; individuals and NGOs operating independently of the local municipality face the same issues as those elsewhere.

low them to draw on their own skills, knowledge and experiences and apply these as they see best fit.

4. Recontextualising the Study: Community versus Government and Industry?

"No theory stands alone, it must be integrated into the yet bigger picture of the substantive area" (Glaser 1998, 207). This study started with a focus on the data and the concerns of the participants, thus determining the focus of the following discussion and how it ties in with existing knowledge. By considering their experiences within the wider context of CVE, this research offers a perspective not often considered within international relations and security studies; the day to day work and experiences of a group of individuals who are dealing with the fallout from policy and media are elevated.

The British 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy (Home Office 2015, 17) refers to building a partnership with all those opposed to extremism, stating: "We will go further to stand with and build the capacity of mainstream individuals, community organisations and others in our society who work every day to challenge extremists and protect vulnerable individuals." In the United States, countering violent extremism is guided by two principles: "(1) communities provide the solution to violent extremism; and (2) CVE efforts are best pursued at the local level, tailored to local dynamics, where local officials continue to build relationships within their communities through established community policing and community outreach mechanisms" (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary 2015a). At the EU level the Radicalisation Awareness Network has a Youth, Families and Communities working group (European Commission 2017), which has noted that "engagement with – and empowerment of – youth, communities and families, are critical in the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism".

Despite the focus on community input, empowerment and engagement in CVE policy documents, this is not reflected in the findings of this study: those practitioners working at community level are not, despite what policy documents suggest, supported and encouraged in this endeavour. Green and Proctor (2016, v, emphasis in original) emphasise the need to invest in *"community-led prevention"*:

> Governments should enable civil society efforts to detect and disrupt radicalisation and recruitment, and rehabilitate and reintegrate those who have succumbed to extremist ideologies and narratives. Community and civic leaders are at the forefront of challenging violent extremism but they require much greater funding, support and encouragement.

The data analysis within this study calls this element of CVE policy starkly into question: there is no evidence that local communities are being supported and the grassroots practitioners interviewed – all working at community level around community engagement – draw on their own resources, experiences and connections to facilitate the work they are doing.

This raises questions about how smaller, individual or community-based actors can compete with large, powerful industry actors not only in carrying out their day-to-day work, but in reaching a position to exert any influence on CVE policy or the agenda set by governments. Funding is a significant and complex issue. Large amounts of funds are, ostensibly, being made available for CVE work. However, where exactly this money is going remains unclear. Rosen (2016) has noted this funding shortfall: "Too many national governments continue not to provide local governments and communities with the resources needed to develop tailored community engagement programs to identify early signs of and prevent radicalisation to violence." He goes on to point out that "the $11.5 million per day the United States spends on its military presence in Iraq is more than the $10 million the Department of Homeland Security was given this year to support grassroots countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts in the United States, and nearly twice as much as the State Department's Bureau of Counterterrorism received this year to support civil society-led CVE initiatives across the entire globe." In a 2015 report on CVE in America, Vidino and Hughes (2015, 18) find that: "Resources devoted so far to CVE have been limited, and CVE units within each relevant agency remain understaffed." One of their key recommendations is that more funding be provided, something which then–US President Obama recognised at the Washington CVE summit (White House Office of the Press Secretary 2015b): "We're going to step up our efforts to engage with partners and raise awareness so more communities understand how to protect their loved ones from becoming radicalized. We've got to devote more resources to these efforts." However, changes in administrations can bring sweeping policy changes, including in the area of CVE. Since 2017, the Trump Administration has revoked funding from organisations that had been offered grants under the CVE Grant Program, particularly for organisations working to counter right-wing extremism. Other organisations, largely Muslim groups, have refused to accept the funding that was made available, uncomfortable with the shift in political climate (Edwards Ainsley, Volz and Cooke 2017).

Clearly it is not only the lack of funding itself that is problematic. If that were the only issue to consider, this could be relatively easily resolved. However, the funding issue is further complicated by issues of credibility and the ability for community-based practitioners and projects to remain independent. The lack of support for community and civic 'leaders' has been noted in research conducted by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, with a key recommendation of their 2016 report Turning Point: *A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism* being to further the support available for community-based CVE practitioners. However, this research calls into question recommendations such as Green and Proctor's (above); such suggestions can be regarded as simplistic and criticised for not taking the complexities sufficiently into account. Questions around agendas and agenda-setting abound. While the practitioners in this study feel frustrated with poor CVE policy, there is little they can do; the political focus on CVE issues allows politicians to set the agenda and define the threat, ultimately setting the tone for overall discourse (de Graaf and de Graaf 2010). This discourse is underscored by media and popular culture, and academia is increasingly playing a role in shaping agendas in this area. Industry-academia partnerships are increasingly the norm, with CVE not exempt from these effects, *Peer 2 Peer: Challenging Extremism* being a good example. Investment and funding in academic research helps shape and determine research agendas, with the European Framework Programme for European Research and Technological Development (FP7) and follow-up programme Horizon 2020, for example, increasingly prioritising research that adheres to the aims of the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network Centre of Excellence.[5] For the practitioners in this study, it is not simply about receiving funds, it is about being able to work to their own agendas, not those dictated by others. It is difficult to imagine how they can be in a position to do so when other actors are in much more powerful positions with far more resources available to them.

Beyond direct funding, Khan (2015) suggests that: "Some large corporations are starting to provide training and access to their services and facilities [for practitioners and NGOs], but no one is willing to run or sponsor initiatives yet." Such partnerships are being encouraged, but again are yet to take off in any significant way. The struggle for resources, but also the negative impact that donor funding can have on grassroots activism was the subject of a July 2017 *Guardian* blogpost by Sunil Babu Pant. Pant, an LGBTIQ activist in Nepal, argues that the professionalisation of the work of activists associated with donor funding is something to be resisted. Not only do attempts at professionalisation result in NGOs being deeply indebted to the donor, marking the "start of submission to a system that repeatedly disempowers and controls", it often renders local knowledge and experience worthless: "The injustices, abuses and deprivation taking place may be a well-known fact to the local communities but without research carried out using a methodology acceptable to the donor, the local knowledge retains no value and is considered 'anecdotal'." Such sentiment echoes the fears of the participants of this study: they need money to survive, but they cannot work effectively if viewed as under obligation to the government or other funders. This suggests parallels between the individuals in this study and other small organisations and individuals working in other areas. Pant ends his *Guardian* piece emphasising the power associated with remaining independent:

> My advice to human rights movements is to remain a grassroots and loosely organised movement for as long as you can. Don't become a "professional" NGO for the sake of it. Becoming "professional and efficient" is becoming corporate. You will deliver much better if you stay a raw, innocent and effective activist. If not, you may as well shift to the corporate world.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights some of the issues facing frontline CVE practitioners and, by doing so, offers insights into the CVE field more generally. Through interviewing grassroots CVE practitioners and analysing this data according to the grounded theory principles, it became clear that much of what is happening in the wider CVE field is a source of great frustration to them, and affects the way they approach their work. Throughout their work they try to overcome what they consider to be poor policy combined with a lack of resources. Despite the difficulties faced, these practitioners are very driven in the work they do, and draw heavily on their own personal experiences, skills and resources to facilitate this work. At the very least, this suggest a considerable gap between policy and practice; what is happening on the ground, for these practitioners at least, in no way reflects the focus placed on community engagement within policy documents. This research has highlighted further gaps, including the government focus on online extremism as a distinct area;

[5] The EU Radicalisation Awareness Network was founded by the European Commission in 2011 to gather CVE experts and frontline practitioners from all over Europe: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network_en. One of the aims of the Commission is to shape the CVE research agenda (European Commission 2014).

the practitioners in this study see their online and offline work as inseparable. Similarly, issues around ideology and counter-narratives, which feature prominently within CVE policy and are emphasised as key elements of CVE work, were not as significant for those interviewed as a part of this research.

These gaps aside, CVE practitioners working at grassroots level perceive CVE policy as having a negative effect on their day-to-day work. Their perception of CVE policy colours all that they do and the approaches they take to their work. Coupled with the lack of resources, this renders them powerless in the face of a growing CVE industry, unable to have any significant influence on the direction CVE policy is taking. The solution is not as easy as simply making more funds available. The question, rather, is how to support these individuals – many of whom are increasingly becoming significant voices within CVE, albeit on a small scale – while allowing them to get on with and go about their work unimpeded. This would be a real sign of the empowerment that CVE policy purports to emphasise.

This study captures one aspect of the work of the interviewed grassroots CVE practitioners, and was taken as far as possible with the available resources, the available participants and the available time. Of course, it is always possible that additional data collection might uncover something beyond the variations in the data that have been presented here. There are also practical limitations, including context and geography. As such, this study speaks only to the experiences of those who participated therein. Given that grounded theory focuses on conceptualisation rather than description, with concepts independent of time and place, this is something that is potentially of significance in future studies in this area. While an effort was made to test the concepts across those seeking to counter different varieties of violent extremism in different locations, they were also tested across time by interviewing those working in the context of Northern Ireland. Of course, the US, Great Britain, Northern Ireland and EU contexts, while not identical, are not entirely dissimilar. How applicable this theory would be for those operating in other regions of the world is thus up for question.

One of the benefits of taking a grounded theory approach to this study is that significant areas for future research become apparent. There is much scope for comparative studies of different actors in the area of CVE, for example, comparing the results of this study to a similar exploration that focuses on those actors operating at a different level within the industry. This study into one subset of CVE actors has uncovered a variety of insights into the field as a whole; a comparison study would certainly expand on these insights and offer a different perspective from which to consider work in the area and the role of policy. The impact of different democratic structures on grassroots CVE activity is also worth exploring further. The data collected here indicates that there is some variation between grassroots CVE practitioners based in Sweden and Denmark compared to those operating in the United Kingdom and the United States. This should be explored further to determine the effects that different governance arrangements have on the actors in question and their ability to carry out their day-to-day work. Expanding the geographical focus of the study would also be beneficial and would potentially go some way towards dealing with the limitations of this study.

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