

PEACEMAKERS

WHEN FORMER EXTREMISTS GO PUBLIC

What are the risks as our
appetite grows for new stories?



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 LIFEAFTERHATE

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear reader,

Welcome to the latest issue of Peacemakers and the first of 2020!

Life After Hate is in the midst of scaling up our programming to meet a growing demand. Every day more men and women are asking for our help as they disengage from hate groups, looking for answers and forging new identities.

We are also opening more cases for friends and families seeking support. Since August 2017, we've taken on more than 360 cases, more than 40 percent of which involve family members. It can be a lonely road for everyone involved. We know that firsthand. And the current atmosphere is not making it any easier.

What we are witnessing today is the ramping up of efforts to repackage, rebrand, and revitalize a hateful and dehumanizing environment from which "lone wolf" attackers eventually emerge to kill in the name of white supremacy ideology.

That's what makes the voices of formers so important. But the decision to go public with very personal stories — so often fraught with shame and guilt — comes with its own set of risks to the individual and society. Formers open themselves up for emotional and physical attacks. And any missteps on their part can undermine the entire field. We explore this more in our cover story, "[Risks of the Spotlight](#)," on P. 4.

In this issue we also want to give you a glimpse into the everyday work of our ExitUSA interventionists.

"Radicalized individuals often isolate themselves from society, family, and friends," says Robert Örell, program director of ExitUSA. "Their impulse is to invalidate all outside information, and they often respond combatively to feedback or efforts to engage them, especially when it comes to questioning their decisions."

Very often that's the starting point for Robert and Life After Hate intervention workers. While there's a deep complexity to our work, it is always informed by compassion first, and supported by our years of academic and professional training.

[Turn to P. 10 to read more.](#)

As always, we thank YOU for all your support. Our mission is to help people leave the violent far-right to connect with humanity and lead compassionate lives.

In pursuit of social evolution,

Sammy Rangel, MSW, CSAC
Executive Director, Co-Founder
Life After Hate



RISKS



IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The first time Thomas Engelmann spoke to a reporter about his involvement with the Aryan Brotherhood — and his near-fatal attempt to get out — he was a nervous wreck.

He trusted the reporter, but he didn't know how the story would come out. When it finally did in April 2018, the lengthy, 2,000-word article went national within the USA Today network of newspapers. And Engelmann said he felt something he hadn't come close to feeling until then.

"Validated, finally," he said. "I had been shot, and I had been erased, my whole identity had been erased by that point. I was a dead man.

Illustration: High-profile news events, like the white supremacist rally in Newnan, GA in 2018, increase the public's appetite for personal stories from former extremists.

GOING PUBLIC

"I was finally able to come out and say, 'This is my story. This is how it happened.' And once I was able to do that, I felt at peace."

Firsthand accounts from formers (people who have left violent extremist groups, literally and ideologically) offer a unique and credible look at violent extremism. They humanize the issues, help galvanize public support, and point to solutions.

But as media outlets here and abroad become increasingly more interested in the topic, new risks are emerging:

- Formers who go public are vulnerable to emotional and physical attacks.
- Any missteps on their part can undermine the industry of violence prevention.
- Journalists who rely on the wrong sources, fail to vet facts, or publish overly-simplified stories mislead the public and hurt the credibility of other formers, researchers, and practitioners in the field.

"The importance of these narratives are multifaceted," said Pete Simi, a researcher who has been studying violent far-right extremism for two decades. "One of them seems to be that it helps us better understand how people can disengage from these groups."

"So, if our understanding of the disengagement process is informed to some extent by inaccuracies, then we are going to develop interventions that get it wrong."

THE RISK TO FORMERS

Contemporary voices in the world of violent extremism have a powerful arsenal of tools their predecessors did not: Social media.

In the days before Twitter and Facebook, formers often needed an organization's help to share their story. For Angela King, a former neo-Nazi skinhead who helped found Life After Hate, that organization was the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center.

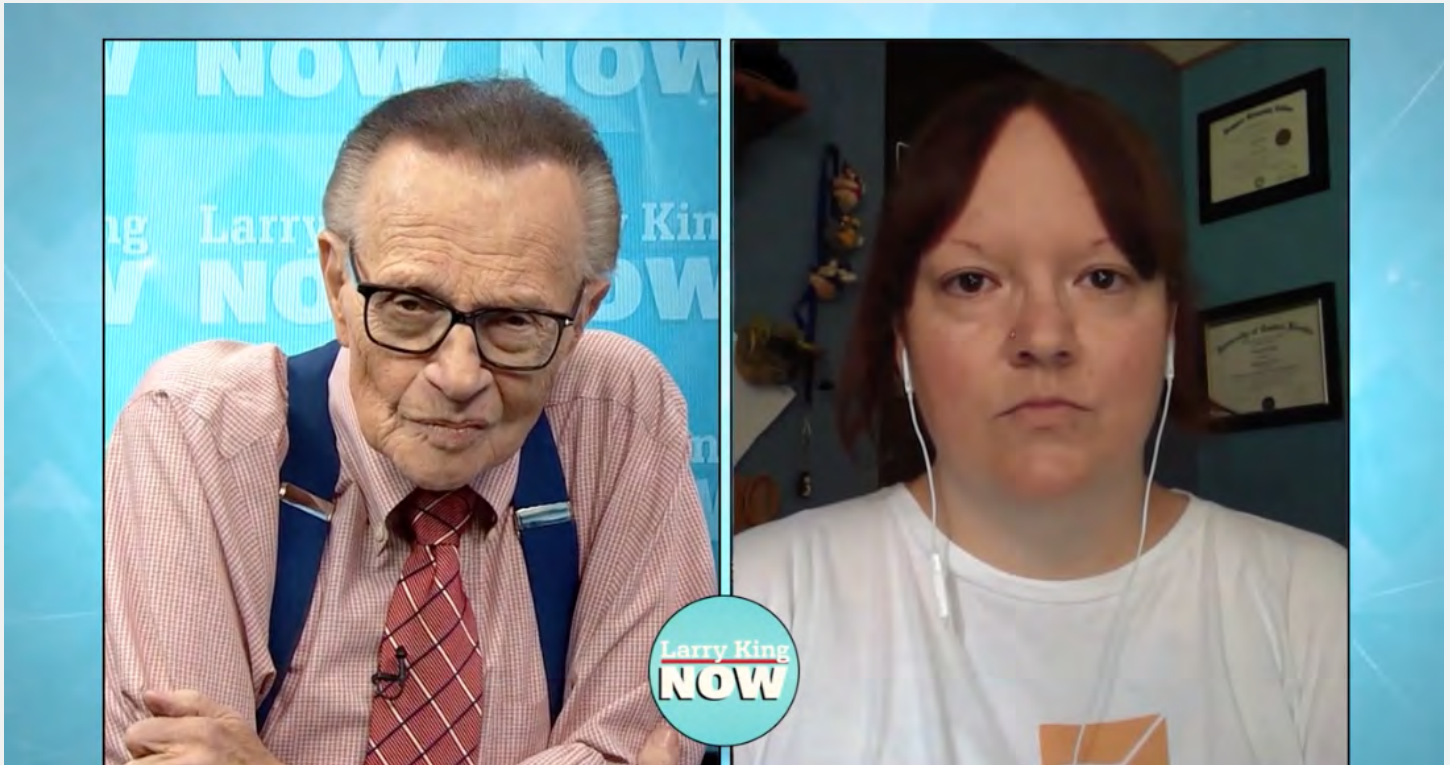
"A lot of us older formers, we didn't intend to come out and do what we do. For some of us, it was an organic process that happened as we were working on ourselves." During her early speaking engagements, King said she was introduced as a "former skinhead."



"I was finally able to come out and say, 'This is my story. This is how it happened.' And once I was able to do that, I felt at peace."

— Thomas Engelmann

GOING PUBLIC



"There wasn't much else to my resume," she said.

That changed as she continued her academic, professional, and personal work.

But the question she and others face remains: "When does a person stop being a former? Do they ever stop being a former? Does labeling someone a former ever stunt their growth in any way?"

Brad Galloway, King's colleague and fellow former-turned-researcher, said formers must balance a desire to contribute to the national conversation on extremism with their own well-being.

"There are downsides to going public," Galloway said. "Formers go through the process of guilt and shame, and imagine someone getting completely lambasted on Twitter."

Engelmann agrees. "[Reporters are] trying to give color to a story. They try and dig for the painful, the nasty, whatever is there. If you're not ready for it emotionally, it can really catch you by surprise."

Angela King, a cofounder of Life After Hate pictured here in a January 2019 interview with Larry King, helps formers navigate the often-thorny landscape of media requests and interviews.

GOING PUBLIC

THE RISK TO THE INDUSTRY

Collectively, formers make up a class of experts that are receiving more and more attention. As our focus turns from Islamist extremism to incidents of domestic terrorism at the hands of the extreme far-right, the public's appetite for the former's perspective is growing.

But the newness of these discussions makes it difficult to determine who exactly is an authority. And perhaps more to the point, What is the extent of their expertise? Has the former become an expert in the field, taken steps to make amends, practiced self-healing, and undergone academic training? Or is that person simply an expert on their own life experiences?

"How do we know about the credibility of a former," Galloway said. "I wish I had a dataset to manage that, but we don't. Because that would be weird if we did."

Formers who are not prepared to talk beyond their personal experiences may unwittingly mislead the public about the process of disengagement and de-radicalization. And the problem becomes magnified when reporters rush to fill the void of credible voices.

"Autobiographies are notoriously inaccurate," Simi said. "So, it's not surprising that formers, especially in the early stages as they're reconstructing and trying to figure out and make sense of their lives, would do so in a way that is not so accurate.

"But to have journalists then simply parrot that is a little bit troubling."

When formers get things wrong, reporters are likely to get things wrong. Galloway points to the fundamental difference between disengagement and de-radicalization — a distinction that can have an outsized impact on researchers, law enforcement, and interventionists.

"There are lots of people out there who are disengaged from a hate group and are still ideologically-motivated in some form or another," he said, adding: "You can be helped by somebody else, but somebody doesn't do that for you. You need to do the work. And that's where maybe it's too soon for a person who disengages [to become] a public figure talking about de-radicalization in the media."



"... if our understanding of the disengagement process is informed to some extent by inaccuracies, then we are going to develop interventions that get it wrong."

— Pete Simi, researcher

GOING PUBLIC



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HOW REPORTERS CAN HELP

Though there is no clear rubric by which to judge a former's experiences and credibility, King says it's critical that reporters verify what they're told.

"If someone comes out and says they're an expert, you should check that out," she said.

Journalists should be aware that some formers may be more eager than others to seek out interviews. While that's not necessarily a deal-breaker, reporters should look for credentials and evidence of a former's contribution to the field.

"I think we're not looking at what a person has done to really change," King said. "Because it takes so much more than saying I'm different, I'm not racist anymore."

Simi, who has conducted more than 100 interviews with formers, says overly-simplistic stories tend to create binaries that don't exactly translate to reality.

Too often, journalists rely on a narrative based on the hero's journey in conquering adversity. Inside that neat, beginning-middle-end storytelling, however, is an absence of the real work formers must put in.

"We lose the messiness. We lose the nuance," Simi said. "It's in the messiness, it's in the nuances where we can really gain a sense of exactly more or less what are the things that matter in terms of being able to leave one of these groups and change."



"A lot of us older formers, we didn't intend to come out and do what we do. For some of us, it was an organic process that happened as we were working on ourselves."

— Angela King



~~Wildereunderstands that~~
~~culture and demographics~~
~~are our destiny. We can't restore our~~
~~civilization with somebody else's babies~~
~~https://twitter.com/v_of_europe/status/1000000000000000000~~

Welcome to the next phase of #WeCounterHate

You may have read about Twitter's decision to allow users to hide replies from their feeds. The idea is to empower people in the face of bullying and harassment. Unfortunately, the reply function was the main mechanism that #WeCounterHate used to combat hate speech.

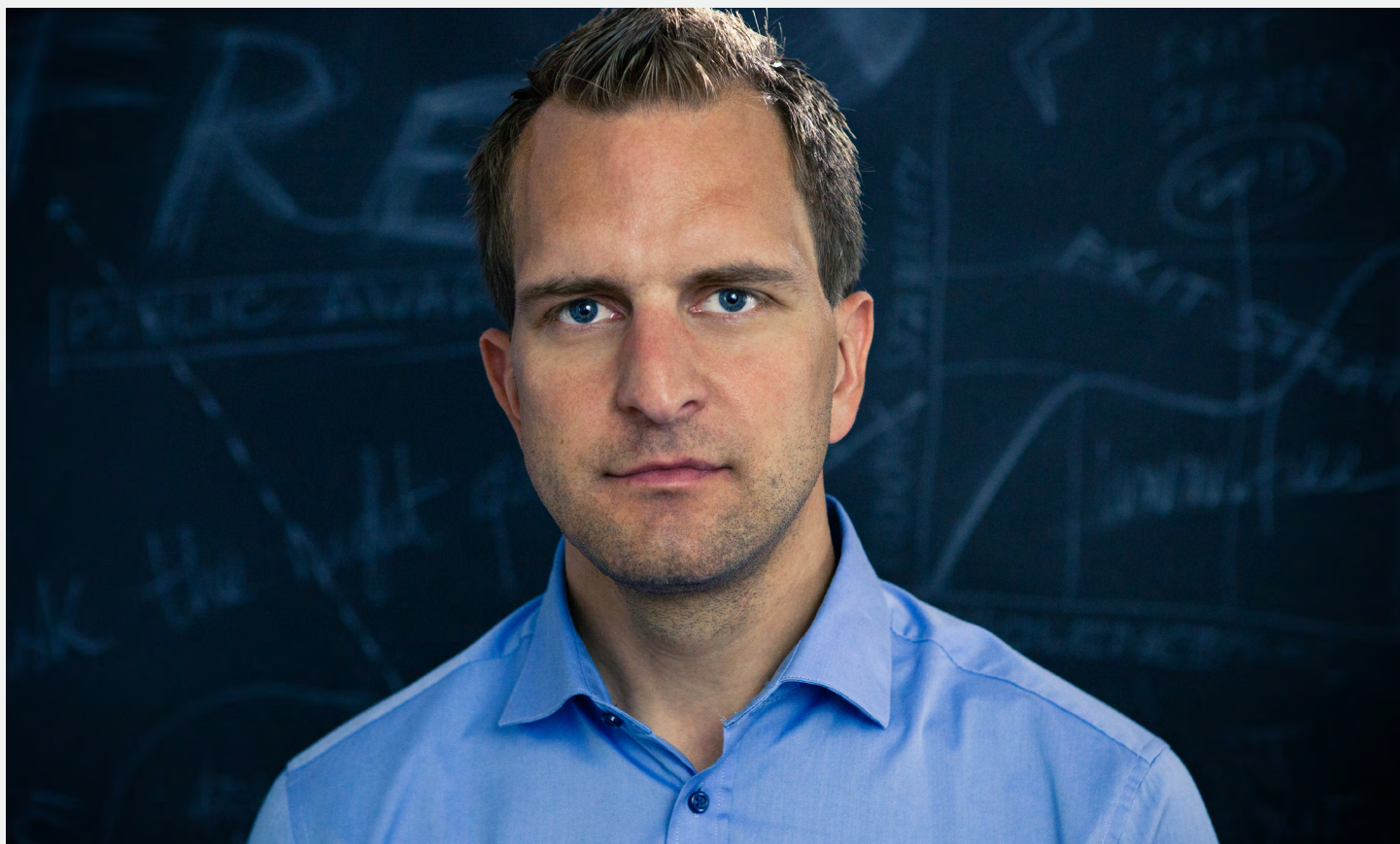
Therefore, in December we wrapped-up the campaign – which has in its two-year run kept millions of hateful tweets off of social media.

We are so proud of what we were able to achieve and we're grateful to our friends at POSSIBLE who helped us put a dent in on-line hate speech, while getting our message of compassion out there to all the individuals

questioning their belief in hateful ideology.

This award-winning campaign will continue to be a major beacon in our fight against hate. In the coming months, we plan on releasing all the public data so that future generations of peacemakers – as well as academic researchers and tech innovators – can learn from the great work we started.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without your support. Since January 2018 you have been the backbone of #WeCounterHate. You helped launch one of the most innovative anti-hate campaigns on social media and we will remain forever grateful to you.



Robert Örell is the program director of ExitUSA, the flagship intervention program at Life After Hate. He has more than 18 years of professional experience in the field of countering/preventing violent extremism. Robert is a social worker, international speaker, and expert on radicalization, disengagement, and interventions.

What's one of the biggest changes you see in the types of cases ExitUSA is taking on?

What made 2019 so different is that more families are asking for help. These cases can be some of the most intensive we receive. In the last several months, for example, we helped a family whose teenage son ran away from home and – the family fears – joined an armed militia. We also helped a family who was dealing with a teenage son who after being bullied sought community and comfort online, falling deeper into white supremacist ideology.

Q&A



We must be very precise in how we manage these, now very-strained relationships, so we don't push people further into violent extremism. So, our approach is to focus on building up those family bonds. We must focus on what is healthy, what is working, what is good."

How do families respond to these types of situations?

Family members, especially parents, often describe a situation that escalated so quickly it seems impossible to reach their kids before it's too late. This leads to conflict, confrontation, and simply, non-constructive dialogue. And that's exactly what's so hard for family members under distress to do: Respond constructively, so they don't push away or further alienate their children.

How do you begin to coach that?

What we see as most helpful is when families approach the problem from a place of trying to understand why and how their children became involved, how the influence of radicalization changes relationships, and how it divides families. People will say that it appeared as if their children were drawn into a cult. And, indeed, there are similarities.

We must be very precise in how we manage these, now very-strained relationships, so we don't push people further into violent extremism. So, our approach is to focus on building up those family bonds. We must focus on what is healthy, what is working, what is good. We often recommend getting other family members involved, especially those who have had a positive impact in the past.

What happens if the relationship is already so damaged?

Particularly with families confronting missing children, or children who have left the home, we try to remind them to focus on three key messages and repeat them as often as possible: We love you. We miss you. You are always welcome back.

Q&A

What are some common themes that run through the cases you see?

Radicalized individuals often isolate themselves from society, family, and friends. Their impulse is to invalidate all outside information, and they often respond combatively to feedback or efforts to engage them, especially when it comes to questioning their decisions.

Violent extremism promotes violent solutions to problems, conflicts, and stress. If we start from that understanding, we can meet people with compassion for who they are and where they come from in a nonjudgmental, non-confrontational way.

The best strategy is to focus on strengthening positive growth, empowering the individual so that they know they have the capacity to change, rebuilding past relationships, and above all else, building a new social identity.

How can people help?

Ultimately, what we want to prevent in all cases is allowing the hate to become the only community for the individual. If it's the only place where they feel like they can be with friends, or have their basic needs met, or even where they can get feedback in general, then we won't succeed in getting that person out. As a community, we need to work together to promote cooperation and positivity for individuals at risk of — or already involved in — violence and hate. Those who successfully leave behind hate groups are motivated to reconnect with themselves and with society. So it takes a willingness on our part to accept them back.

Get help

If you're ready to leave hate and violence behind,
we're here to support you.

Give

Your gift helps us disrupt violent hate through
outreach, research and education.

Shop

Browse our online shop for gifts for you and your
family, friends and colleagues.

