

Former extremists, victims launch social network

April 26 2012, by Mariano Andrade



An alleged gang member is handcuffed in Mejicanos, a suburb of San Salvador. Reformed one-time violent extremists and their victims on Wednesday launched a social network to halt the radicalization of youth and combat gang culture -- with the backing of Internet giant Google.

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Former extremists and survivors of their attacks can share their experiences via the Against Violent Extremism network, presented in New York by a consortium including [Google](#) Ideas and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

"The goal is to create a global movement against extremism," said

Institute for Strategic Dialogue chief executive Sasha Havlicek.

Former perpetrators of attacks and their survivors "are powerful influencers in turning potential and existing extremists away from a violent path," Against Violent Extremism (AVE) said on its website.

The network, which includes activists, policymakers, entrepreneurs and business leaders, proposes to allow onetime extremists from Pakistan to discuss how to fight the scourge of terror with former [gang members](#) from El Salvador.

A driving force behind the platform is "the belief that there are lessons to be learned between groups combating different forms of extremism, from Islamism to the white power movement," according to the network's website.

The idea originated during the Summit Against Violent Extremism hosted in Dublin last year by Google Ideas, the company's think tank that "convenes unorthodox stakeholders... to explore the role that technology can play in tackling some of the toughest human challenges."

"It's important to network with people from all of the world," said Robert Orell, a former member of a white supremacist movement in Sweden in the 1990s who now works as director of anti-Nazi group Exit Sweden.

The AVE platform aims to rack up 500 members within a year and twice that amount in two years. By late Wednesday, it already counted over 400 connections, including 44 "formers" and 18 survivors.

"We were very surprised by how much everyone wanted to collaborate," said Yasmin Dolatabadi, principal at Google Ideas.

The site provides a guide on how to run a charitable group, build a marketing campaign, use social networks, host a virtual meeting and build a website.

Users can upload short clips on AVE's YouTube channel to start discussions. A network map shows where members are located geographically, and the site allows members to set their own privacy settings so they can control what information they share about themselves.

Through the website, people in need are matched with organizations that can offer money, time and expertise. A separate marketplace function allows members to share professional skills.

Among the 20 projects featured by AVE was a partnership between Southern California Crossroads and the Tribeca Film Institute to create an after-school program for children to create film shorts on their gang-ridden community in Lennox, a town near Los Angeles.

The town -- which is made up of 93 percent Latino immigrant families, about a third of them living below the poverty line -- is considered the capital of gang recruitment in the United States.

Another project, Eretz Shalom, is a "social movement" of Jews and Arabs seeking to promote dialogue between Jewish and Arab inhabitants of the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria, which correspond to the West Bank and Israeli settlements there today.

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