



22/03/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN small-scale meeting on "Digital Exit Work",
15 March 2021, 15:00 to 18:00 CET, online

Digital Exit Work

Key outcomes

The effectiveness of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions is based on an in-depth understanding of the relevant target audiences, and in particular of the needs of individuals. Most existing exit programmes are founded around concepts of in-person interventions where trust, respect and a personal connection are seen as essential. In this context, digital platforms and tools may serve as means to establish contact and to facilitate an offline in-person meeting. Several extremist or terrorist cases in recent years, however, have shown that a segment of individuals is not interested in in-person contact, whether with fellow extremists or with exit counsellors. This expert meeting therefore discussed existing deradicalisation or exit lessons learned, as well as good practices in reaching and working with individuals only or mostly by digital means.

Some of the key findings of the meeting are:

- Target groups comprised of "digital natives", who grew up with social media, to build emotional connections might either not see or feel a difference between online and offline in terms of the value or depth of human connections, or they might prefer a digital exchange in principle. Also, individuals with social phobia or persons who seek anonymity might prefer digital formats to help them overcome stigma, shame and security concerns.
- Online exit counselling can work well if the needs of the clients are best served by using this method. An agreement over the objectives of the counselling can serve as the starting point for a process that identifies which formats and methods might be most helpful and effective. In general, providing options like online or in-person interventions, and also regarding different counsellor profiles (e.g. peers/age/gender), increase the likelihood of building trust and a safe space.
- Partnerships between exit programmes with different strengths and capacities might be a good way to make sure (potential) clients receive offers (and/or support?) that fit their needs.

This paper will first describe what challenges have been discussed from different perspectives shared. In the second part, recommendations for both practitioners and policymakers are presented.

Highlights of the discussion

The following insights and challenges have been presented by experts on the topic.

- Experiences with digital exit and psychosocial support:** Some psychologists and exit workers have offered online counselling services for a few years now by using chat, voice or video meetings. These practitioners have highlighted that this format works well for some of their clients and offers opportunities for effective counselling. Online counselling can also help in avoiding stigmatisation and might be more safe for individuals who have not left an extremist group yet. Furthermore, the aspect of anonymity can lower the threshold of seeking help.
- How to build trust?:** Some psychologists and exit workers have offered online counselling services for a few years now (chat, voice or video meeting) and have highlighted that this format works well for some of their clients. This indicates that the answer to the question of “how to build trust?” should not be generalised but seems to depend on the preferences and needs of individuals. In general, a mutual agreement on the overall objectives of the sessions seems to be more relevant than formats or methods.
- Digital formats bring flexibility:** Since the distancing processes from an ideology and/or group might take years, counsellors and clients having experiences with online counselling sessions can be an advantage if anyone moves to other cities or if the work schedules of a client do not go well with the service hours of exit workers. Online counselling can also help in avoiding stigmatisation and might be more safe for individuals who have not left an extremist group yet.
- Meeting the needs of clients:** Several experts highlighted that the online interventions/counselling format should be tailored to the needs of a specific audience and individuals (e.g. classic video setting/interactive/gamification/multimedia), their own schedules, and that they should have the option to select between different “types” of counsellors (peer group/age/gender, etc.).
- Experiences from digital P/CVE outreach projects:** Some exit counselling programmes have proactively reached out to previously unknown individuals based on their profiles and behaviour (likes/shares/friends, etc.) online. Other projects have set up fake websites or online games to attract individuals and to start a conversation with them. The objective here was, amongst other things, to raise the awareness that support would be available if an individual is curious or interested. Ethical implications regarding potentially upsetting individuals through this approach or by promoting extremist/conspiracy narratives to attract individuals need to be considered.
- Technological support and solutions are needed:** The need for software solutions for the detection of online behaviour that might justify outreach or an intervention by exit workers was clearly articulated. In this context, it was discussed that while some of the major social media companies have implemented (pilot) projects in this field that, for example, show pop-up information for people who search for specific designated key words (like “Heil Hitler”) with a suggestion to contact psychological counselling services; the general recommender (automated decision-making) systems of those platforms might still direct extremist content to users who don’t appreciate this nudge from the companies.
- Making digital interventions safe:** The importance of ongoing psychological support (supervision) and professional supervision for intervention providers, as well as the necessity for back-end teams concerned with data security, privacy and physical security, has been highlighted.

Recommendations

For practitioners, recommendations include:

- The answer to the question of “how to build trust?” should not be generalised but seems to depend on the preferences and needs of individuals, also in online settings. Several experts highlighted that the **online interventions/counselling approach should be tailored to the needs of a specific audience and individuals** (e.g. classic video setting/interactive/gamification/multimedia), **their own schedules**, and that **they should have the option to select between different “types” of counsellors** (peer group/age/gender, etc.).
- An agreement over the objectives of the counselling can serve as the starting point for a process that identifies which formats and methods might be most helpful and effective. In general, providing options like online *or* in-person interventions, and also regarding different counsellor profiles (peer/age/gender, etc.), increase the likelihood of building trust and a safe space, which is the foundation of successful counselling.
- [A pilot project](#) for direct (1-2-1) digital engagement with individuals showing signs of radicalisation online indicates that **casual and meditative tones** were the most commonly used and proved to be successful at generating responses. Furthermore, **personal questions, shared interests (like music/sports) and highlighting the consequences of negative actions** based on experiences of the counsellors were most likely to generate responses. These lessons learned could possibly also apply to digital exit work settings. Other findings show the **possible benefit of combining diverse expertise and experience** in a digital exit work team:
 - **professional counsellors** delivered the greatest number of conversations,
 - **survivors** of extremism generated the longest conversations,
 - **former extremists** produced better response rates than counsellors, but completed the fewest number of conversations.
- In online work in general, it is key to invest in equipping those who execute the online work with the right tools and methods to work in an online context ⁽¹⁾. For digital exit workers in particular, this will include taking care regarding data security, privacy and physical security, as well as offering psychological support (supervision). It is important to **remain flexible in order to adapt to new developments and changes in the online sphere**. Digital exit work programmes should remain fluid to reflect changing social media environments.
- Partnerships between exit programmes with different strategies and capacities might be a good way to make sure (potential) clients receive offers that fit their needs.

For policymakers, these recommendations are:

- **Consider funding (more) exit projects or modules** within existing projects that focus on the digital dimensions of counselling, social work, reintegration and rehabilitation.
- **Stimulate structured exchanges of lessons learned** and good (or not so good practices) between exit workers who focus on the digital dimensions and adjunct fields (e.g. sects/organised crime) like psychologists or social workers who also focus on digital formats.

⁽¹⁾ See also: [RAN YF&C meeting on ‘Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context’ 19 December 2020](#) and [RAN YF&C & RAN C&N online meeting on ‘How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements’ 19 March 2020](#). Amongst others, these papers provide more in-depth information on necessary skills and resources needed and organisational and ethical considerations that need to be taken into account (including safety measures).

- Facilitate a broader and deeper **collaboration between civil society organisations and larger (tech) companies**, for example through the EU Internet Forum, to support moving from the existing series of small digital P/CVE or exit pilot projects to a more structured cooperation between tech companies, civil society organisations and policymakers.

Relevant practices

Life After Hate's [ExitUSA programme](#) works with mental health professionals who volunteer to support their clients. The work is structured around the triangular setting, where a member of the ExitUSA team who has their own experiences of leaving violent far-right extremism is paired in a tandem setting with the mental health professional. Together they support the client with the aim of dealing with crisis, difficult experiences and difficult situations. They also work to sensitise the client towards seeking professional mental health support locally; what does mental health support look like and what does it mean to work with your experiences in a professional setting.

The [redirect method](#), a collaboration between larger tech companies and some civil society organisations, aims at combating violent extremists by redirecting users who search for hate-related terms towards resources, education and outreach groups that might be able to offer support.

The [1-2-1 online interventions](#) from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue is an experimental approach designed to fill the gap of not having systematised attempts to supplement counter-speech efforts with direct online messaging and engagement at scale. Delivered on Facebook to date and working across extreme-right and Islamist ideologies, the programme provides an opportunity for individuals showing clear signs of radicalisation to meet and engage with someone who can support their exit from hate.

Follow-up

A structured and continued exchange between experts should explore questions like how to have difficult in-depth conversations online, how to build trust, how to optimise referral systems (like redirect), and how to identify and interact with radicalised individuals who are currently not open for disengagement or radicalisation.

Further reading

- **On how an exit intervention can be set up:** Organisations involved in exit work have to address a number of key issues across various areas: organisational structure and objectives, hiring staff and working with formers, engaging with radicalised individuals, media and communication, safety aspects and confidentiality, quality measures and evaluation, and working with returnees. [This paper](#) aims to help guide organisations in addressing these issues. It also addresses which attributes and skills make an exit worker suitable, how to engage with radicalised individuals, and how to deal with the media, confidentiality, security and evaluation.
- **On how to communicate with radicalised individuals in an exit setting:** During [a RAN EXIT meeting on this topic](#), it was discussed that communication between practitioner and participants is one of the core elements of exit work. In the meantime, it is a challenge to establish and maintain a

situation in which conversation serves the goal of facilitating an individual to leave an extremist environment, culture or ideology. Important factors that create a positive setting for exit are mutual respect and trust, clear rules and clarity of the role of practitioners. In a digital setting, this could also possibly include anonymity. The paper on this meeting aims to help and inspire exit work practitioners in their communication with (former) extremists, based on the expertise of experienced professionals.

- A particular component of communicating with radicalised individuals in an exit setting relates to **motivation of the individual – which also has implication for how “to get people in”**. It is therefore important to understand this motivation: how it works, how it can be stimulated, and what the alternatives are in its absence. This has been discussed in [a RAN EXIT meeting on how to stimulate motivation](#), which also elaborates on approaches with regard to this in several exit programmes across EU Member States.
- **How a safe environment should be created** has been discussed during [a RAN EXIT meeting on ‘Management of Exit Work’](#). For example, it was recommended to create and realise a trustful image, to have a strategy in place to secure information.

