

RAN C&N

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CONCLUSION PAPER***RAN C&N Working Group meeting****27 and 29 March 2023, digital*

How to respond to disinformation in public communications from the perspective of frontline practitioners

Key outcomes

Disinformation is a 'hot topic', especially around the current Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, anti-systems sentiments and accelerationist narratives. This online RAN Communication and Narratives (C&N) Working Group meeting explored how the (online) street knowledge of first-line practitioners can be used to improve public communications to combat mis- or disinformation.

During the meeting, both experts in strategic communications as well as frontline practitioners with experience in dealing with disinformation in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work gathered to discuss this topic. The meeting was structured in a way that allowed to zoom in from the strategic level to a more hands-on, practitioner-focused perspective on the topic at hand. Participants identified four overarching themes regarding the role of practitioners in dealing with disinformation based on examples from their own work. These four themes were discussed in depth to formulate do's and don'ts for dealing with disinformation by P/CVE practitioners as well as debunking and fact-checking organisations.

The list of do's and don'ts contains, among others, the following:

- Monitoring of narratives is important, so the practitioners in the field are aware of what is going on in disinformation when speaking to clients.
- When dealing with disinformation, pick your battles. Prioritise extremist content and focus on the main P/CVE objectives.
- Don't securitise democratic processes like protests by labelling activists as 'extremists', and unnecessarily engaging them from a P/CVE perspective.
- Offer alternatives, be open to debate.
- Work with 'ambassadors' to reach specific target groups. These should be trusted people within target groups, like influencers and role models.

Highlights of the discussion

The spread of fake news and mis- and disinformation is of growing concern, both on policy level and for practitioners. Conspiracy narratives can push individuals towards (violent) extremist ideologies or groups, and away from trust in government and institutions. A lot of this is happening online.

While some P/CVE practitioners in the RAN Practitioners network are already doing online P/CVE projects or interventions, there are still a lot of challenges in doing this kind of work in an online setting. (Local) Authorities are also struggling with addressing disinformation, especially around narratives that undermine the trust in these authorities. The 'street knowledge' of practitioners combined with the experience of online P/CVE work brings opportunities. Unique insights that frontline practitioners bring to the table can help in understanding what makes people vulnerable to deceptive information and violent rhetoric. This, in turn, can lead to insights in what can work on an individual level to disengage vulnerable individuals. This knowledge can be used to advise possible ways to address disinformation through public communication.

Addressing disinformation on EU level: FIMI

On EU level, disinformation is addressed through the [EUvsDisinfo](#) project, run by the [European External Action Service](#). This is on a strategic level and concerns disinformation coming from outside of the EU. The abbreviation 'FIMI' is used as an umbrella term: Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference. In the 2018 EU's Action Plan against Disinformation, disinformation is defined as follows: "Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm" (1).

Elements that distinguish FIMI are that it is: harmful, mostly non-illegal, manipulative, intentional and coordinated. FIMI is done by state and non-state actors, and their proxies. Disinformation is then seen as a part of FIMI. When looking at FIMI, the United States' Global Engagement Center's 'Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem' is a useful resource to make a division between the types of FIMI that are being used, and to what extent they are overt or covert (2).



(1) See: https://commission.europa.eu/publications/action-plan-disinformation-commission-contribution-european-council-13-14-december-2018_en

(2) See: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

Several of these instances of FIMI can also be relevant for radicalisation processes and extremism, especially the more 'denied' types. For example, campaigns undermining faith in institutions or amplification of civil discord through the weaponisation of social media can also be picked up by extremist groups to capitalise upon. Moreover, the usage of proxy sources can mean that (extremist) groups from within the EU boundaries are being used to spread these types of disinformation.

P/CVE practitioners and disinformation

This raises the question of what the boundaries are between addressing disinformation and P/CVE work. Participants discussed this in several break-out sessions by answering some guiding questions.

Participants identified several reasons why a P/CVE practitioner *should* play a role in addressing disinformation. While not all disinformation leads to radicalisation, extremist ideologies and conspiracy narratives underlying them are often built on disinformation. One reason that was mentioned is that practitioners are a good source for up-to-date information regarding the situation 'on the ground'. As they can adapt quickly, practitioners are able to deal with the fast-changing climate of disinformation, where for instance science takes longer to produce validated information on online developments. Another reason is that practitioners are also affected by disinformation themselves — not only professionally, but also personally as individuals. It is only logical for practitioners to address disinformation that they encounter, for instance when working with clients.

When talking about the role a P/CVE practitioner could have — and what roles P/CVE practitioners should explicitly not have — several points were discussed by the participants. To start with, practitioners can provide input for policy, for instance by pushing for a change in legislation. Authorities like the police should have legal ways to act on their own initiative to protect democratic values. Right now, this is problematic in several EU Member States because disinformation falls under general defamation legislation. This requires a citizen to make a request (i.e. report a case of hate speech, etc.), before authorities can act. Practitioners can also play a role in promoting media literacy — not only for the youth as part of (informal) curricula, but also for adults. Thirdly, practitioners can be credible messengers, who can reach the target group of people susceptible to disinformation. In doing so, practitioners should ensure that they keep their own independent role within civil society.

Regarding the distinction between working against disinformation and on P/CVE, it was stated that, while disinformation feeds into extremist narratives, not all disinformation is linked to extremism. And on the other hand, extremist narratives should not be reduced to simply being disinformation. The roles of P/CVE practitioners and people working in the field of debunking and deconstructing misinformation overlap only in part and should be separated as much as possible to not over-securitise working against disinformation and to be transparent.

The role of specific terminology and wording in countering disinformation is important. Disinformation is about the *intention* to spread incorrect information for a certain purpose. However, a piece of disinformation created with this intention can also unknowingly be spread by people lacking the resources or knowledge to recognise it as such. There is a risk here of stigmatising someone who unknowingly spreads disinformation, which can prove to be counterproductive and push these people even further away. Also, words have the power to frame an event. For example, a journalist writing that a politician spreads 'false information' gives a very different feeling as opposed to writing that a politician 'lied'. Therefore, caution is advised for practitioners and journalists alike.

Cases of dealing with disinformation on the practitioner level

During the meeting, two participants presented concrete cases of situations in which they had to deal with disinformation in their professional environment. These ground-level experiences helped in inspiring participants to come up with their own case examples for the rest of the meeting.

- The first case was of a **former police spokesperson**, who talked about his experiences in dealing with protesters believing in COVID-19-related conspiracy narratives during the pandemic (2020-2022). One of the strategies of the spokesperson was to be visible in the channels that this target group was most active in. This meant being visible on different types of fringe platforms and alternative media channels, as opposed to the mainstream media that a spokesperson usually speaks to. While this was criticised, both internally and externally, the spokesperson felt this was necessary in order to reach the target group with the factual information. Especially during live broadcasts (no filtering/clipping, etc.), this provides the opportunity to unmask the 'disinformer'.
- The second case was from a researcher, who did a small study on **micro-interventions in social media comment sections**. Here, a group was formed to actively engage with disinformation content on social media channels by reacting in the comments. Interesting to see was that this group was quick to form their own 'in-group'. This suggests that in forming groups to counter the spread of disinformation, it is wise to also be self-conscious about your own group and be wary of the pitfalls of reinforcing the same us-vs-them narratives your target group is using and you were aiming to deconstruct.

Four themes around disinformation

On the second day, participants each brought their own example case of disinformation in their country or direct environment. Their input was gathered in a word cloud:



From these words, four overarching themes were selected to discuss in break-out groups. In groups, participants discussed for each of these themes the role of a P/CVE practitioner in relation to the theme:



1. **State narratives.** As discussed during the setting the scene presentation on the first day (on FIMI), a lot of the disinformation spread in EU Member States has its origins from state-sponsored narratives from outside of the EU. While there is a clear link to extremist narratives in the EU, it can still be debated whether (and how) P/CVE practitioners should address this.
2. **Disinformation targeting minorities.** Disinformation often targets minority groups in the narratives, for example the LGBTQ community or religious minorities in EU Member States. There are clear links with extremist narratives, for example in hate speech targeting minorities.

3. **Edge cases on the political spectrum.** There may be groups or parties in EU Member States that are on the fringe of the political spectrum (far right or far left), which sometimes engage with or even actively spread disinformation narratives. Because of the political aspect, there are challenges for P/CVE practitioners if they want to address this.
4. **Borderline behaviour by individuals.** Individuals who are involved in extremist groups might spread disinformation completely (or seemingly) unrelated to the extremist ideology they adhere to. The question then arises whether this still falls within the realm of a P/CVE practitioner’s work.





For each of these topics, do’s and don’ts were discussed during the break-out sessions. These do’s and don’ts can be found below.

Do’s and don’ts

Using the GAMMA+ model ⁽³⁾, the do’s and don’ts of this meeting have been structured for the General recommendations and recommendations regarding Goal, Audience, Message, Messenger and the Medium (there were no recommendations regarding the call to Action, nor the evaluation).

	DO’S	DON’TS
GENERAL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring of narratives is important, so the practitioners in the field are aware of what is going on in disinformation when speaking to clients. • Develop action plans and protocols (who is doing what, when and how) for relevant stakeholders. • Do an ethical review at the start of a project to counter disinformation. • Decide in the context of a project how to address the ‘grey zone’, information that is not clearly right/wrong or false/true. • Consider mental health issues. A lot of problems are connected to mental health. Divert someone to the experts when needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do no harm: be aware when engaging, to not amplify the message you are trying to counter. Or that an intervention could agitate someone. This is especially relevant for online interventions that involve social media, as the algorithms driving social media channels are inherently programmed to amplify. • Don’t reinvent the wheel. Use evidence from P/CVE and from behavioural science. Utilise what we already know.
GOAL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pick your battles: prioritise extremist content and focus on the main P/CVE objectives. On the other hand, be aware that disinformation campaigns can also look quite harmless. • Investigate the source. Disinformation often comes from seemingly ordinary people, who in reality might be connected to state or other actors. • Be aware of current events that can be utilised for disinformation as well as have historical knowledge and socio-political local context. A narrative from Russia might be the same, but the approach you take to address it in different countries may vary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t use a dichotomous approach to avoid strengthening us-vs-them dynamics. • Don’t over-securitise, don’t label democratic activists as being ‘extremists’ by engaging from a P/CVE perspective. • We should not engage with every provocation. By responding you might actually be spreading the message further.

⁽³⁾ See, for instance: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/pages/page/ran-cn-effective-narratives-updating-gamma-model-brussels-14-15-november-2019_en

<p>AUDIENCE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Screenagers’ and adults completely immersing in the cyber-social system. • Equip the state officers with knowledge. • Be aware of the audience. While responding, you might not reach the sender, but you could reach their audience. • Be aware of the us-vs-them mechanism, and the need for a scapegoat/enemy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not take sides and demonise. • Don’t over-target certain groups. Some broad groups are easily identified as ‘target groups’ of disinformation (i.e. Russophones in the Baltics, while many of this group might not even be susceptible to disinformation). Seeing only counter-messaging against disinformation, while the targeted people feel they should not even be targeted, can be counterproductive.
<p>MESSAGE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In addition to countering the narrative, reveal the source of the disinformation (e.g., it originated from Russian state media). • How can we tell an interesting story that can compete with the alarming disinformation stories? Our story sometimes also needs to trigger emotionally. For instance, by experimenting with long-term campaigns based on doubt. • Use language that resonates with the intended audience. If appropriate and using best judgement, this may even include using humour when presenting facts. In a crisis situation, stick to the facts. • Explain the process, how we did fact-checking. Also provide training to readers who want to be volunteers (‘elves’). • Offer alternatives, be open to debate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t pick sides, or pick topics based on who said something, but take into account the importance of the topic, how viral it is.
<p>MESSENGER</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building trust: work under your own name, also meet up in person, build relationships with NGOs working with the target group. Be transparent. Write about yourself and your position. • Credibility: follow the same procedure for all sources of disinformation (transparency). • Work with ‘ambassadors’ to reach specific target groups. Trusted people within target groups, like influencers and role models. • Do what you are good at. For instance, a psychologist has other competences than a police officer. • The whole organisation (for instance, within the police) should speak as one voice. • Separate the roles: there are a lot of fact-checking organisations we could work with. Leave that up to them so P/CVE can also stay in its own lane. 	
<p>MEDIUM</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of the press is most important when dealing with state-sponsored narratives (in countries with state-owned media, you see a lot of repetition of state narratives in media). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don’t over-target on certain media sources. For example, broad targeting on a channel where there are not a lot of people susceptible to disinformation. This can make these people see only counter-messaging, while they feel they should not even be targeted. This can be counterproductive.

Follow-up

A possible follow-up of this meeting could be either directed at structured monitoring of disinformation narratives and/or the design of guidelines for practitioners from P/CVE on the one hand and from debunking and countering disinformation on the other hand on how to work together and how to clearly separate their roles.

Further reading

Bolt, N. (2021). *Strategic communications and disinformation in the early 21st century*. EUI RSC PP, 2021/12, Global Governance Programme, European University Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/74494>

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European External Action Service. (2023). *1st EEAS report on foreign information manipulation and interference threats. Towards a framework for networked defence*. <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

Ingram, H. J., & Reed, A. (2016). *Lessons from history for counter-terrorism strategic communications*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism. <https://www.icct.nl/publication/lessons-history-counter-terrorism-strategic-communications>

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