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CONCLUSION PAPER
RAN small-scale expert meeting: How to deal with alternative media that fosters polarisation on the local level
30 November 2022, Online meeting

How to deal with alternative media that fosters polarisation on the local level

Key outcomes

In the past few years, conspiracy narratives and anti-authorities sentiments have grown significantly across the EU and beyond. The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst and accelerator of the fragmentation of ideologies, actors and pathways to radicalisation, while the post-pandemic period has demonstrated that conspiracy narratives and disinformation adapt to — and thrive — in new crises such as the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, the resulting refugee situation, the energy and food crisis, and rising inflation.

Alternative media plays a significant role in polarisation under these circumstances. For this purpose, a recent small-scale expert workshop brought together practitioner experts and researchers to share their knowledge, experiences, and the tools they developed or use, and to discuss the role of alternative media in polarisation, its effects and tackling options, focusing on the local sphere. These insights will feed into an overarching specialised paper on the topic in more depth and with additional contextualisation. The following text aims to briefly summarise and highlight the key points of discussion and insights from the expert workshop itself.

After a brief overview of key discussion points and key considerations, recommendations and success factors are presented further below.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting focused on three aspects: the role of (alternative) media in fostering polarisation in general, cases and challenges in dealing with this on the local level, and digital tools and solutions to address alternative media fostering polarisation.

Setting the scene: alternative media and its role in fostering polarisation

In the first part, a general introduction to alternative media and its role in fostering polarisation was given.

- Alternative media is understood as media sources that differ from established or dominant types of media in terms of their content, production or distribution. Many of the first alternative media channels were initiated as attempts of under-represented groups in the mainstream media channels, or groups that felt misrepresented or falsely represented. Examples of these groups are workers unions and LGBT communities.

- There is an increasing notion that alternative media is significantly contributing to the spread of conspiracy narratives, disinformation and ultimately polarisation. However, there is little evidence that alternative media drives polarisation directly. It becomes problematic when matched with populism. There is often an overlap between the groups that feel neglected or unrepresented by the mainstream media and populist messages. These outposts present themselves as fighting the elites, representing weakened communities, and reviling the 'real' problems and the people and institutions responsible for them.

- There is a higher number of right-wing extremist (RWE) alternative media, as in many countries the mainstream media is portrayed as too liberal and trying to affect the political discourse (alongside academia and other institutions). There are left-wing alternative media outposts, but they are not as popular as they were in the past.

- Overall, alternative media has low penetration among audiences and there is no evidence that it has become the mainstream. It still has a significant role in shaping discourse in communities that already have populist and polarised stances. In addition, alternative media does not have so much influence on the political 'centre' but on the fringes, which become louder and reaffirmed.

- Other factors need to be considered when assessing the role of alternative media in driving polarisation and radicalisation. These include the overall quality, transparency and integrity of the general media landscape and the public's trust or mistrust in the political system. Alternative media also flourishes in times of uncertainty or crisis.

- Social media is a major amplifier for problematic content posted on alternative media (but also mainstream media, for that matter). Many alternative media outposts use social media to spread their content to wider audiences. There are often overlaps between actors/organisations that operate as de facto (alternative) media outlets mainly on social media.

Local case examples

In the second part, two case examples of the role alternative media can play in the physical (hyper)local domain were discussed. The first case shows how alternative media outlets are part of the bigger media landscape, and how this interplay can be seen on the local level. The case in question is **local protests in the German city of Hannover**, which started during COVID restrictions but are still taking place now. Some interesting observations on the case are:

- The protests are small in scale but are coming from **anti-government** or **anti-authority sentiments** that are expressed in different ways (against COVID restrictions, pro-Russia), as well as anti-Semitic sentiments.

- There was a small group of around 500 members active on Telegram. Here, both **mainstream media and alternative media content were shared** extensively — mainstream media to make fun of, and alternative media to confirm ideas. These are mainly far-right-affiliated alternative media sources, targeting minority groups and journalists, among others.

Three challenges were identified around this case:

1. The protests are not really disruptive and they are within legal boundaries and freedom of speech rights. But because of the content and origin of what is shared online from alternative media sources, it is a realistic scenario that at some point the protest will become more disruptive or even violent. How can we deal with this?

2. The main actors are known and can be connected to each other, but they are not crossing any legal lines yet. They are not 'radicalised' or seen as extremists. And many protests come from legitimate grievances.

As the scenario can escalate, for example, through tangible threats against journalists reporting on protests, how can we work preventively in this case?

3. It is difficult for civil society organisations (CSOs) to follow groups like this one. There are many of these groups, and a lot of them are local. The challenge, then, is how local authorities and civil society can work together to keep track of what's going on in these groups (i.e. monitoring).

The second case shows how local authorities can be impacted by alternative media sources. The case in question is **accusations of sexual assault that was portrayed as a problem caused by an influx of refugees to Finland**. The (suspected) perpetrators are migrants while the victims were local Finnish girls. This polarised the community. Observations on this case are:

- Activists used alternative media sources to confirm their ideas. An example is a former local municipal councillor who was running an alternative media channel himself and picked up the case. Other people used this to get information on the case, as the police were holding back on sharing details.

- The police were accused of taking sides; this was done on Twitter by an alternative media outlet. Subsequently, sustained attempts were made to target a police officer and the work of police was doing in order to break the public's trust in institutions. Moreover, other municipal workers were also threatened and harassed.

- The municipality gathered different members of the community and its institutions for a mediation talk, which failed and became a platform to increase polarisation by some municipality members and press.

Three challenges arise from this case:

1. If information on the case is first coming from alternative media sources instead of official communications, the information from these alternative sources is likely to be perceived as facts by some people. In such a situation, where official communication is then a reaction to the earlier-spread information, it is difficult to control the narrative. The challenge is how can the authorities communicate the situation first and still keep the discourse from turning into polarising matter.

2. In a highly polarised situation, mediation efforts or other dialogue initiatives can work counterproductively and result in even more polarisation. It is a challenge to prevent such a polarised situation from emerging and be timely in organising mediation efforts. In this particular situation, the mediation efforts might have worked if they were made earlier.

3. For police, the main challenge is information sharing. The police do not want to share many details on an ongoing investigation, like the background of the suspects, which seems logical. However, to control the narrative, sharing this kind of information first and speaking about it can still have a polarising effect initially, but in the end gives authorities the chance to control the narrative, especially if the framing is cohesive. This might be preferable to the information being first shared on alternative media sources.

Addressing alternative media

In the third part, two initiatives that address alternative media in their digital work presented their scope and methods.

Sulis AI ([1]) **– Tackling online harms together** is a tool that enables researchers, officials and activists to safely scan and search through the dark web after terrorist, RWE, homophobic, anti-women, conspiracy theory, anti-vaccines and other radicalising content. Using this, Sulis AI enables a search that is 'clean' from content in photos or videos that might harm the user, such as child abuse, sexual violence, etc.

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[1] Our solutions | Sulis Insights | Data-driven actionable insights and strategy

The dark web became a haven for radicalising and radicalised users, as there is no real supervision over it. Moreover, there is an effort to give the feeling of a safe space to the users, even though 'hostile' people and organisations spread their content through them. There is usually no specific call for violence, but consumers of such content might interpret it as one or will be motivated to carry out violence accordingly.

Debunk.org (²) researches portals, platforms and people spreading polarising content and disinformation. Debunk.org works in eight countries where it analyses disinformation, monitors online election campaigns, organises community training and carries out media literacy campaigns.

Based on the monitoring work of Debunk.org, two interrelated case studies were highlighted as examples of the role of alternative media in polarisation. The Great Family Defense March on 15 May 2021 in Vilnius protested against the 'genderist agenda', 'LGBT propaganda' and similar issues. After the event, the 'Lithuanian family movement' was established and continues to organise rallies. According to the state intelligence services, they are a threat to national security. The second event, which was organised by mostly the same people, was the protest against new COVID-19 restrictions in front of the parliament that developed into a violent riot. The different people and organisations behind these events use different disinformation outlets, such as MINFO.NT, among others. Another misinformation and polarisation instrument in Lithuania is Russian propaganda, which intensified since the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. An example is the large website RUBALTIC.RU based in Kaliningrad, Russia. It is only one outlet among many by which Russian authorities or supporters try to cause polarisation in neighbouring countries.

The efforts of Debunk.org to monitor and expose malicious content allow for more systematic cooperation with state institutions such as the police and Office of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics towards reporting and removal of content, as well as actions taken against media outlets disseminating such content, including investigations and administrative proceedings, but also public awareness raising and preventive talks.

Recommendations

In the group discussions that concluded this meeting, several recommendations were formulated that bring together the challenges on the local level and existing ways and initiatives to monitor and address alternative media.

Regarding the **narratives spread by alternative media sources:**

- **Leading the discourse** is crucial in controlling the narrative. Working along the lines of being reactive or responsive to polarising narratives is less effective, especially as often there are many of them simultaneously. The authorities (and the relevant CSOs) should be proactive.

    o **Anticipate key events happening that can influence the local level**, for example, local elections, or even national/international events that can have a local impact. Knowing certain events are going to happen, and that alternative media will react to this and possibly spread disinformation around the event, can help in pre-emptively formulating alternative narratives and coming up with an official communication strategy.

    o For **controlling the narrative around a highly polarising event**, it is crucial to **take the lead and share reliable and responsible information**. It is more difficult to control the narrative in being responsive rather than being proactive. The authorities should release information as early as possible, while framing it in the best way to avoid polarising sentiments. As information tends to spread, it is better for the responsible institution to spread it rather than people and organisations with different agendas.

(²) [Disinformation and misinformation analysis center and think tank | DebunkEU.org](#)

- **Use existing resources on addressing polarisation**, like the RAN Polarisation Manual or publications by the Strong Cities Network.

- When responding to crises, **dialogue with/between polarised groups** can be valuable. However, this works best if such dialogue is already established before a crisis occurs, and/or utilised early. It is also important to not legitimise/give a platform to extremist voices but reach out to those that are open to dialogue and finding a common ground. Set clear boundaries around illegal behaviour.

- **Trainings for journalists and public figures** on communication and how to deal with polarisation can help to increase trust between them but also to make them more aware of how they impact the content of media and polarisation.

- Overall, responses to polarisation should not put the emphasis on alternative media per se but on improving the media environment more broadly and those factors that make certain content more problematic.

- **A cultural change** is needed among practitioners — and institutions — who still feel unprepared and hesitant to enter the digital sphere. This can be overcome with trainings on the use of technology, but also to better understand different types of media and communication channels.

  o Monitoring of the digital sphere is very challenging for first-line practitioners, due to lacking digital culture but also institutional constraints. CSOs can help fill this gap, as some are very good in the use of technology, but more funding needs to be made available for that.

- We need to learn how to specialise so that not everyone has to do everything:

  o Some basic skills are needed for practitioners such as how to properly dissect information and respond, which is also a key skill to be transferred to the target groups practitioners are in contact with.

  o The needs of practitioners have to be better understood. There needs to be a mapping of the puzzle/network of actors — who is who and who is doing what, what profiles and skills are available, what data is to be shared with whom, who coordinates and so on.

Regarding **local authorities using digital solutions to address alternative media:**

- The limited government funding for digital solutions can lead to replication of efforts and different actors working in silos. **Collaboration between different tools and solutions should be encouraged**; existing data and infrastructures should be made accessible to others.

- Using the case example of the voluntary **armies of elves**, which are actively debunking and countering disinformation campaigns from (mainly Russian) troll farms, there is potential to apply this on the local level.

  o When anticipating an upcoming key event that can impact the local level, **knowing 'elves' or other volunteers who are in your locality** can help in addressing and preventing the potential spread of disinformation through alternative media sources.

  o They can help in both monitoring beforehand and debunking / offering alternative/counternarratives during and after an upcoming key event.

Follow-up

Follow-up suggestions coming out of this meeting are:

- Explore how to make different tools, datasets and platforms that monitor and assess polarising content more accessible to practitioners and a wider audience, and how to encourage collaboration between these tools.

- Further the understanding of alternative media's role in polarisation and the level of penetration across different contexts, especially in societies where media freedom and democracy indicators score lower.

- Explore how the local level can be better supported to set up strategic/crisis communication capabilities.

- Address more effectively instances of politicians/politics using the mainstream media to spread polarising content.

Further reading

Radicalisation Awareness Network: RAN Polarisation Management Manual, Amsterdam 06 July 2017

Strong Cities Network: Online Hub Library

European Commission