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## CONCLUSION PAPER

*RAN Youth & Education (Y&E)*

*8 – 9 March 2022, Online meeting*

# Integrating the online dimension into offline pedagogical practices

## Key outcomes

Older generations are becoming increasingly aware that for young people, the online world (social media and online games) is in fact part of the real world. Offline efforts at preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) should thus certainly take into account this online dimension. After all, it is essential for youth professionals to understand the entirety of young people's experiences if they are to connect with them and build trust. However, youth practitioners still find it challenging to identify this online content and integrate it into their daily practices. Challenges include bridging the gap between young people and professionals; staying up-to-date about trending platforms, content and narratives; and identifying working methods to use in classroom or youth work contexts.

The RAN Youth & Education (Y&E) working group convened a working session on 8 and 9 March 2022 for insights and tips on how to gain in-depth and immersive knowledge of the younger generation's online experience and subsequently integrated it in pedagogical practices. This paper is based on insights from the working session and aims to provide educators and youth workers with practical tips on how to include the online dimension in offline pedagogical practices.

The following key outcomes were identified.

- Since young people are the experts in this area, **let them teach you**. This can be achieved in various ways:
  - give them a subject to research online, and discuss the related sources, platforms and narratives;
  - show them familiar content on your smartphone and let them explain it to you (this may form a foundation for further discussion: begin the conversation on a neutral topic, and gradually move to more controversial content).
- Be **open to reflective conversations** on online content, without interrupting, prescribing or judging: a young person may share something controversial that they do not necessarily support or even really understand.
- The long periods of time young people spend online is not always concerning. Focus on the **quality rather than the quantity**; the internet is also a space for **belonging and personal (talent) development**. Empower pupils by giving them space to share their online passions. In both positive and negative instances, it is important to stay acquainted with their activities.
- Youth workers and teachers should have **freedom in their curriculum or programme** to implement methods to connect to this online dimension.

## Setting the scene: Why the urgency?

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The RAN Y&E meeting started with a panel discussion on the narratives and platforms of online VRWE networks, in particular the recent threat analysis of the Dutch National Coordinator that reported several hundreds of Dutch teenagers radicalising online towards right-wing accelerationism and striving for a race war and collapse of society, with various examples of manifestations of these networks, including very young children who had seen the Christchurch video, racist gaming communities, and threats on TikTok.

### Why are some young people so active online?

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Christian Vorre Mogensen from the Centre for Digital Pedagogy shared some insights on why young people are sometimes so attracted to online activity, especially in the gaming community. He stressed that the quantity of time spent online was not concerning; rather, the **quality was more important**. Young people are active on the internet for several reasons: engaging socially, learning and educating themselves, and for entertainment. Essentially, this does not differ from how adults use the internet.

Moreover, for some young people, the internet provides **positive opportunities** not accessible in the real world. For example, someone experiencing difficulty coping with social situations offline may find refuge in an online community where they can feel accepted and included. In fact, the online dimension can thus also be considered **empowering** when viewed positively as a means for young people to develop certain competencies. Despite these possibly positive effects, repeatedly spending a long time online can also verge on escapism.

Considering the topic of gaming specifically, the speaker argued that a gaming addiction does not lead to sadness, but rather that young people might escape online as a **distraction** from their sadness in real life. Also, gaming allows players agency over their actions and control of their online actions, which appeals to those lacking this in real life. We should thus **change the way we view gaming**, moving from the framework of the 'gaming addiction' towards greater focus on their other needs.

Young people can be exposed to extremist content online very easily because of the nature of digital platforms like TikTok, Discord or Telegram, where the user-friendliness and low barriers in terms of moderation make it easy to creatively distribute certain messages. Keeping pace with online extremist communities is challenging, as they use their own language and subliminal references. It is important for practitioners to be able to identify such symbols and narratives, because the behaviour these young people exhibit and consume online might reflect offline intolerant language and actions. Being unaware of such online conventions or expressions might lead to unpleasant surprises if practitioners are not able to interpret their meaning and significance. It is therefore vital to be well-informed and prepared, in order to respond appropriately.

Speakers explained that there is a need for digital P/CVE work. The young people consuming and sharing problematic online content need some kind of help or guidance. However, secretly integrating in such networks as a practitioner is a delicate operation and can compromise trust. Therefore, most P/CVE actors investigating these online networks are police or intelligence services. This digital prevent work is rather investigative, while there is a need for help and care, which should be done by practitioners. Preventive digital youth work, for example, is very beneficial, but is not feasible for every practitioner. There is a lack of digital preventive work, so currently it is up to the individual practitioner to also do digital prevent work. Therefore, it is essential to support practitioners with inspiration and methods on how to encourage young people to share their online experiences, in order to be able to interpret online

developments. When practitioners create such an environment, they are able to build a meaningful connection with these young people, which is an essential element in prevention work.

## Discussion highlights

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The first day's focus was on the urgent need for integration of the online and offline worlds. Several practices were presented that focused on this aspect. Key insights from the break-out session discussions are presented below.

- A starting point is to **destigmatise and normalise** online engagements of young people, for example gaming. Not taking the online world seriously or viewing it negatively could present a **barrier** between practitioners and young people.
- Schools and teachers are often already overwhelmed at work. A **change in teaching structures** is needed that allows teachers to free up time to invest in extracurricular topics and skills.
- Youth and social work play a vital role in connecting with young people, and therefore also with their online experiences. **Schools should welcome youth and social workers and effectively collaborate** with them in and around schools: they should make good use of available assets to invest in development of the necessary skills to build this connection.
- Following the pandemic and lockdowns, many online **memes have become less humorous** and more pessimistic and cynical. Being able to detect and interpret these expressions is key when it comes to **evaluating how young people are coping, and identifying their needs**.
- Aside from its risks, the **internet can also be a very positive place** for young people, where they can discover and develop transferable skills. For example, in Bosnia where schools are segregated, young people rejected nationalism on TikTok and embraced and overcame their ethnic differences online.

## Recommendations

During the working session on the second day, participants brainstormed concrete working methods for youth professionals integrating the online experiences of young people into their offline work in the classroom or in the youth work context. They used the inspirational practices presented on the first day as input.

The recommendations, shown below, are divided into three levels (for practitioners, organisations and policymakers), with some overlap between the different levels.

### Teachers and youth workers

Before young people share their online experiences, the following prerequisites should be met.

- Teachers and youth workers should have at least **basic knowledge of the relevant platforms and narratives**. A quarterly small workshop could be run by an internal or external social media expert to provide information on key aspects.
- Youth professionals should continuously work on building trust with young people. A **safe space is needed before pupils will feel comfortable enough to share their experiences** (whether online or offline). This takes time and should always be a priority when working with young people: they will not share with someone they do not trust, so this relationship is worth investing in.

The following tips will support teachers and youth workers seeking to integrate the online dimension into offline practices.

- When your aim as a practitioner is to engage with the full reality of young people, you must **develop media literacy skills**. This means educating yourself about the online dimension. This does not need to be done outside the classroom or youth centre. Developing these skills can go hand in hand with the development

of media literacy and critical thinking skills of the young people you work with, i.e. simultaneously improving both your own and young people's media literacy skills.

- Think about ways to **collaborate with young people**, work with them and learn from each other. Collaboration is needed to bridge the gap between the two perspectives (i.e. practitioners who perceive the online world as a threat and concern, and young people for whom online activity is an enriching experience). Respectful and non-judgemental connection will support this collaboration, which will in turn foster the connection needed to subvert the notion that we all keep our own truth and perception of right and wrong. Again, practitioners do not need to be experts about the online dimension, but they do need some basic knowledge, and they must be **curious** and willing to ask young people, who are the experts, for information and explanations.
- **Stay updated** on the online narratives around current events and make a point of discussing these in the classroom. Pay extra attention when something happens which involves or could invoke hate speech. Ask pupils to **share the narratives** they encounter online and to describe what they are seeing. Ask them what they think about these narratives or images. Do not be apprehensive about holding potentially polarising conversations.<sup>1</sup>
- **Integrate the online dimension into each lesson or engagement in schools and youth work**. For example, instead of teaching a subject using the conventional method, ask pupils to research it online, and then look at where they find their info and what it is saying. In this way, you can observe what young people view, read and experience and how they find their information.
- Come up with **original working methods**: for example, ask young people to prepare presentations about their online passions. This exercise should make them enthusiastic to share their online activity, and to explain what they are engaging with and why.
- Remain aware of your own bias and filter bubble, and don't be judgmental or prohibitive. Remain open-minded and neutral towards the perspectives of your pupils. Be able to hold **difficult conversations**.<sup>2</sup>
- **Share what you learn** with colleagues in schools and youth work organisations.
- If you want to engage online, do it through **a professional social media account** for that purpose only.

## Schools and youth work organisations

- Every school and youth centre should have a **digital expert** (internal or external). Schools and organisations can invite digital experts to regularly update youth professionals on online developments or educate young people in media literacy skills. These could be professionals from social media companies, influencers, or experts on software, cybercrime and media literacy. This could also be an option for career days.
- Within your organisation, appoint specialists on online topics to stay on top of things in terms of the lived reality of pupils. This could be one particular specialist, but participants preferred the option of a '**digital committee**' comprising teachers and other youth professionals (from within and outside your organisation), **youngsters and a digital expert**. This committee would function as a sounding board on different experiences online and could evaluate the needs and attention points for the organisation to focus on, both for young people and for youth professionals.
- Under the curricula and programmes for youth professionals, there should be **room for individual creativity of teachers and youth workers** seeking to establish a trustful environment.

## Policymakers developing education curricula for teachers and youth workers

- **Prioritise the online dimension in curricula** for teachers and youth workers. If they are unprepared for this reality before starting work, they will have a stumbling block that will also become an growing backlog over time, as the significance of the online dimension is set to increase in coming years. Brushing up on skills and knowledge once teachers and youth workers have already completed their education and training will be much more challenging.

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<sup>1</sup> See [ran paper covid-19 stories that polarise 20201112\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#) online.

<sup>2</sup> See [ran young holding difficult conversations stockholm 01-02\\_03\\_2018\\_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#) online.

- Integrate the online aspect as far as possible **in all subjects, such as mathematics, geography and English**. In history lessons, for example, discuss the given facts or events as well as the origins of the information.
- Make **critical thinking and media literacy compulsory in school curricula**, dedicating enough time and resources and ensuring it is also creative and interactive.
- Journalists attend **social media bootcamps**: teachers and youth workers could benefit from similar training specifically targeting their profession. This training could focus on relevant topics and include how to facilitate discussions and how to make knowledge accessible and sustainable for pupils.
- Set up an organised, **informative (online) platform** for teachers and youth workers that keeps them updated on the latest online trends in an accessible, user-friendly format.

## Relevant practices

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The **YMCA Dobrich (Bulgaria)** organises workshops for schools and youth work organisations, promoting democratic citizenship values and improving trust between young people and youth workers. The workshops often focus on media literacy and facilitate sharing online trends and narratives by showing and discussing videos. For example, a picture may be presented showing a 'tree of tolerance' without leaves, to which one adds leaves that answer the question 'What do we need for a more tolerant society?'

**GO! Royal Atheneum of Antwerp (Belgium)** incorporates the online dimension into their everyday curriculum through concrete exercises on fake news, algorithms and deepfakes. These methods are not limited to citizenship courses but could also be applicable in subjects like geography, for example.

The **Ezzev Foundation (Poland)** took over citizenship classes in a secondary school, seeking to achieve better psychosocial integration and a sense of belonging among the pupils. There is considerable focus on creating a safe space by making every student feel heard, and by deconstructing the original group identities and then creating a new group identity as part of that class group. The use of social media is also one of their regular topics of discussion.

**Socialife (the Netherlands)** is experienced in digital youth work, with a focus on the importance of being active in the online reality of pupils: this has preventive value and supports the positive pedagogical development of young people.

## Follow up

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Taking into account the highlights and recommendations, the following suggestions were made:

- development of a podcast, webinar or infographic for practitioners, with tips for staying safe online;
- creation of videos and infographics showing the outcomes of each RAN meeting;
- A meeting on dealing with difficult or concerning comments from young people (RAN EDU and RAN Y&E have dedicated meetings to these topics; conclusion papers are referenced in this paper).

## Further reading

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- RAN YF&C, [Doing digital youthwork in a P/CVE context](#), 2019
- RAN Y&E, [COVID-19 stories that polarise](#), 2020 (on discussing controversial topics in classrooms)
- RAN Y&E, [Education and youth work: towards an effective collaboration](#), 2021
- C. O'Connor, [Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok](#), Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021
- C. Mogensen, [Hybrid youth and social work](#), 2022 (RAN specialised paper)