

25/01/2021

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN C&N event -

24 and 25 November 2020

Digital meeting

The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives

Introduction

Conspiracy narratives, defined as “an account of events as the deliberate product of a powerful few, regardless of the evidence”⁽¹⁾ are not novel; they have driven political movements and extremism for hundreds of years. Supercharged by social media and further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy narratives have moved to the forefront of global public discourse and act as a catalyst for radicalisation. This recent surge of conspiracy narratives has impacted extremist movements of all kinds, including violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) and violent left-wing extremism (VLWE). Throughout this conclusion paper we will use the term “conspiracy narratives” rather than the more commonly used term “conspiracy theories” to refer to this form of thinking. This is an effort to deny this form of thinking the legitimacy of being referred to as theories. In addition to this, conspiracy narratives differ from genuine conspiracies, which relate to an agreement between two or more people who aim to commit an act against something or someone.

The aim of the RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (C&N) meeting held on 24 and 25 November 2020 was to explore this topic with practitioners, industry representatives and experts. During the first day of the meeting, practitioners and experts discussed emerging conspiracy narrative trends, and how these intersect with extremism. Participants offered practical insights on how to engage with individuals who either believe in conspiracy narratives or are prone to them. On the second day, participants analysed the Great Replacement and QAnon through the lens of the GAMMMA+ model and provided pragmatic recommendations to practitioners on how to counter conspiracy narratives. This paper summarises the discussions, highlights key points and recommends practical next steps.

¹ Bartlett, J. & Miller, C. (2010) *The power of unreason. Conspiracy, theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. https://www.demos.co.uk/files/Conspiracy_theories_paper.pdf

Highlights

1. Conspiracy narratives are not new

It is a myth that conspiracy narratives are solely linked to social media or the internet; such narratives have existed globally for centuries. Anti-Semitic conspiracies leading to pogroms against Jewish communities is one of the most well-known examples. Current narratives are often recycled from historical narratives and are usually centred on “the enemy” that is seen as the root of all evil.

2. Conspiracy narratives are emotionally satisfying

Conspiracy narratives are emotionally attractive because they are simple and flattering, while the truth is complicated and painful. These narratives are often embraced when the believer is in the midst of a personal crisis, serving as a tool of self-empowerment. Personal crises can create the urgent psychological need for a ready-made solution that makes a person feel better. This need can be filled by conspiracy narratives which explain that everything that is wrong with a person’s life, and the world, is the fault of an all-powerful hidden elite. Conspiracy narratives can serve as a tool of self-empowerment since they promise clarity, belonging, status and innocence. On the one hand, this can create a sense of urgency, whereas it might also provide a sense of relief due to the perception that certain things, i.e. the wrongs, are predetermined by a greater power.

3. Conspiracy narratives draw people in in phases

People are drawn into conspiracy narratives in distinct phases. Although each individual of course follows their own distinct journey, six distinct phases were identified during the meeting.

1. **Origin / trigger:** An initial introduction to a topic, for example through a YouTube video.
2. **Research phase:** Individuals start conducting their own research. This is frequently seen as an exciting phase as the individuals are jumping into the unknowns trying to uncover all that they have never known.
3. **“Plateau” phase:** Beliefs become stabilised. Some people end up staying in this phase, instead of moving on to the ‘Moment of clarity’ phase.
4. **Moment of clarity:** The realisation that 1) they were wrong about something, or 2) the conspiracy promoter that they trusted was wrong.
5. **Unravelling:** Discovering that something was wrong, resulting in questioning other things as well.
6. **Withdrawal:** Moving away from the conspiracy narratives. Rarely, this results in becoming a clear opponent of the narratives.

Movement between these phases is not always perfectly linear, and not all adherents pass through all six stages.

4. Conspiracy narratives are dynamic

There is a strong “remix culture” amongst conspiracy narrative adherents, in which seemingly unrelated narratives are brought together and updated and form distinctive new narratives. One example is narratives surrounding 5G roll-out mixed with COVID-19 narratives to form novel conspiracies.

This process, which previously took years, has been accelerated by the rise of the internet. This acceleration results in narratives spreading quickly to different countries and evolving to the local context. The rapid localisation of conspiracy narratives allows narratives to gain more credibility and resonance. A clear example here is also seen with the arrival of the originally United States-based QAnon in Europe. In the Netherlands, according

to QAnon narratives present in the country, prominent government officials and the Dutch royal family are supposedly part of a paedophilic network abusing children ⁽²⁾.

This evolution and spread can also take place offline during large-scale demonstrations, as well as during the more local events, such as at a local sports club or yoga centre.

5. Conspiracy narratives intersect with extremism

Conspiracy narratives are found across the extremist spectrum and animate many extremist world views. In recent years, attacks such as those in Christchurch, El Paso and Halle were inspired in part by conspiracy narratives, specifically the Great Replacement. QAnon has also inspired a range of high-profile acts of violence. The following indicators tend to be present in conspiracy narratives and form a more dangerous mechanism when used in combination with one another:

- one group is superior to another (superiority versus inferiority);
- one group is under attack by the other (imminent threat); and
- the threat is apocalyptic in nature (existential threat).

Research on the effects of conspiracy beliefs on violent extremist intentions indicates that a stronger conspiracy mentality, when combined with traits such as low self-control, law-relevant morality and self-efficacy, leads to increased violent extremist intentions ⁽³⁾.

While links have been established between conspiracy narratives and violent extremism, they remain distinct. Conspiracy narratives exist on a "conspiracy spectrum", and their adherents are a cross-section of the general population. There are many adherents to outlandish conspiracy narratives who are entirely peaceful, even pacifistic. Similarly, some violent extremist groups do not adhere to significant or recognised conspiracy narratives.

6. Conspiracy narratives can be countered

Critical thinking, media literacy and teaching tolerance can help grow society's resilience towards conspiracy narratives. Debunking, pre-bunking and inoculation strategies are promising methods to increase resilience. When engaging with those in the conspiracy narrative rabbit hole, practitioners must:

- 1. Maintain effective communication:** Aim to understand the people you are engaging with, while showing respect, honesty, openness, transparency and politeness. It is important to find common ground and validate their genuine concerns, including but not limited to government overreach, corruption or environmental degradation. Avoid the backfire effect, bearing in mind the "do no harm" principles.
- 2. Supply useful information:** There are multiple ways to share information here, such as: a) where the person might have made mistakes in their conspiracy narratives; b) where other conspiracy narrators have been wrong; and c) a broader perspective, or things that were left unaddressed, as well as sources where they got their information from.
- 3. Give it time:** It is key to avoid any interactions leading to anger. These interactions will require time and patience, and it is of essence here to know that you are helping them come to the "moment of clarity", point four in the 6-phases trajectory schema above, and provide them with perspective. If time and space allow for it, it is important to build or maintain a relationship with the person.

It is crucial that all work to counter conspiracy narratives is done in a "do no harm" fashion, taking care not to introduce the adherent to damaging new topics.

⁽²⁾ Bouma, R. (2020). *Amerikaanse complottheorie QAnon ook in Nederland in opkomst*.

<https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2349814-amerikaanse-complottheorie-qanon-ook-in-nederland-in-opkomst.html>

⁽³⁾ Rottweiler, B. & Gill, P. (2020). *Conspiracy Beliefs and Violent Extremist Intentions: The Contingent Effects of Self-efficacy, Self-control and Law-related Morality*.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2020.1803288?journalCode=ftpv20&>

		THE GREAT REPLACEMENT	QANON
1	 G [GOAL]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil war; • Polarisation; • Divide and conquer; • Dehumanise; • Sense of identity; • Keep the "traditional" community; • White ethnostate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defeat evil; • To provide psychological comfort to their confusion in a complex world / understanding confusing reality; • Restore an enchanted world; • Trump presidency.
2	 A [AUDIENCE]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who experience a sense of loss / grieved individuals; • Working class; • The supposed "elites"; • Conservatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alt-right / patriots; • Ordinary people (mothers and fathers; men and women); • People who are wrestling with the complexities of the world: searching for meaning.
3	 M [MESSAGE]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "We are under attack"; • "It is now or never" / "We have to defend ourselves"; • "Destruction of traditional family is reason for decline of EU populations"; • "Immigrants are invaders"; • "Mistrust of mainstream media". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The elite ruling is the evil" / "Everything you know is a lie"; • "Good, ordinary people are victims"; • "Your situation is the product of intentional plans by others"; • "Your liberty is under threat".
4	 M [MESSENGER]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencers / self-proclaimed political figures / academics / journalists; • Terrorists / extremists; • Religious leaders; • Alternative media; • Social media bots; • Accelerationists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q; • Alternative media; • Individuals claiming to be "red-pilled"; • Influencers; • Echo chambers / every follower is a messenger.
5	 M [MEDIUM]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fringe platforms: Gab, 4chan, 8kun; • Mainstream platforms: TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Telegram; • Print media: stickers and posters; • Live streams / video games; • Real-life events. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large social media platforms; • Fringe social media platforms; • Memes / live streams; • The Dark Web.
6	 A [ACTION] (CALL TO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political action: Change the system from the inside / overthrow of government; • Raise awareness / protesting; • Promote conflict of truth / violence; • Red-pilling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spread the message; • Protest / riot; • Prepare for violence against immoral other / prepare for martial law.

[Evaluation]



Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the insights provided by participants throughout the meeting. These were workshopped with participants with reference to the QAnon and Great Replacement narratives, but they are applicable to other narratives.

1. Recommendations for social workers:

- Aim to understand the underlying grievances. Social workers do not need to know every aspect of each conspiracy narrative, as it is difficult to stay up to date with the constant evolution of such narratives.
- Avoid the temptation to become debunkers and remain focused on the primary mission of providing care to those at risk. Social workers can engage in conversations with the community and should aim to validate the person's emotions, for example by asking open, non-judgemental questions. It is crucial to not confront the person by telling them that they are "wrong", as this might do more harm than good.
- Try to understand the narrative in order to carefully and critically examine the argumentation. Potential questions may include: "What is the origin of the narrative?", "Can the information be verified?" and "What is the intention of the narrative?"⁽⁴⁾. The GAMMMA+ model can serve as a useful tool for deconstructing narratives.

2. Recommendations for local authorities:

- Establish relationships with credible messengers, including social media influencers, as the at-risk might not trust local authorities or police as messengers.
- Educate the public about the dangers of conspiracy narratives, with a focus on prevention. This can also be achieved through other measures, such as organising "low-level" debates and fostering critical thinking, including promoting relevant tools and teaching skills.
- Deepen multi-agency cooperation amongst local authorities, social workers, police, health organisations and more, to create a 360° view of different situations.
- Encourage a dialogue and relationship between frontline practitioners and those vulnerable to conspiracy narratives.
- Develop tools that practitioners can use, for instance in the classroom around discussion with young people, or for parents as they have such talks with young people. Tools discussing open, non-judgemental questions, such as "How can one engage with a conspiracy narrative?", are important, especially for people who are close to the audiences that are traditionally "invisible" (e.g. due to a limited recognisable presence).
- Transparency is key during engagements with individuals, particularly around the role that the local authority might be playing and what they aim to achieve.

3. Recommendations for police:

- Maintain close contacts with a team of experts, including but not limited to psychologists, counsellors and social workers, who have a good understanding of conspiracy believers and their needs and grievances.
- Police should be trained to distinguish between violence-inducing and non-violent conspiracy narratives. Police focus should first and foremost be on enforcing the law, and therefore keeping a close eye on the legal ramifications of conspiracy believers' actions rather than telling them what they ought to believe.
- Avoid being pressured into becoming the first port of call for those attempting to counter conspiracy narratives. Direct involvement of police or law enforcement would risk entrenching existing adversarial views.

⁽⁴⁾ Lamberty, P. (2020). *Verschwörungserzählungen*. https://m.bpb.de/system/files/dokument_pdf/BPB_Info-aktuell-35-2020_barrierefrei.pdf

Relevant practices

The following practices were taken from the [RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices: Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism](#):

- [Municipality of Sarpsborg, Norway](#) – The municipality uses a holistic and systematic approach in supporting families to prevent or reverse radicalisation processes with affected family members by focusing on consolidating user involvement, building trust and strengthening family networks.
- [Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation](#) –
 1. *Holding Difficult Conversations* – Running workshops for teachers and other frontline public-sector workers to gain needed skills and confidence to hold difficult conversations on challenging subjects, such as identity, belonging, values and group members;
 2. *Rethinking Radicalisation (Community Dialogue)* – Providing tailored seminars and workshops that are aimed at providing safe and neutral spaces for local authorities and the communities they serve to enter into dialogue and rethink radicalisation.
- [Diversion – Dialogue in Citizenship Education](#) – A methodology that lays out steps, exercises and guidelines that help teachers guide conversations around conflicting values and polarising topics.

Follow-up

Following this meeting and previous RAN meetings that discussed the topic of conspiracy narratives, the topic will be further examined in one of the RAN 2021 meetings. The follow-up meeting will build out a framework for practitioners on how to deal with conspiracy narratives in a P/CVE setting.

Further reading

- West, M. (2018). *Escaping the rabbit hole: How to debunk conspiracy theories using facts, logic, and respect*. Skyhorse. Access [here](#).
- Nocun, K., & Lamberty, P. (2020). *Fake facts: Wie Verschwörungstheorien unser Denken bestimmen* (German Edition). Bastei Entertainment. Access [here](#).
- Rottweiler, B., & Gill, P. (2020). Conspiracy beliefs and violent extremist intentions: The contingent effects of self-efficacy, self-control and law-related morality. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. Access [here](#).
- Lamberty, P. (2020). *Verschwörungserzählungen*. Informationen zur politischen Bildung. Access [here](#).