

## RAN LOCAL

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### CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN LOCAL Online P/CVE approach for local authorities, how to manage it?  
27-28 May 2021, online event

# An online P/CVE approach for local authorities: challenges, tips & tricks

## Key outcomes

With people spending a great deal of time online, the ideal integral approach in the prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE), on the local level, is no longer based solely on face-to-face contact and interventions. It also comprises online components and interventions that allow local coordinators and first-line practitioners to signal signs of radicalisation and to intervene through digital communication channels. This paper is based on the insights from the RAN LOCAL meeting on 27–28 May 2021. It presents practitioners' views on what is needed for smart and more effective solutions to address the digital or online space and what tools, knowledge and means they need to achieve this.

The participants identified the following needs:

- Intensify the online presence of first-line practitioners on the online platforms and apps where polarising and extremist content is shared and to create online safe spaces to actively reach out and engage with relevant target groups.
- Work towards a clear legal structure and framework that includes juridical and ethical boundaries of online P/CVE work and the roles and responsibilities of actors involved.
- Use artificial intelligence and monitoring software to detect (local) extremist content and patterns using machine learning algorithms.
- Raise public awareness about the risks of being online, and who and where to turn to in case of any problems.

The needs and challenges are identified first, followed by practical tips and insights on how to use online actions impactful on the local level for local coordinators and first-line practitioners.

## Highlights of the discussion



Over the years, local authorities have greatly invested in setting up their local strategy and approach in P/CVE. Much of these efforts, however, focused on face-to-face contact. Accelerated by the lockdown restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need to identify the early signs of radicalisation online. It has also become increasingly necessary to intervene in an online setting. For local authorities and practitioners, this new reality is challenging.

Some of the main reasons local P/CVE work should include online aspects are due to an increase of hate speech, polarisation, conspiracy narratives and the spread of fake news, especially since the start of the pandemic. The online sphere functions as an echo chamber in which the same narrative is repeated over and over again once someone has shown interest in perceiving the world a certain way. Nowadays, online work should not be considered 'extra' to the 'regular' work. It is actually an integral part of local P/CVE work (**holistic approach**). As the two blend more and more, it is more accurate to think about it as a continuum rather than make distinctions between online and offline work. It's all about reaching (vulnerable) people where they are, be it online or offline.

### Dream scenarios

During the meeting, ideal '**dream scenarios**' were constructed as an integral P/CVE approach to effectively deal with the online space at the local level. In these dream scenarios, there are no restrictions in terms of time, budget, or legal constraints. The following common denominators were part of the scenarios that were developed:

- Several remarks were made about the **role of local authorities**. It is important for local governments to 'lead the way' and provide political and financial support for the (development) of the online P/CVE approach and be transparent about what is being done online.



- Concerning **multi-agency cooperation**, it is important to translate the responsibilities within the P/CVE framework to the online sphere: *Who* should do *what* online and *how* should different organisations work together? This demands for training and the allocation of capacities.

- As per the **interventions**, the development and promotion of alternative narratives, the creation of online safe spaces and the active outreach by practitioners (using a holistic approach, combining online & offline) were mentioned.

- Cooperation with tech companies and/or social media platforms (on notice and takedown request procedures), the possibility to 'localise' what's online and the need to detect hate speech and extremist content using artificial intelligence (AI) or other tools were mentioned concerning the necessary **digital infrastructure**.
- Regarding **gathering information online**, the scenarios included the wish to know 'what & where' (vulnerable or radical people and groups, signs of extremism) to look for, use of a shared approach as to the 'how' (using a shared platform between the involved practitioners for monitoring the online sphere) and defining the 'who' (which practitioner should reach out online and what is being done internationally, nationally and locally).
- An important overarching theme within the different 'dream scenarios' concerns the **(legal) structures to facilitate working online**. A clear framework of rules and regulations is needed nationally as well as at the EU level to promote ethical working methods, striking the right balance between the safeguarding of privacy and the need to be able to intervene online to prevent radicalisation and terrorism. Being transparent about what is being done online is pivotal and important for building trust regarding the online P/CVE approach.

## Gaps and challenges

After building the 'dream scenarios', the ideas gathered in these scenarios were confronted with the harsh reality, in which budget, time and other resources are scarce. Doing this, the most important **gaps and challenges** to reach the 'dream scenarios' were identified and shared. These were the following.

- Working with the **tech industry**, interests of local coordinators and practitioners might not align with those of the tech companies.
- Regarding the **online interventions** there are certain challenges:
  - The current **skills and knowledge** of the practitioners involved are rather limited at the moment, such as knowledge about current platforms and recruitment tactics that are being used, as well as skills to achieve the right 'tone of voice' when engaging via online means.
  - Working online can cause **danger or exposure for practitioners** and may require them to seek alternative ways of working (different times and places than the 'old' way of working).
  - Sharing information** about online observations is challenging regarding legal regulations.

- More research and development are needed in order to make the desired localised online monitoring possible. Technical solutions can also be quite costly.
- Currently, it is **difficult to segment the audience** in order to make the right distinction between vulnerable youngsters, the radical agitators who need to be banned or prosecuted and the 'trolls' who are only involved for the single purpose of provocation or for their own entertainment.
- **(Legal) structures** concerning working online are currently vague or absent. For instance, should practitioners engage on the dark web with its illegal content? How far can or should you go? What are the ethical boundaries?
- At the time, **funding from national governments** to work on P/CVE online is mostly offered on a project-by-project basis, while there is a need for structural funding.

## Recommendations

A distinction can be made between some of the preconditions required to work with online components at the local level and some tips & tricks identified on how to include online components in the local P/CVE approach.

### Preconditions:

- To facilitate online P/CVE approaches, having **(clear) legal structures and frameworks**<sup>1</sup> in place on different levels (EU, national and local) is essential to provide a mandate and restrictions for local authorities and professionals regarding the monitoring of the online space and their active outreach. As such, these frameworks should include, for instance, aspects concerning privacy and ethics.
- Clear **guidelines on the roles and responsibilities** of different actors involved to ensure a common comprehension of who is responsible for what in the multi-agency setting.
- **Structural political support and budget** is needed to go from experimenting with online approaches to a holistic approach where online work is an integral aspect of the local P/CVE approach.
- **Continuous collaboration with industry partners** (tech companies, social media) to not only signal any harmful or extremist content and being able to remove it, but also prevent people from falling down the 'rabbit hole' due to echo chambers & algorithms. In addition, industry partners could support an active online outreach by professionals on their platforms.
- Consider possibilities of spreading **alternative narratives or strategic communication outlets** to people vulnerable to radicalisation. The C&N GAMMMA+ model<sup>2</sup> can provide some useful insights for this.

<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EU) No 2021/784 on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0784&qid=1621416320608&from=EN>

<sup>2</sup> C&N 2019 Paper 'Updating the GAMMMA+ model' and C&N 'Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns'.

# How to do online P/CVE work

## Tips & Tricks



### First and foremost: Go online!

The online and offline worlds are merged. This means the online space should not be ignored since it interacts with offline signals and actions.

A comprehensive and integral P/CVE approach may have a **50/50 division** between online and offline components.



**The (structural) use of artificial intelligence (AI)** and machine learning for monitoring and detecting hateful or extremist content online. The amount of content posted online is impossible for humans to monitor, which is why AI can be of added value.



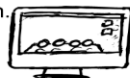
### Discuss within the local multi-agency structure

how online interventions or components can be included in the existing approach and who is assigned which roles and responsibilities, also related to sharing information.



### Start implementing online monitoring or detection tools where possible

These can help in identifying signals online or hotbeds of radicalisation. These could be Webcrawler and Talkwalker or initiatives like the European Observatory of Online Hate.



### Experiment, monitor, evaluate, adjust and learn

Online efforts will not be perfect from the beginning. Allow enough time to find out what works and what doesn't, and under which circumstances. Keep track of all efforts and the reactions to consider what can be improved in the future.



### Actively involve youth in online activities

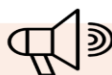
They can have useful input and with some training they might even help in flagging extremist content or worrisome signals online.



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### Raise public awareness

about the risks of going online and in particular the roles and responsibilities of parents, including looking at the role of caretakers from a more compelling perspective. One option is to define the situation of **'digital neglect'** in which parents/guardians fail to create a safe digital environment for their children (by setting boundaries and being involved in children's online presence).



### Provide an active outreach by first-line practitioners to (vulnerable) people online. Consider the following:

In general, **safe spaces** can be created online to interact with your target audience, or for them to share their concerns with you. These could be closed off groups on existing social media platforms, using gaming (adjacent communications) platforms, such as Twitch and Discord or using gaming as a way to engage with the public online (see example of 'Gaming with the police' on page 6).

First-line practitioners can look into **possibilities of online counselling**. For example, mental health professionals, exit workers or youth workers could reach out to people who are vulnerable to radicalisation, radicalised or people in general and provide online counselling through for example chats, video calls or other communication channels on existing or self-developed platforms.

[2] C&N 2019 Paper: 'Updating the GAMMMA+ model' and C&N 'Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns'.

## Relevant practices

1. [True Friend](#) is a new initiative designed to address the important challenge of preventing young people from drifting away from our open society. The initiative, with a central role for an online environment (special app and social media) aims for a positive impact on the choices and behaviour of a new generation of citizens so they will, to the best of their abilities, actively contribute to our society and help strengthen it. By stimulating democratic values and offering an 'alter-narrative', the programme helps children (ages 10–12) to recognise the value of their open society and what it can offer them. The attractive mix of online and offline components offers participating children year-round ample opportunities to create true friendships, triggered by a range of challenges, right in the heart of their city. True Friend is operating in the Geldrop-Mierlo municipality in the southern Netherlands.
2. Some cities like Mechelen (northern Belgium) are working towards a P/CVE strategy in which online and offline components are fully integrated. For instance, the city's approach hinges on its previous positive experiences in creating online safe spaces, developing software, and involving young people in active outreach and online interventions. However, considering the numerous online pitfalls (e.g. echo chamber, disinformation, and the ambiguous ethical and juridical framework), the city is searching for new tools, skills, and frameworks. To gain more online skills, the city works together with [Textgain](#), a company specialised in using AI to better understand the working mechanism of algorithms and detect patterns of hate speech and disinformation.
3. [U-Turn](#) is an online intervention used in Dortmund, a city in Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia region. It aims to reach out to individuals in online groups who display an affinity for conspiracy theories and anti-democratic tendencies. Interventions start with identifying the group's members, distinguishing between the hardcore members and agitators and those who are followers and at risk of becoming more radicalised. Since the latter is relatively easier to reach and often willing to challenge their beliefs, intervention efforts with these individuals take place first online. Having created a trustful relationship with these members, interventions continue offline in order to challenge their views and provide them with support to deal with difficult situations and mental health problems.
4. '[WebWalkers](#)', or 'Promeneurs du Net' (France) programme aims to better equip web coaches to engage with young people showing worrying signs of radicalisations and/or violent extremism online. Through training programmes and face-to-face and online workshops with young people, web coaches are able to detect these signs and support young people on different levels (e.g. strengthening social ties and relationships, and communications and psychological support).

'Gaming with the police'. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Dutch police started this pilot initiative as a tool for the police to stay connected with young people. Currently, they have 21 teams of police officers who engage with young people at least once a week by playing popular video games (like FIFA, Fortnite and Call of Duty). Whilst playing, they talk about subjects that have been raised by the young people themselves. Compared to the offline world, police are more accessible online for some young people, as group hierarchy is not present in the online setting. The police can engage in one-on-one conversations with youth and, where necessary, guide a troubled youth to other local practitioners for assistance.

## Follow-up meeting

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- A follow-up meeting could explore the possibilities and pathways to **building a clear legal and ethical structure for online P/CVE on different levels**: local, national and European.
- A meeting about **the use of artificial intelligence (AI)** in the prevention of violent acts and detecting extremist content may also be considered.
- Also, a RAN meeting **on online safe spaces in P/CVE** could prove useful for practitioners. This meeting could address issues related to why, how, and where to create such safe spaces.

## Further reading

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RAN Families, communities & social care working group (RAN FC&S), 2019: [Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context](#).

RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (RAN C&N), 2017: [Guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMMA+\)](#).

RAN Communication and Narratives Working Group (RAN C&N), 2019: [Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMMA+ model](#).

RAN Mental Health (RAN HEALTH), 2020: [P/CVE and mental health support online](#).