Radicalisation Awareness Network

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Practitioners

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Hybrid social work and digital awareness for family support

Key outcomes

The Families, Communities and Social Care (FC&S) Working Group convened a meeting on 16 and 17 March to address the topic of hybrid social work and digital awareness in support for families of radicalised individuals. The meeting served as an opportunity to take stock of the challenges that practitioners encounter when using digital or hybrid interventions, to explore inspiring examples of digital family support approaches and formulate considerations on deciding whether to 'go digital' or not. Participants of this meeting were mainly practitioners working in family support and social care services, supporting family members of radicalised individuals.

Some of the key outcomes of this meeting are summarised below.

- Challenges that practitioners during the meeting have mapped entail; keeping up with continuously developing trends, narratives and language online, keeping a trustful relationship and 'reading' body language and facial expressions online, ethical questions related to security and confidentiality issues and the practitioners' wellbeing.
- Key recommendations that have been made when practitioners are considering to 'go digital' are:
    - Adapt your working methods to the **personal preferences, needs and situational circumstances of the person you are supporting**. A trustful relationship is crucial and a prerequisite for this is that the family member feels comfortable with the approach taken. Practical considerations can be found at the end of this paper.
    - **Discuss terms and conditions for online approaches** with the client on how the confidentiality and security of both the client and practitioner are ensured. These can include for example agreements on switching cameras on or making recordings.
    - Keep an eye on **your personal wellbeing** as a practitioner. With online work, the framework of time and place fades and practitioners can increasingly be reached 24/7. Therefore, make agreements within the organisation, such as on the maximum amount of counselling sessions per day or the possibility of turning off your phone.

This paper outlines the highlights of this meeting, the challenges of practitioners and recommendations to overcome these challenges. In addition, the annex of this document includes a practical list that can serve as a helpful source when considering a digital/hybrid approach, based on the persons' needs and situation.

Highlights of the meeting

Importance of the topic: a hybrid world

The internet is part of every asset of people's everyday lives, especially of the younger generation. It is part of the communities in which people live and it forms how people engage with the world. Online, people can find like-minded persons outside of where they live physically: this means they can find a sense of belonging in online communities. The online world can thus even serve to answer questions such as '*who am I?*' or '*who should I be?*'. Figure I reflects how the online world can offer answers to the needs of people in their offline lives. These two worlds cannot be seen separate from each other and can offer many positive elements that (among others) can protect people from radicalising.
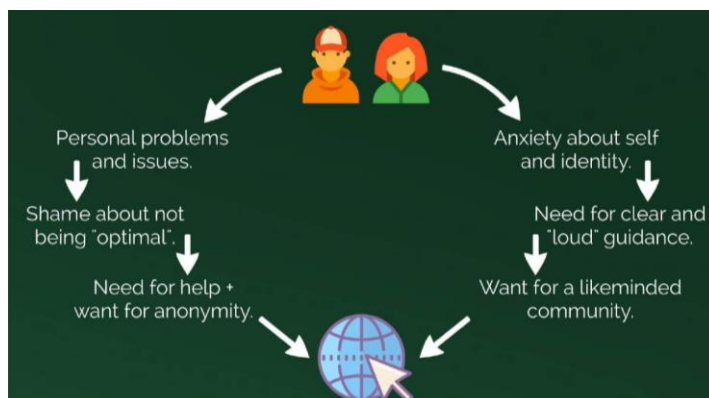
Not actual screen time is of concern (as parents for example often worry), but the digital world becomes a concern when people in certain niche communities start to actively shut out particular groups. Figure II shows an example of how to differentiate between different kinds of online behaviour.
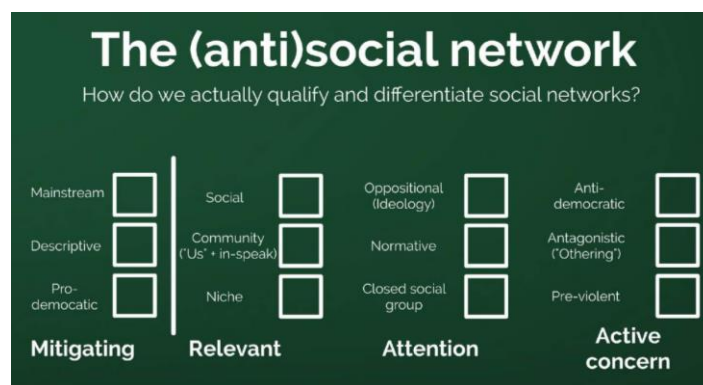
Practitioners during this meeting emphasised the importance of understanding how the online and offline world often intersect nowadays: it has become a hybrid world.

Figure 1: Based on a presentation by Christian Vorre Mogensen (Centre for Digital Youth Care)

Figure 2: Based on a presentation by Christian Vorre Mogensen (Centre for Digital Youth Care)

In light of this increasingly hybrid world, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, practitioners in P/CVE are also increasingly exploring innovative digital approaches. In previous meetings of the Radicalisation Awareness Network, the potential opportunities of digital P/CVE work have been discussed, mainly related to primary prevention, such as youth work interventions and engaging with young people online (see also section: Further Reading). For professionals in secondary and tertiary prevention, however, who are often relying on a trustful relationship with their clients resulting from long-term face-to-face counselling or meetings, digital interventions are still limited and not standardised within their methodologies (yet). Whereas the Covid-19 pandemic however has forced many practitioners to carry out their work digitally for periods of time, it seems that family support practitioners do see the potential of the digital world. Pros of the use of digital communication are for example that it enables social workers to connect with families in a fast and low threshold way. Further, for some clients, it may feel more comfortable to talk digitally and in their own safe environment. Additionally, digital interventions save time and are cheaper.

Challenges and recommendations

Besides the opportunities that the digital world can offer, practitioners also discussed a set of challenges they encounter when working digitally. They are presented below, including practical recommendations for practitioners and the organisation they work at.

Challenge 1: Working digitally can cause both practitioners and clients to feel uncomfortable due to several reasons. Some families do not have access to digital means, because they cannot afford a laptop. Others lack the technical or physical capacities to properly use them, or encounter language issues more heavily in a digital way. The same goes for practitioners, who do not all possess the digital skills and knowledge about digital means and developments. Components that practitioners refer to as challenging are being aware of the newest apps, programmes and platforms and the skills to use these, and understanding online dialect and digital legislation. Practitioners face a lack of time to keep up with the elements above, which can cause barriers to seek digital approaches.

Recommendations:

- Adapt your working methods to the **personal needs and situational circumstances** of the person you are supporting. A trustful relationship is above all crucial and a prerequisite for this is that the family member feels comfortable with the approach taken.
- **Keep it simple** when you use digital means. Use digital apps and programmes that are easy to use for everyone.
- **Network with and get inspired by innovative digital approaches** from adjacent fields, to be able to adapt to different needs and situations. There is no need to reinvent the wheel.
    o Examples are: digital peer support communities already used in other fields (*see section: Opportunities from an Adjacent Field*), using specific apps to get an indication of how someone is doing (example: the Global Psychotrauma Screen (GPS) used to identify reactions to a stressor or traumatic event and assess risk or protective factors), the use of online counselling sessions, informative webinars or using chat functions.
- When you are working with an entire family, it can be worthwhile to **involve siblings** to empower them to foster a positive change within the family and increase for example digital skills and/or literacy. On a case-by-case basis it has to be estimated if this is a suitable solution.
- **Include a translator** in the online conversation to avoid language barriers and misunderstandings.
- Be aware that it might **take some time** before a client feels comfortable to meet digitally or engage in digital interventions.

Challenge 2: Working digitally can be challenging when it comes to the security of both the client and the practitioner. Practitioners can face uncertainties: digitally it is hard to estimate whether you are dealing with a fake online account/identity, you cannot be sure whether a conversation is being recorded, or whether someone else is overhearing a conversation in the same room. This last point is also an issue for the client, when this means he/she is not able to speak freely digitally. For the practitioner, judicial issues can arise when it comes to withholding information.

Recommendations:

- **Discuss and publish terms and conditions** specifically related to digital work. This can for example relate to set standards on security and confidentiality within your organisation (for example: 'do not make recordings' or 'only person A and B have access to this account').
- **Discuss the above conditions in advance with the individuals you work with** to make the family feel safe when working online and make sure their privacy is assured.
- Especially when working digitally, discuss within your organisation what your team needs to know about **legislation around cases that involve judicial aspects**.
- Generally, there is a need for an **ethical code of conduct** for working online, to standardise several important issues such as:
    o How to deal with confidentiality of both the client and the practitioner;
    o How practitioners are protected when their client is under judicial orders;
    o What technical skills and expertise practitioners should possess.

Challenge 3: Assessing behaviour and emotions in a digital way can be challenging. For example, it is more difficult to read someone's body language and facial expressions ('is somebody blushing, nervous?'). Other barriers in online contact are for example Wi-Fi instability or the possibility to just click on 'Exit' in an

uncomfortable conversation. Also, situational circumstances are not easy to estimate digitally, such as the tidiness of a home, or the presence of other/new people.

Recommendations:

- **Formulate rules of communication** at the start of the counselling session.
  - o Indicate that you may ask more/different questions to make sure you read body language online correctly.
  - o Make an agreement on keeping your cameras turned on to keep a trustful relationship (unless there is a valid personal reason not to).
- In some cases, it is recommended to **first meet face-to-face** before you start using digital means to get to know the client and enhance your credibility. An advantage is then also that it might be easier in a later stage to 'read' someone's emotions online. It is however argued that a first digital contact can also lower the threshold to get support, so this consideration should be made on a case-by-case basis.
- When making use of video calls, consider a non-distracting background and light, make good **eye contact** through your camera, ask clear questions and accept some silence.
- Think of **appropriate aftercare,** because it is not always clear how someone is doing after a digital counselling session.

Challenge 4: Working digitally can cause challenges for the personal wellbeing of practitioners. Since they can be reached online 24/7, practitioners also feel the need to always be available for their clients. Further, working online means the possibility to plan more appointments on one day. Related to this, practitioners are constantly confronted with the hate that is being spread online. All in all, this means that some practitioners find it more difficult to separate work and private life.

Recommendations:

- Make specific agreements on working online with your organisation and set boundaries for yourself. This may include:
  - o Set a maximum **amount of counselling sessions** per day.
  - o **Turn off your phone** at the (official) end of your workday. If you need to be available for urgent issues, make specific agreements on this.

Insights for (local) authorities

- The legal counter-terrorism framework should **ensure that family support practitioners are protected**. New ethical questions around information sharing, confidentiality and security in general arise when working digitally. The framework should take these new developments into account and ensure the practitioners can be legally protected, especially in cases where a judicial aspect is involved.
- **Give priority to the digital P/CVE dimension in the curricula for social workers**. It is important to include education about the radicalisation process and its online manifestations in all social workers' curricula. Besides this, courses should also pay attention to innovative opportunities as well as (ethical) implications of working digitally. At the moment, there is not sufficient attention yet to the digital dimension in social work's practice and education.
- **Foster exchange between family support institutions in P/CVE and other fields that have already implemented digital approaches**. Digital approaches are out there (even more so since the Covid-19 pandemic), such as in youth work or the broader social work and mental health field. Inspiring learnings from these fields may be transferred to family support in P/CVE.

Inspiring practice from an adjacent field: digital peer support communities

After crimes, accidents and disasters, Victim Support Netherlands offers victims and their relatives legal support during a criminal trial, emotional support and/or practical help. The organisation has set up two digital ways of support: digital group counselling sessions as well as digital peer support communities, in which peers provide each other with online support in different thematic groups. Whereas the target group is not the same as the target group of family support in P/CVE, there are similarities in terms of relatives that are facing difficult situations that involve shame, stigma and/or legal issues and they are often reluctant to talk about their issues.

Pros and cons
Pros of this approach are: people that feel strong barriers to opening up may feel a lower threshold to do so in an online peer support group and it gives people the opportunity to get advice from people who faced similar challenges. It was noted that this approach may also be helpful for family members that live in rural areas and don't have access to immediate support, or families that are still in camps and are likely to return (and want to have a familiar safety net upon return). Lessons learned from this adjacent field are:

- Managing a digital peer support group needs continuous attention. For example, all questions and stories posed in the community need an answer and you should make sure there is new content to keep the activity going. It can help to appoint one specific community manager.
- Be aware of what you as a practitioner can and cannot do: specifically for digital peer support groups, you cannot guarantee complete safety and are not completely in control.
- Make sure other ways to help the client are directly available if necessary to avoid for example re-traumatisation or a lack of aftercare.
- Create groups following different challenges or themes. Every thematic group needs an ambassador (a peer who has been through a similar process).
- It is crucial to discuss and set out house rules on the platform.

Follow-up

Several topics that could benefit from a further follow-up were mentioned, such as a broader discussion on an ethical 'code' for social workers in P/CVE that considers digital work to safeguard the quality of the work and the wellbeing of both clients and practitioners. Also, a continuous point of attention over the years is remaining up to date with digital developments that have an influence on offline interventions as well as in terms of innovative digital approaches in P/CVE. Lastly, participants indicated the need for a monitoring mechanism that can be applied to measure the outcomes of digital interventions.

Further reading

RAN Papers:
- RAN Ad Hoc Paper (2022). Hybrid Youth and Social Work.
- RAN FC&S (2021). Supporting families in fostering resilience against (Covid-19-related) conspiracy narratives.
- RAN REHAB (2022). Exploring hybrid and digital rehab work. *(will be published soon)*
- RAN Y&E (2022). Integrating the online world in your offline pedagogical practices. *(will be published soon)*
- RAN YF&C (2019). Doing digital youth work in a P/CVE context.
- RAN YF&C & RAN C&N (2020). How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements.

Other relevant articles:
- Nordesjö, K., Scaramuzzino, G. & Ulmestig, R. (2021). The social worker-client relationship in the digital era, European Journal of Social Work, 25 (2), p.303-315.
- Wentzel, J., Van der Vaart, R., Bohlmeijer, E.T. & Van Gemert-Pijnen, J.E.W.C. (2016).Mixing Online and Face-to-Face Therapy: How to Benefit From Blended Care in Mental Health Care, JMIR mental health, 3(1), e9.

Annex

Exploring the situation and needs of the client: a list of considerations

Participants engaged in a discussion on the question 'when should family support be face-to-face and in what situations could we work digitally, or a combination of both?' As mentioned earlier in this paper, one should decide the best course of action on a case-by-case basis. To make this statement more meaningful, however, participants discussed specific points of attention related to the personal needs and situation of the client that may be helpful when deciding to work digitally or not. These have been summarised in the list below. Please note that this list is not exhaustive and is merely a reflection of the points of attention discussed at this meeting. Also, a decision on the approach taken should always be in consultation with the client.

Exploring the situation and needs of the client: a list of considerations
Before considering using digital methods

- **Is the person open to using digital interventions?**
  It is recommended to discuss the approach in consultation with the person who needs the support and take the personal circumstances/needs into account (see also box below).

- **May a digital intervention lead to a lower threshold to get into contact with this person?**
  Take into account in advance who your client or target audience is and what kind of support is needed. Example: a digital chat function with fast answers for questions may for some audiences be a first gateway for support, for others face-to-face counselling is a more suitable approach.

Personal circumstances

- **Does the person have access to online methods? For example:**
  - **Does the person possess a laptop and a stable Wi-Fi connection?**
    Poverty can influence the possibility of using digital means.
  - **Does the person know how to use the digital platform/app?**
    A basic level of technical capacities is required to use a digital approach.
  - **Is the person in prison?**
    Depending on the country, it is not always possible to use digital interventions in case a person is in prison.

- **Are there any language barriers that may intensify through online contact?**
  In some cases, a solution may be to use a translator.

- **Are there any reasons why the person would be distracted if he/she is calling from home?**
  Think of background noise, other people present, children around, etc.

- **Does the person live far away? Does the person suffer from an illness that limits his/her mobility?**
  Digital means may form an opportunity, for example as a lower threshold to participate. On the other hand, some clients lack the physical capabilities to properly use digital means because they suffer from an illness.

<u>Relationship and trust</u>

☐ **Has the practitioner met the client before?**
Sometimes it is beneficial to first meet in person, especially when the practitioner is not sure whether a fake identity/account is being used. Also, it can be easier to read expressions and/or body language online when you already know the person on the other side of the screen.

☐ **Is there already a level of trust built between the practitioner and the client?**
As trust is a crucial basis for the relationship, consider first whether there is already a certain level of trust and estimate whether this can be done digitally or whether face-to-face meetings are needed.

<u>Content of discussion</u>

☐ **Will the practitioner and the client discuss uncomfortable issues?**
This case does not necessarily require a face-to-face setting: some persons may find it much more comfortable to share their uncomfortable story digitally.

☐ **Will the practitioner help the client with practical matters? (e.g., getting a passport, paperwork, etc.)**
The nature of the contact may influence the decision on going digital or not. Practitioners during this meeting emphasised that easy practical questions can fit a digital approach.

☐ **How complex is the situation of the person (e.g., is he/she in a crisis situation or are highly sensitive issues at stake)?**
If the client is in the middle of a crisis situation where he/she needs a quick answer digital might be the best option. However, if highly sensitive issues must be discussed, face-to-face might be better.

<u>Privacy/confidentiality</u>

☐ **Can the client safely express him/herself online?**
Online communication brings additional confidentiality issues: a client should, for example, be certain that the communication is not being recorded or that the technical account is only being used by the person him/herself.

☐ **Is the client free to speak privately from his/her home?**
For some persons, it may be easier to open up through online means. For others, this may create an additional barrier. This could also have to do with the fact that others may be overhearing a digital conversation at home.

These leading questions do not necessarily lead to one or the other (working digitally or working face-to-face). A combination of both can also be implemented (hybrid interventions). Hybrid methods allow for practitioners to be reached in several manners, making it easier for clients to contact them. It can be seen as a supplement to face-to-face approaches.