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EX POST PAPER

How can online communications drive offline interventions?

Summary

Following up on earlier RAN C&N meetings and papers that discussed the GAMMMA+ model, this ex post paper will look specifically into the call to action: a central element when wanting to use online communications to drive concrete offline preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) actions.

A call to action should be clearly communicated, simple, doable and meaningful, and should include various elements (agency, emotional, informational, curiosity, world view, leadership, ownership and responsibility) in order to be effective.

This ex post paper builds upon the lessons learned from the RAN C&N meeting 'Communications to drive offline interventions' and provides a set of tips and tricks that are applicable when trying to use online communications to drive offline interventions

This paper is for practitioners who are experienced in organising (successful) offline activities, as well as for communication and marketing specialists and researchers active on CVE and PVE communications.

Introduction

Why counter- and alternative narratives aren't just online

Counter- and alternative narratives ([1]) can help in offering individuals multiple and different perspectives on societal challenges and, directly or indirectly, challenge extremist ideas. When people think about creating a counter- or alternative campaign on social media, they often think that it is essential to create a large-scale, viral campaign with a big reach that targets the masses. This way of thinking often also applies for P/CVE practitioners who want to reach their target groups online. However, most prevent work is done on a local scale and therefore needs to target a much more specific audience. Bearing the idea of large campaigns in mind, many P/CVE counter- and alternative narrative campaigns make the following mistakes:

- They lack clear and measurable goals;
- They are not set up in a way to engage with and have no in-depth knowledge of their specific target audience;
- They lack focus on changing their audience's thinking and behaviour, and do not include a clear call to action.

Counter speech is often criticised for trying to act in isolation of wider P/CVE approaches, and trying to get stakeholders to deliver counter-narratives, irrespective of their main work. As a result, these campaigns can appear to be monologues, where one side tells a story and the other side, often random people from the broader public, is supposed to listen. These narratives are baseless and lack authenticity because they are not grounded in real (offline) work. This is something to take into account when developing a campaign and specifically when formulating the call to action of the campaign. If we want to understand whether online communications can drive offline interventions, we need to approach online campaigns more as overarching umbrellas promoting shared visions and beliefs, reflecting the good work that is done locally by practitioners.

This ex post paper will discuss the GAMMMA+ model and more specifically what an effective call to action of a campaign should look like. It will then continue with formulating key success factors of a good call to action that results in offline action, based on the elements of the GAMMMA+ model.

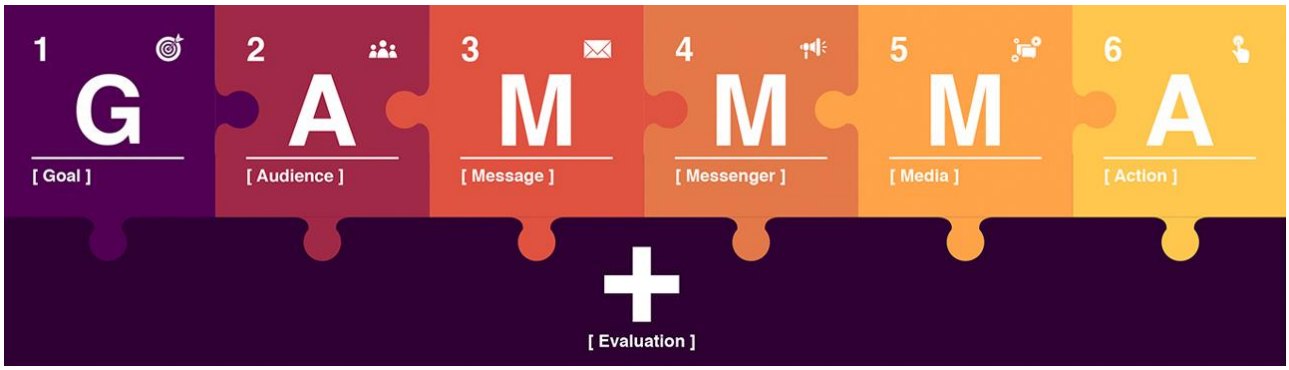
GAMMMA+

A model that combines these offline and online elements in a campaign is the GAMMMA+ model. The GAMMMA+ model helps the campaign to:

1) do no harm: when not thinking the campaign through, well-intended campaigns may enter a field of political conflict without understanding the consequences this may have. GAMMMA+ therefore helps to not become part of the problem;
2) increase the impact of the campaign, both online and offline.

([1]) More information about the difference between counter- and alternative narratives can be found in: de Latour, A., Perger, N., Salaj, R., Tocchi, C., & Viejo Otero, P., 'WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives'. Council of Europe and No Hate Speech Movement, 2017, p. 80–82.

GAMMMA+ takes into account the **goal, target audience, message, messenger, media, call-to-action** and helps **monitor and evaluate** elements that are essential to think about when setting up a counter- or alternative narrative campaign. More information about the GAMMMA+ model can be found in the RAN Issue Paper RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns (GAMMMA+).



Call to Action

Where the first five elements of the GAMMMA+ model are mostly about the (online) campaign itself, the call to action focuses more on the offline actions that the campaign should result in. The call to action aims to create behavioural change, which is the central focus of every successful campaign: in order to create a change of attitude of the target audience, one must first change their behaviour. As the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) indicates in 'The counter-narrative handbook' ([2]), the call to action should be in line with the campaign goals and can help to maximise the impact of the campaign: instruct the audience how they should interact with the campaign, why this is important and what difference it will make. An effective call to action contains several elements and ingredients:

([2]) Tuck, H., & Silverman, T., The counter-narrative handbook. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016, p. 37.

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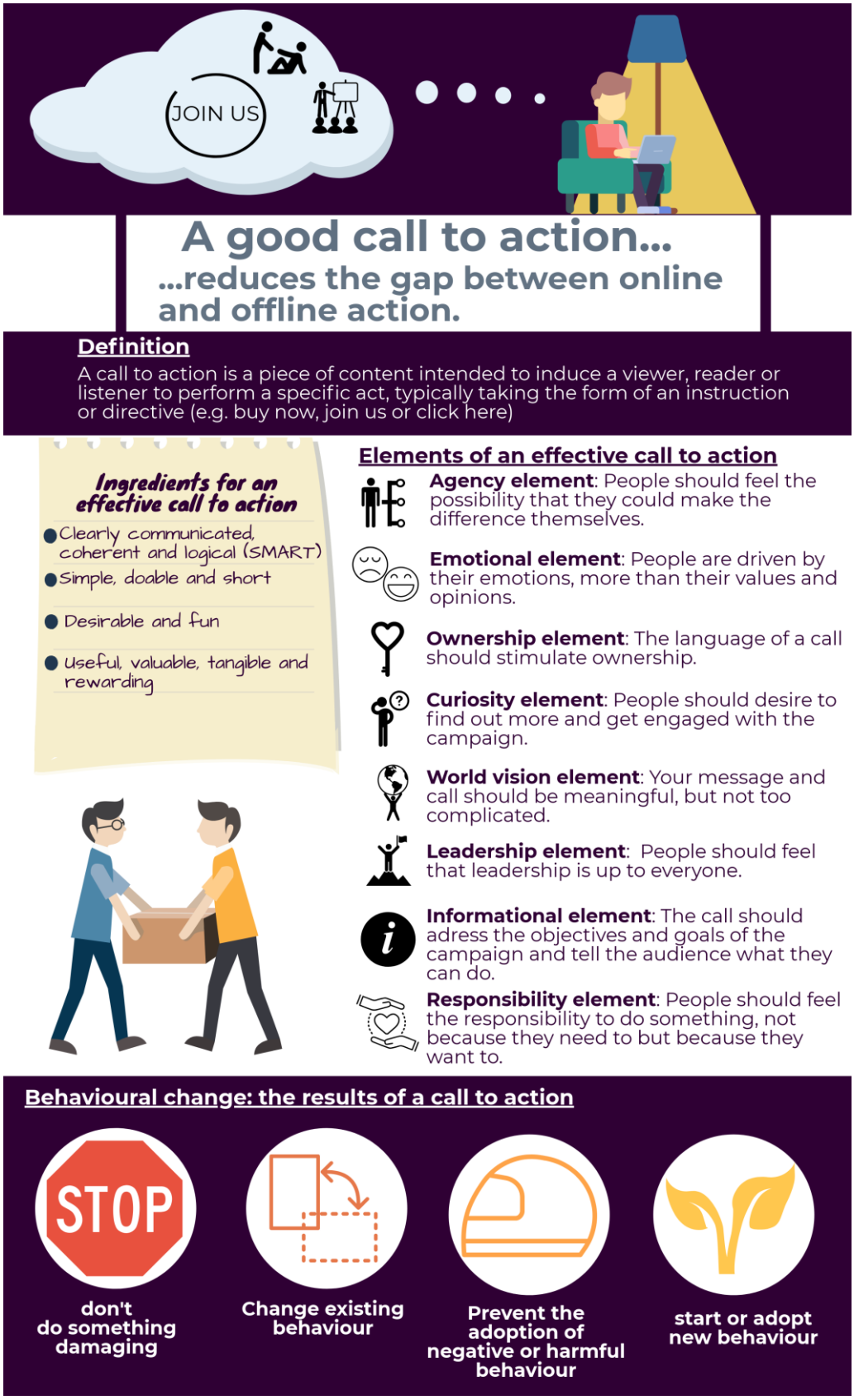

Important building blocks of a good call to action

Since all elements of the GAMMMA+ model influence the call to action in their own way, this section provides a set of key tips and tricks related to this that are applicable when trying to use online communications to drive offline interventions.

GOAL:

What influence do the goals of a campaign have on the call to action?

A good goal should not describe a vision but be a very concrete and measurable objective that helps to set up an effective campaign. Key tips related to goals are:

A clear goal should empower the audience to:

- Connect
- Engage
- Sustain
- Act

Inform the target audience what the campaign is about
No matter how well known the topic or problem that the campaign addresses is, one should not assume an equal understanding of the target audience on this. In order to do an effective call to action, the goal of the campaign should be clearly addressed in this.

Create a positive goal that provides an alternative
In contrast to counter-narratives that often state what one should not do, extremists often have an effective call to action because they emphasise very practically what one Should do ([3]). Positive goals that provide the audience with an alternative are often more effective: it should provide a call to action instead of a call to inaction.

Make the goal of a campaign SMART-formulated
In order to get people to act, the goal needs to be coherent, in both its online and offline objectives. Well-defined goals are clear and sensible, which result in people knowing what the aim of the campaign is. A way to achieve this is to formulate your goal as Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely (SMART).

AUDIENCE: How might the call to action change at audience level?

Have a clearly defined target audience based on contextual, environmental and stakeholder analyses
The audience should be very clearly identified in order to know how you should talk to them, what their current behaviour is and why they would care about what you want to talk about. People often find this difficult, but not understanding your audience may lead to reaching an unintended audience. Doing both offline and online environment and context analyses (what power- and political dynamics are present in this specific context?),

([3]) Hedayah, & ICCT, Developing effective counter-narrative frameworks for countering violent extremism. Hedayah and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2014, p. 2.

as well as a stakeholder analysis (what are the audience's attitudes, appearance and daily activities?) can help to hyper target the audience.

Do not do a campaign if there is no member of the target audience included in the campaign team

When setting up a campaign, knowing and understanding the audience acutely in how they work and what they think is essential. Having a member of the target audience in the campaign team will provide the opportunity to find out what they need and to test the campaign. If the target audience is not included in your campaign, you don't know what they will adhere to in this specific campaign and the call to action is likely to be ineffective. A way to do this is to partner up with a local organisation or group that represents your audience.

Example of using online communications to do offline engagement:

- Hyper target the audience you want to reach (where do they live, what do they do, how old are they?);
- Create a (non-provocative) buzz in the anticipated area;
- Identify key stakeholders whose language online is polarising;
- After finding out who they are, try to take the relationship offline by doing one-to-one interventions.

Understanding people's emotions is as important as understanding their demographics

People are driven by emotions. Often, their feelings are more important than their values and opinions. An effective call to action should therefore appeal to them on an emotional level.

THE CESTS HANDRAIL

Generating offline behavioural change with a communications campaign is difficult. This is particularly true when campaigns are resource limited and or mainly online. However, there are a variety of low-cost steps campaigns can take if they adhere to SMART principles and embed a logical progression of engagement through the campaigns life cycle. The call to action and offline intervention should be seen as critical to the campaign, rather than a useful add on or result.

This logical progression can be embedded in your campaign by following a CESTS handrail.

1. CONNECT – Deliver your content to your intended target audience.
2. ENGAGE – Enable your TA to interact with your content and respond to it.
3. SUSTAIN – Continue your engagement in order to form an audience relationship and build towards an action.
4. TRANSFER – Offer local offline events, actions, or groups, which the audience can attend or engage with, through a call to action.
5. SUSTAIN – Continue online engagement to increase transfers and offline engagement to reinforce positive behaviour.

It should be noted, that the TRANSFER element of CESTS can be challenging and that Do No Harm safeguards will be important.

However, if a TRANSFER is possible, there are several tips and tricks to remember.

1. Keep it local – The more recognisable the offline setting and location to the TA, the higher the chances of engagement and transfer.
2. Make it safe – Ensure the environment is safe for participants and intervention providers both mentally and physically. Do not endanger either.
3. Make it valued – Increase your likelihood of success through an interesting offline action which appeals to the social/cultural values of the TA.
4. Piggy back it – Look for key events, settings and occasions where your offline action naturally coincides with the TA's life, habits or interests.
5. Partner it – Identify partners who can support your call to action such as businesses and local service providers. Consider using your campaign to drive your TA to already established offline activities.

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MESSAGE, MESSENGER, MEDIUM:

Who are the important stakeholders and partnerships to sort the Message, Messenger and Medium?

Message

Carefully consider the tone of the message

In order for your audience to understand and accept what you want to say in the campaign, the message should be presented in the best possible way. It therefore needs to be as localised, personalised and as SMART-formulated as possible in order to close the say-do gap. The tone of the message should be carefully considered every time and match the audience, the goals of the campaign and the environmental context.

Credible messengers are, among other things:

- Trustworthy
- Relatable
- Authentic
- Genuine

Build and develop sustainability in the project by producing a series of content

A single piece of content does not make a counter- or alternative narrative: this is made up of many messages. In this, quantity is more important than quality: although one piece of content may be more beautiful, 20 smaller pieces of content are more effective. Especially in the beginning, it is essential to build capacity to send out this series of content in order for the campaign to have a sustained effect. In this, consider partnering up with someone who could sustain the offline activity as well.

Messenger

Always test the messenger on the target audience

Having a messenger who is close to and deemed credible by the target audience can make the message resonate more: who the messenger is, is often more important than what he/she says. Next to closeness to the audience, the messenger does also need to have a link to the call to action to be credible in this specific campaign. Only the target audience can decide whether they consider the messenger to be credible and authentic, so testing this with them is key to making them consider changing their behaviour.

Recommendations on message

- Do not become an extremist in fighting extremism. Extremists often "troll" and use dehumanising language: not referring to people as humans makes it easier to attack people. By using this language as well, one might enter into their game.
- Scope the message to the medium that you are using in order for it to be effective.
- Avoid having social biases about certain groups or people included in your message.
- Create a sense of urgency and incentive for the audience to start doing something (differently).
- Be consistent in the messages that you share.
- Know how the target audience talks and what colloquial they use.
- Include inspirational storytelling, examples and entertainment in your messages instead of merely presenting facts.

Spend enough time to prepare the messenger on what consequences might follow
A risk when using credible messengers is that there may be a backlash once the campaign is released. This may happen when the wrong target audience is reached, or when the message is interpreted differently than intended. A backlash can make the messenger vulnerable to hate comments, etc. Make sure to think the campaign and responses through until the end, prepare the messengers for these potential consequences and potentially have a plan B.

Medium

Know the social media preferences of your audience
Knowing on which platforms the target audience is active helps to know where the online campaign should take place to reach the audience in the best way. The medium should match with the goal of the campaign and the call to action that you want to do. More information, tips and tricks on campaigning on different social media platforms can be found in the RAN C&N ex post paper on dissemination strategies and building online multi-platform networks.

An easy way to formulate a theory of change is to formulate the following sentence:
'**If** (input) …,
then …,
thereby (outcome) …,
contributing to (objective) …'

Maintain and manage the (online) medium:
Make sure that the content on your media channels is regularly updated and as user-friendly as possible in order for your audience to come back. The audience should want to constantly engage and interact with the content and come back for more. Also, make sure that the trail is right and that there is a coherency in the content on the other media of your organisation as well.

EVALUATION AND MONITORING:

How can you monitor and evaluate the effects of the call to action?

Evaluation and monitoring are essential when wanting to know whether the call to action has been effective, and therefore whether the campaign has been impactful. Including enough budget for testing, monitoring and evaluation in your campaign plan is therefore essential. Tips for evaluating and monitoring your call to action are:

Assess the need for the campaign and test initial ideas with the target audience
Doing a campaign only makes sense if the target audience feels there is a need for this. Knowing the target audience well, having a clearly defined and localised campaign, and testing initial ideas on the target audience can help to assess these needs. Later on in the process, doing a content and quality analysis can help to assess how the target audience is experiencing the campaign and whether it is therefore effective.

Integrate testing, monitoring and evaluation in the campaign plan from the beginning
There is a tendency of clients to focus more on evidence-based interventions, which make a baseline benchmarking and monitoring and evaluating from the start essential. In order to know whether the call to action is successful and whether the campaign is progressing, you should regularly monitor what is going well

and what should be improved. Does the call to action have effect? Do people react? And does the call to action or campaign have any negative effects? Monitoring the effects of your campaign makes it possible to adjust or deal with unforeseen effects while it is still running. Evaluating the impact can only be done if the campaign has been running for a while. To properly evaluate and measure impact, clear objectives, tangible (sub) goals, key performance indicators (KPIs), and clearly described output and outcome should be determined before starting the campaign. More information on evaluating and monitoring your campaign can be found in the RAN C&N ex post paper on how to measure the impact of your online counter or alternative narrative campaign.

When setting up a campaign, make a clear draft plan and discuss this with your team to establish a realistic life cycle of the campaign. Elements that should be taken into account in this are:

- Who should do what?
- How long should the campaign run for? The risk of running a campaign too long is that the call to action is not relevant anymore. The ISD states that indicators that determine the duration of a campaign are budget, capacity and objectives. The time that your campaign is running for is based on how you expect to make the biggest impact on your audience: "If your campaign is about public awareness then you may want to make a big splash quickly to capitalise on media coverage or events. Other campaigns may try to engage with a more specific audience over a longer period of time" ([4]).
- How much time do you need to spend on each campaign element?
- What is your budget and what are the indicative costs? Despite what many people think, campaign budgets do not need to be big to create a successful campaign. How big a budget is needed depends on, among other things, the scale on which you want to advertise and brand your campaign and the tools that you use. Next to the available budget, the ISD indicates that it is important to think about the division of the budget as well: "Allocate specific amounts for each aspect of your campaign (content production versus promotion and distribution) and keep accurate records of what you have spent. Try to build-in flexibility and remain responsive to changes in costs or requirements during the production process and campaigning stage" ([5]).

Have a clear theory of change and formulate KPIs

When planning a campaign, think through what your actions are resulting in and make sure that you are not doing any harm. If you are not thinking this through, this might result in unintended consequences. Formulating a clear theory of change can help you to elaborate on how and why the desired change will happen in this specific context. Essential in this is to identify your own assumptions and the gaps there still are in reaching your audience. By working backwards from the desired goal, you can establish what outcomes are needed to achieve this. Essential in this is to establish clear KPIs such as:

- Measurement of performance (what information on the performance of your team can you collect and analyse?);
- Measurement of activity (what is the output of a certain activity?);
- Measurement of effect.

Establishing these KPIs requires testing them extensively before setting them. When monitoring, make sure that the campaign remains aligned with these KPIs. RAN C&N

([4]) Tuck, H., & Silverman, T., The counter-narrative handbook. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016, p. 25.
([5]) Tuck, H., & Silverman, T., The counter-narrative handbook. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016, p. 14.