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SPECIAL OVERVIEW PAPER

RAN Communication & Narratives

RAN Activities in Communication & Narratives

Introduction

This is a specialised overview paper on the key themes of the RAN Communication & Narratives (C&N) Working Group in the past 10 years. These key themes are all topics related to:

- developing counter- and alternative narrative campaigns;
- the roles of different actors in strategic communications and campaigns in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE);
- understanding narratives and recruitment methods.

Communication lies at the heart of spreading extremist ideas, but also of ways to provide alternatives to these extremist black-and-white narratives. This includes both online and offline efforts. Counter- and alternative narratives are not deradicalisation tools in themselves. They can be used as preventive tools to offer individuals multiple/different perspectives on societal challenges. Online efforts should go hand in hand with initiatives in the offline domain, for example by educating young people at schools about the consequences of violent extremism. Internet and social media might be channels to plant seeds of doubt. The C&N Working Group aims to identify and bring up the way that communication and narratives are used or encountered in radicalisation processes and in measures or efforts that challenge such extremist ideas and/or provide alternatives.

From the founding of RAN in 2012 until 2015, the working group was known as RAN Internet and Social Media, or RAN@. In these early years, the focus was on learning about counter- and alternative narrative campaigns. Later, the GAMMMA+ model was created by the C&N Working Group as a set of guidelines for setting up counter- and alternative narrative campaigns. In recent years, the scope of the working group has broadened to include more recent emerging trends, like the role of video gaming and conspiracy narratives.

The participants of the RAN C&N group are mostly first-line practitioners such as NGO representatives who are involved in making alternative narratives, (strategic) communications experts and representatives of internet companies who are involved in the public policy domain. Given that communication is not restricted to one type of professional, the C&N Working Group actively involves other stakeholders besides communications experts.

The current working group leaders are Ross Frenett from Ireland (Moonshot CVE) and Fabian Wichmann from Germany (EXIT-Germany), both since 2020. Previous working group leaders were: Jonathan Russell (United Kingdom, 2017-2020), Alexander Ritzmann (Germany, 2017-2020), Guillaume Denoix de Saint Marc (France, 2016-2017), Najeeb Ahmed (United Kingdom, 2016-2017), and for the RAN@ Working Group (2012-2016): Sasha Havlicek (United Kingdom), Yasmin Green (United Kingdom) and Rachel Briggs (United Kingdom) in changing composition.

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Main theme: How to develop, implement and evaluate counter- and alternative narrative campaigns

This chapter focuses on online and offline counter- and alternative narrative campaigns — one of the core topics of the C&N Working Group over the years. The online space especially has been important throughout the history of the C&N Working Group. Since the start of the working group as RAN@, the online spectrum has become more and more important in general but also for P/CVE work. Therefore, developing, implementing and evaluating (online) counter- and alternative narrative campaigns is a core theme in this working group.

The first years of the C&N (or RAN@) Working Group explored counter- and alternative narratives and discussed several online (and offline) campaigns, resulting in several lessons learned. This is discussed in the first part of this chapter. Secondly, the development and implementation of the GAMMMA+ model, containing guidelines to develop, implement and evaluate campaigns, is covered.

Subtheme: Exploring counter- and alternative narrative campaigns

During the first years of the working group (especially in the RAN@ period, 2012-2015), the focus of C&N was mainly on understanding and developing online counter- and alternative narrative campaigns.

The first meetings explored the core concepts of counter-narratives and alternative narratives, and the difference between them:

- **Alternative narratives** undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing what you are “for” rather than “against”. This can be done by telling positive stories about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy.
- **Counter-narratives** directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging. This can be done by challenging ideologies through emotion, theology, humour, and the exposure of hypocrisy, lies and untruths.

The RAN@ Working Group was also involved in creating a campaign themselves, namely Abdullah-X (also see ‘Practices’ below). By being involved in developing, implementing and evaluating the Abdullah-X campaign, the working group was able to learn a lot about counter- and alternative narratives. Additionally, several other of effective counter- or alternative narrative campaigns (both online and offline) were presented during the meetings.

Meetings and papers

- Working Group meeting, Mapping – counternarratives & extremist online narratives, 14 November 2012.
- Working Group meeting, Refining the counter-narrative spectrum and Counternarrative campaigns (target, message and messenger), 25-26 March 2013.
- Working Group meeting, Disseminating lessons learned from Abdullah-X and training in counternarrative campaigns, 2 March 2015.
- Working Group meeting, Counternarratives: target audiences, credible messengers and promising practices, 4 September 2015.
- Issue paper ‘[Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives](#)’, 1 October 2015.
- Working Group meeting, [Presenting new WG and designing an on- and offline campaign to draw attention to P/CVE](#), Berlin, 10-11 December 2015.

Practices

Abdullah-X (United Kingdom)

Abdullah-X was an online campaign aiming to build resistance to extremist narratives and the allure of radicalisation. Abdullah-X is a cartoon image of a teenage Muslim boy who is looking for his identity and place in society. The character has changing appearances to stress that the message is more important than the character’s look. The

objective of the Abdullah-X project was to radically challenge online extremist messaging using hard-hitting, robust and specialist, subject-based knowledge.

HOPE not hate (United Kingdom)

HOPE not hate has a campaigning wing, a research department and a charitable education arm. They seek to provide a positive antidote and diversionary focuses to the extremists' narratives, for example by using intelligent counter-narratives to challenge extremism (for instance, the #wearethemany hashtag online).

Nazis against Nazis (Germany)

Nazis against Nazis was an offline "involuntary fundraising" campaign in 2014, where EUR 10 was donated to EXIT-Germany for every metre walked in a neo-Nazi march. The result was over EUR 10 000 in donations and a lot of (inter)national media coverage.

No-Nazi.net (Germany)

No-Nazi.net's work is based on monitoring, evaluating and combating hate speech and right-wing extremism (RWE) in social networks and other parts of the digital world as well. Furthermore, it promotes democratic values in cooperation with young activists online.

Trojan T-Shirt (Germany)

The Trojan T-Shirt campaign was an offline campaign against neo-Nazis in 2010, giving out t-shirts with "white power" prints that changed to "If your t-shirt can do it, so can you" with the EXIT-Germany logo after washing. The campaign gained a lot of media attention.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Working on the Abdullah-X campaign and discussing several other practices (see above) resulted in some general lessons learned and recommendations on developing counter- and alternative narrative campaigns:

- It is important to have a clear goal and tangible targets for your campaign.
- In order to create an effective counter- or alternative narrative campaign, you need to define and understand your target audience.
- Tailor your message for each segment of your audience.
- Track the progress of your campaign and optimise it if necessary.
- Timing is key to gain momentum and make your campaign a success.
- People tend to listen to emotional messages rather than factual statements.
- Use subtitles for your video content. Many people watch on their smartphone, often without the sound on.

What needs to be further explored?

In the first years of the C&N (or RAN@) Working Group, the focus was on identifying lessons learned and recommendations from existing counter- and alternative narrative campaigns and direct involvement in campaigning. This led to the conclusion that the focus of the working group could better shift to a more advisory role, thereby guiding others who aim to work on counter- and alternative narrative campaigns. This resulted in the **GAMMMA+ model**, which is covered the next subtheme.

Subtheme: Developing and implementing the GAMMMA+ model

After the early years of the C&N Working Group, the focus shifted from involvement in counter- and narrative campaigns to a more advisory role. Building on the earlier lessons learned and recommendations, this resulted in the development of the GAMMMA+ model. The model was developed as a tool to help communications experts and first-line practitioners who aim to develop, implement or evaluate a counter- or alternative narrative campaign.

After the initial development, a significant amount of the C&N Working Group meetings was dedicated to expanding and improving upon the GAMMMA+ model, or applying it to a certain topic or theme. This subtheme can therefore be divided into events and papers on the GAMMMA+ model itself and events and papers that expanded on or applied the GAMMMA+ model.

A) The GAMMMA+ model

In 2017, the GAMMMA+ model was developed and presented by the RAN C&N Working Group. In December 2019, a working group meeting was focused on updating the GAMMMA+ model to keep up with developments. This resulted in a concise overview with updated recommendations on the GAMMMA+ model.



Note that the GAMMMA+ model is merely a helpful tool providing tips and recommendations, and it should be interpreted as such. It is by no means the only way to approach developing a counter- or alternative narrative campaign.

Meetings and papers

- [How to measure the impact of your online counter or alternative narrative campaign](#), Brussels, 13-14 February 2017.
- Issue paper '[RAN guidelines for effective alternative and counter-narrative campaigns \(GAMMMA+\)](#)', 31 December 2017.
- '[Monitoring & Evaluating counter- and alternative narrative campaigns](#)', Berlin, 21-22 February 2019.
- Issue paper '[Effective Narratives: Updating the GAMMMA+ model](#)', Brussels, 14-15 November 2019.

Lessons learned and recommendations

The visualisation below shows the outline of the GAMMMA+ model and includes several tips and recommendations for each stage of the model based on the working group meetings.

<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>1 </p> <p>G</p> <hr/> <p>[Goal]</p> </div>	<p>GOAL</p> <p>Setting clear, realistic and measurable goals is key in planning and developing a campaign.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulate an explicit theory of change or logic model to help with this.
<div style="text-align: center;"> <p>2 </p> <p>A</p> <hr/> <p>[Audience]</p> </div>	<p>AUDIENCE</p> <p>Having an in-depth understanding of your target audience, their priorities and how they communicate with each other is important for every intervention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use audience segmentation to break down your target audience. • Do not underestimate the complexity of your target audience. • Avoid attracting unintended or disruptive audiences. A way to do this, for example, is by hyper-targeting certain groups through paid advertisements.

3



M

[Message]

MESSAGE

The message or narrative you send needs to resonate with the needs of the target audience.

- A sustained stream of content inviting interaction is more likely to resonate with your audience.
- Test your message before rolling out, for example by using a focus group.
- Be aware of the “backfire effect”: if your message is too confrontational or directly attacks core values of your target audience, it might strengthen their convictions.

4



M

[Messenger]

MESSENGER

A credible messenger is more likely to reach your target audience. However, only the target audience itself can decide whether a messenger is credible.

- Groups have their own “language” and subcultures. Narratives from locals will therefore have a higher chance of being effective.
- Ensure you understand your target audience well enough to find a credible messenger.
 - Having a member of your target audience in your team will help in assessing the credibility of your messenger.
 - If you do not feel comfortable enough in your understanding of your target audience, you could consider tweaking the constituency of your target audience if that helps you in finding a credible messenger.

The crucial role of a credible messenger can be filled by a range of different actors within P/CVE. Therefore, a separate subtheme in ‘Main theme 2: Roles of different actors in strategic communications and online P/CVE work’ is dedicated to different actors as credible messengers (see page 8).

5



M

[Media]

MEDIA

The medium or platform you use to disseminate your message is important for your outreach.

- Addressing your target audience where they already communicate is more effective than directing them to your preferred platform.
- Determine the platform you will use as early as possible, because this will impact the type of content you create.
- Do not be afraid to use media platforms you are not familiar with.

6



A

[Action]

ACTION

In order to achieve behavioural change, online–offline engagement through a call to action is important.

- Use strong command verbs and words that provoke emotional responses.
- Keep it simple and address your audience directly.
- Give your audience a reason to act and stimulate a feeling of “missing out” if they don’t.
- Adjust your call to action to the platform you use for your message.



[Evaluation]

MONITORING & EVALUATION

Monitoring and evaluating your campaign will help in improving it.

- Invest enough money and time in designing your campaign and make sure it includes piloting, testing and reiteration.
- Monitoring and evaluation are not a one-time effort; make sure there is a continuous process of learning and adjusting.
- Try to do a baseline assessment before you begin in order to effectively measure a behavioural change.

B) Expanding on and applying the GAMMMA+ model

In addition to the GAMMMA+ model itself, several working group meetings expanded on specific elements of the model or applied it to a specific topic or theme.

Meetings and papers

- [How to use the internet and social media platforms for counter- and alternative narrative campaigns, and to disseminate a message](#), Budapest, 3-4 May 2017.
- ['Checklist of relevant mental biases and mechanisms for developing counter or alternative narratives'](#), Vienna, 7-8 February 2018.
- ['Involving young people in counter and alternative narratives – why involve peers?'](#), Madrid, 25 April 2018.
- ['How can online communications drive offline interventions?'](#), Amsterdam, 22-23 November 2018.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Involving youth in setting up a counter- or alternative narrative campaign can help in *understanding the target audience* and *finding a credible messenger*:

- Particularly when addressing audiences below the age of 25, young people might understand the way their peers think and feel much better than others. Young people are also more in tune with emerging technologies and more able to innovate in this sense than most policymakers and other P/CVE stakeholders.
- Policymakers and P/CVE practitioners agree that if young people are close to the target audience, they could significantly increase the likelihood of P/CVE interventions being effective and reduce the risks of stigmatisation or other unintended consequences.

Expanding on the importance of understanding your **Target audience**, it is recommended to take potential *mental biases* into account:

- Think about potential mental biases that your target audience might have and how you can tackle these. You can walk through each stage of the GAMMMA+ model and think about how a potential mental bias (for example, confirmation bias) can affect this stage. Take this into account when developing your campaign ⁽¹⁾.

Building on the **Media** stage of the GAMMMA+ model, several recommendations regard the usage of *social media* as a medium for your campaign:

- Plan ahead to make sure you have enough content to disseminate online for the duration of your campaign.

⁽¹⁾ The paper ['Checklist of relevant mental biases and mechanisms for developing counter or alternative narratives'](#) (2018) covers the most common mental biases for each stage of the GAMMMA+ model and gives recommendations on how to take this into account in your approach.

- Find partners to help you. You can learn a lot from other sectors, or work together with a partner that can offer something you don't have.
- Build multi-platform networks. Disseminating your message on multiple social media platforms will ensure your message is amplified.
- Use the medium/platform where your target audience is.
- Make use of the platform's characteristics and tools. Different social media platforms have different characteristics and tools you can use to your advantage, so take this into account when developing your campaign ⁽²⁾.

Building on the call to **Action**, the last stage of the GAMMMA+ model, an important element here is using online communications to drive offline interventions (i.e. through a *call to action*). Several recommendations on this topic are:

- A concrete and measurable objective will help in formulating a call to action.
 - Inform the target audience about the goal of your campaign.
 - Create a positive goal that provides your target audience with an alternative.
 - Make the goal of your campaign SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Timely) ⁽³⁾.
- Your target audience can also influence how you formulate a call to action.
 - Understanding your target audience both online and offline, for example by doing context and stakeholder analyses, can greatly help in formulating a call to action.
 - Understand why your audience cares about your message and when they would be driven to concrete (offline) action.

Main theme: Roles of different actors in strategic communications and online P/CVE work

This chapter discusses the roles of different types of actors involved in strategic communications and P/CVE campaigns. First, several types of credible messengers for counter- and alternative narratives will be discussed. Second, the role of the media and other stakeholders involved in strategic communications is covered. Last, first-line practitioners involved in online P/CVE work in general are discussed.

Subtheme: Different actors as credible messengers

A credible messenger is a key element to consider when developing a counter- or alternative narrative campaign, as has been explained in the 'Developing and implementing the GAMMMA+ model' section of this paper. Through the years, several kinds of actors that could be credible messengers were discussed in different working group meetings: Formers, Informal actors, Local communities, and Victims of terrorism.

A) Formers

Formerly radicalised individuals, or formers, can be credible messengers for a counter- or alternative narrative campaign. Formers are often well placed to discredit extremist propaganda, prevent radicalisation, contribute to disengagement and deradicalisation, and, through reliance-building, support those who chose to leave a violent extremist movement.

⁽²⁾ In the 2017 paper on [how to use the internet and social media platforms for counter- and alternative narrative campaigns, and to disseminate a message](#), tips, tricks and recommendations on how to use the characteristics and tools of the most popular social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Reddit) to your advantage are discussed.

⁽³⁾ For more information about formulating a SMART goal, see: <https://www.smartsheet.com/blog/essential-guide-writing-smart-goals>

Meetings and papers

- [‘Dos and don’ts of involving formers in PVE/CVE work’](#), Bordeaux, 26-27 June 2017.

Lessons learned and recommendations

- Form a focus group, if the former’s background is the target audience.
- Localise your campaign and set a clear goal.
- Stories are sensationalised in much mainstream media. This is counterproductive and also results in abuse.
- Don’t display judgemental or critical points of view in public.
- Don’t marginalise individuals or groups, and don’t exacerbate stereotyping.

B) Informal actors

Individuals at risk of radicalising, or who are already radicalised, tend to receive messages better when they come from people from their direct social environment. Therefore, informal actors such as family members, friends and neighbours can be credible messengers for counter- and alternative narratives.

Meetings and papers

- [‘The role of Informal Actors in delivering effective counter- and alternative narratives’](#), Helsinki, 20-21 September 2018.

Lessons learned and recommendations

- Several situational elements can help an informal actor in sharing their message:
 - in a non-judgmental environment,
 - in an informal setting,
 - during a fun activity,
 - in the natural social environment of the target audience.
- Informal actors can be an initial target audience of your message. If you first engage with them, they might later be able to become a credible messenger in a counter- or alternative narrative campaign aimed at a target group that is at risk of radicalising.
- Be aware of a possible backfire effect: The moment you officially include informal actors in your campaign, they might become “formalised” and, therefore, be considered less credible.

C) Local communities

There is a wide acceptance amongst P/CVE practitioners that building meaningful relationships with local communities and working together on the problem is important. Not only online advertisements and political campaigns, for example, but also violent extremists are using more and more localised approaches. Where violent extremists try to exploit local vulnerabilities, efforts to counter or prevent this should try to leverage local resilience and fill the gaps where they are found. This is also relevant for counter- and alternative narrative campaigns.

Meetings and papers

- Issue paper [‘Developing counter- and alternative narratives together with local communities’](#), October 2018.

Lessons learned and recommendations

- At minimum, take the time to visit the location of your target audience and understand the local dynamics. Far better is to partner with local communities to gather these all-important audience insights. The audience is the most important aspect of a campaign, so prioritise this.
- Local communities are great natural sources of resilience. Seek to leverage existing assets in the community (youth groups, schools, places of worship) in your campaigns as strong offline calls to action.
- Partnership with local communities can help you find the right messengers for your counter- or alternative narrative campaign.
- Prioritise developing meaningful relationships with local communities built on trust, in order to do no harm.
- Take care to avoid stigmatisation and aim for shared decision-making with local community stakeholders.

D) Victims of terrorism

The voices of victims of terrorism can be a powerful alternative to extremist narratives. When you include victims of terrorism in a P/CVE campaign, you already have your messenger and often also your message already. Therefore, the GAMMMA+ model is not followed in order. However, adapting the GAMMMA+ model for this type of campaign does yield relevant recommendations.

Meetings and papers

- [‘How to involve victims of terrorism in a prevention campaign’](#), 11 June 2020.

Practices

Terrorism: How about listening to what victims have to say? (France)

The French Association for Victims of Terrorism (AfVT) interviewed 20 victims of terror attacks. They talked about their definition of resilience and how they became resilient themselves. The video with the interviews is published online and shown at schools, following which pupils get the opportunity to discuss the video.

Concordia Bloggers video games “I survived terrorism” (Spain)

These are five video games related to human rights developed by the Fernando Buesa Blanco Foundation. One of the games is focused on the delegitimisation of violent extremism. It is centred on Iker, a fictitious person who shares his testimony. Through the game, the Fernando Buesa Blanco Foundation aims to make talking about the Basque Country’s violent past no longer a taboo.

Lessons learned and recommendations

For victims/the messenger:

- Share a story the audience can relate to. Potentially supporting your story with photographs or videos can help with this.
- Don’t foster polarisation by using explicit messages. Instead, try to use implicit, non-confrontational messages.
- Interact with the audience and learn from them.

For practitioners:

- Follow the GAMMMA+ model for your campaign in reversed order. It is important to make sure your Messenger and Message are suited to the Audience and Goal you set.
- Be aware of possible backfire on social media. This can lead to secondary victimisation.
- Also keep the following in mind to avoid revictimisation:
 - Advise victims to become Messengers only if they are capable of enduring situations that could lead to additional trauma.
 - Position victims as survivors instead of as (“weak”) victims.
 - Allow victims to change their mind about participating in the campaign.
 - Provide sufficient support for victims sharing their story.

Subtheme: The media and other stakeholders

The media also play a big role in the communication of a certain narrative, especially after a highly sensitive moment like a terrorist attack.

Meetings and papers

- [‘Communications After an Attack’](#), Lisbon, 1-2 October 2019.

Lessons learned and recommendations

- Establish a communication strategy and build partnerships ahead of time, for example between the police, local government and media outlets. Ensure everyone is on the same page in a potential crisis situation.
- Communications after an attack are complex. Try to keep open lines of communication with first-line practitioners, media and other stakeholders involved to spread a cohesive narrative.

Subtheme: First-line practitioners and online P/CVE work

A key question is: How can practitioners directly reach youth with an interest in extremist content online? This is primarily relevant for teachers and youth workers. This subtheme moves away a little from the counter- and alternative narrative campaign work, but it is still an important theme for the C&N Working Group as it is focused on the online spectrum and its growing importance in P/CVE work.

Meetings and papers

- [How to use one-on-one interventions to prevent and counter radicalisation](#), Berlin, 14-15 December 2016.
- [‘How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements’](#), 19 March 2020.

Practices

Streetwork@online (Germany)

The project Streetwork@online seeks to establish a dialogue with young people from Berlin between the ages of 16 and 27. This will strengthen their capacity for critical reflection and support them in their identity formation.

Web Walkers (Les Promeneurs du Net) (France)

The *Promeneurs du Net* programme provides an educational internet presence for young people by establishing youth workers on popular online social platforms and offering support where needed. By detecting early signs of radicalised views, this approach also advances prevention of radicalisation and/or violent extremism amongst young people.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Regarding digital one-on-one interventions:

- Key elements from the GAMMMA+ model can also be applicable to practitioners aiming to do one-on-one online interventions, i.e. knowing your target audience and having a call to action.
- Engage on a personal level first; don't look for a confrontation.
- Train successful practitioners to be active online.
- Move online one-on-one intervention offline after successful engagement, if appropriate and safe.
- Pay attention to the security of practitioners who perform online one-on-one interventions, especially when they choose to work under their own/real name.
- Try to check if a target person has already been approached by another organisation. Disrupting their intervention can have a negative impact.

Regarding digital youth work:

- Using the different elements from the GAMMMA+ model can be helpful in creating a strategy:
 - Define your goals and know your target audience.
 - Produce relevant content and adjust your content to the medium used.
- Additionally, two important recommendations are:
 - Train necessary skills (for example, in recognising radicalisation online) and provide the resources needed. For example, you can use tools that can signal and identify hotbeds of radicalisation on the internet, such as Talkwalker and CRAWLR.
 - Take into account organisational and ethical considerations (including safety measures).
- Ultimately, being in daily contact with and being visible online to your target audience is more important than having a very advanced digital programme or skills/tools.

Main theme: Understanding narratives

This chapter focuses on the narratives used by extremists and conspiracy thinkers, and what practitioners can take away from these narratives. In order to effectively counter these in an effort to prevent radicalisation, it is important to first understand such narratives. This chapter will discuss jihadist/Islamist extremist narratives, left-/right-wing extremist narratives, conspiracy narratives and the role of video gaming separately.

Subtheme: Violent extremist narratives

Different strands of extremism have their own specific narratives from which counter- and alternative narrative campaigns can learn. A division can be made between Islamist extremism (IE), RWE and left-wing extremism. Multiple C&N events and papers were dedicated to one or more of the types of violent extremism. IE and RWE especially have received a lot of attention in these meetings. They will be discussed as separate topics below.

General lessons learned and recommendations

Several lessons learned and recommendations from the events and papers on violent extremist narratives are relevant for all types of extremism. These are the following:

- Differentiate between extremist overarching narratives/frames. Understanding whether an extremist frame plays into ideological convictions, political grievances or psychosocial issues helps you identify the emotions and grievances the frame appeals to.
- Consider how overarching frames manifest at a local level. Why does a certain frame resonate within a local community? Once you understand this, you can think about which local vulnerabilities need to be addressed.
- Engage with underlying emotions and grievances. Acknowledging an individual's concerns and grievances allows to reframe the narrative without confronting it, and without validating the violence advocated in the extremist narrative. Try to return a sense of agency to the person.
- Don't adopt a binary approach to reality, but incorporate a broader concept of identity. This way you break away from the binary discourse used by extremist groups and avoid generalisations.
- Foster critical thinking amongst the target audiences by raising awareness of propaganda and manipulation effects, enhancing their critical media competences and empowering people to take a stance in social discourses with extremist messages.
- Use role models: for example, engage with famous (regional) Muslim athletes who can serve as role models for those targeted by right-wing extremists.
- Cooperate on a wider scale — e.g. with local governments, local sports clubs and other civil society organisations — to gain more insight into your target audience.
- Invest in primary prevention and building resilience with vulnerable people, or others who might likely be or become the target audience of extremists. Target your early prevention measures at such groups.

A) Islamist extremism

Islamist extremist narratives have changed over the years. Especially since Islamic State's (Daesh) heavy loss of territory, the narrative shifted towards "the war is not over". IE narratives have been the subject of discussion in multiple C&N Working Group meetings and RAN papers. Some of the most used narratives are:

- **Double salvation:** If you join Daesh you belong to the real community of believers. If you also become a martyr this is seen as a "double" salvation.
- **Victimhood:** Appeals to a strong sense of collective injustice and oppression against Muslims. Individuals will never be accepted. The solution is to join Daesh to create an *ummah*.
- **Caliphate:** The caliphate that Daesh is creating is the perfect society. Loss of territory is only a temporary setback.
- **Empowerment:** Anyone can contribute and add value to the cause of Daesh.
- **Just war/hypocrisy of the state:** Daesh is defending Muslim communities that are under siege by nation states.

Meetings and papers

- [Key elements of jihadist propaganda and how to address this through prevention](#), Amsterdam, 3-4 October 2016.
- ['Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and Islamist extremism'](#), Stockholm, 4-5 April 2019.
- Policy workshop ['Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists'](#), Amsterdam, 4 July 2019.
- RAN factbook ['Islamist Extremism'](#), December 2019.

Practices

Jamal al-Khatib (Austria)

An alternative narrative campaign developed with local communities. Jamal al-Khatib is inspired by the story of a young prisoner who disengaged from the jihadist scene in Austria and wanted to help others radicalising. In a series of short films, participating youth and young adults reflect on their own lives and on the situation of Muslims in general.

#NotAnotherBrother (United Kingdom)

#NotAnotherBrother was a counter-narrative campaign aiming to reach potential foreign terrorist fighters, and their networks, in order to dissuade them from extremism and terrorism by challenging ISIS' utopia narrative. It was first launched in 2015.

SMN Helpline (the Netherlands)

SMN Helpline is an initiative and realisation of the vision of *Samenwerkingsverband Marokkaanse Nederlanders* (Alliance of Moroccan-Dutch) on the prevention of radicalisation. *Samenwerkingsverband Marokkaanse Nederlanders* (SMN) considers it important that the Moroccan community in the Netherlands organises its own resilience against Islamic State radicalisation. They aim to speak openly about it in order to raise awareness and prevent more youth from radicalising and/or joining Islamic State.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Understanding the narratives Islamist extremists use can help in effectively creating counter- or alternative narratives, resulting in some of the key lessons learned and recommendations of this theme:

- Advance alternative, peaceful means for individuals to reform, make amends and gain agency (versus double salvation).
- Make individuals feel that they are accepted and can invest in a sense of belonging (versus victimhood).
- Engage communities that might perceive group grievances and hold open and frank conversations.
- Show an understanding of the heterogeneity of Muslims, and move towards acceptance of differences and emphasis on shared values.

B) Right-wing extremism

The scope of RWE narratives has grown over the years, fuelled by the move from offline to online. Both "classic" RWE narratives and narratives that emerged more recently were discussed in several C&N Working Group meetings and papers. Some of the most used RWE narratives are:

- **Struggle for identity:** National identities are under threat by immigrants. Terms like "Islamisation" and "white genocide" are often used in this narrative.
 - **The Great Replacement:** the white race will become extinct because of declining birth rates and mixed marriage.
- Men cannot live according to their nature.
 - **Multiculturalism is not natural:** humans are tribal by nature, so the "us versus them" division is not immoral.
 - **Masculinity:** biological differences between men and women must be accepted as a given. Traditional gender roles need to be maintained.
- **Victimhood:** Governments favour ethnic and religious minorities over natives.
- **Loss of self-government:** Institutions and governments have become too powerful.
- **Conspiracy:** A certain group (taking different forms, for example leftists, globalists, Jews, etc.) are conspiring to weaken the white race ⁽⁴⁾.

⁽⁴⁾ Also see the next subtheme 'Conspiracy narratives'.

Meetings and papers

- [Target audiences of right- and left-wing violent extremists \(vulnerability factors, messages and narratives, reaching target audiences, tips and lessons learned\)](#), Rome, 2-3 November 2017.
- ['Current and future narratives and strategies of far-right and Islamist extremism'](#), Stockholm, 4-5 April 2019.
- Policy workshop ['Narratives and Strategies of Far-Right and Islamist Extremists'](#), Amsterdam, 4 July 2019.
- RAN factbook ['Far-Right Extremism. A Practical Introduction'](#), December 2019.
- RAN paper ['It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour'](#), 2021.

Practices

[Donate the Hate, EXIT-Germany](#)

Donate the Hate is the online counterpart of the Nazis against Nazis campaign. The idea is that if someone posts a hate comment on Facebook, one of the partners of this campaign answers with a prepared post. For each hate comment counted, EUR 1 is donated to EXIT-Germany.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Recommendations to counter/offer alternatives to the specific narratives used by RWE:

- Focus on justified grievances or understandable fears, and highlight the consequences of pursuing a violent path (versus struggle for identity).
- Create a new, inclusive definition of masculinity, in which feminists and LGBTI activists have empowered rather than emasculated society overall (versus masculinity).
- Acknowledge the existence of grievances, without repeating the narrative. Educate citizens regarding what they can and cannot expect from their governments (versus victimhood).
- Governments govern with the people, not over them, supporting local engagement via NGOs and civil society initiatives (versus loss of self-government).
- Demonstrate your commitment to saving the planet (i.e. you want the same result), without discussing birth rates (versus eco-fascism).

Recommendations for practitioners on the online space and use of humour (for example, through memes):

- Use the same platform as those used by right-wing extremist groups.
- Improve your literacy with regard to the memes, codes and symbols right-wing extremists use in their narratives (often masked in humour).
- Increase your knowledge and understanding regarding the cultural practices and structures of radical online milieus.
- Moreover, several recommendations on how to deal with extremist humour can be identified:
 - Ignore exaggerated and misleading statements.
 - Quarantine extremist humour (and thereby their ideas). Do not amplify messages that might harm a broader community.
 - Point out the sources of harmful content. People may reconsider sharing supposedly humorous content if they know the source.

What needs to be further explored?

The online space is highly dynamic and changing rapidly. Right-wing extremist narratives are also evolving with these developments. One of the main challenges for counter- and alternative narrative campaigns is to keep up with these changes. Moreover, first-line practitioners often still lag behind in digital literacy and underestimate the role of digital and meme cultures.

Subtheme: Conspiracy narratives

Conspiracy narratives have moved to the forefront of global public discourse in recent years, due to social media and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Conspiracy narratives can act as a catalyst for radicalisation and intersect with extremism in several ways. Recent examples of conspiracy narratives that also fuel extremist thoughts are the Great Replacement and QAnon. Yet, conspiracy narratives are distinct from extremist narratives ⁽⁵⁾, and it is thus interesting to look at them separately.

Meetings and papers

- [‘The Impact of Conspiracy Narratives on Violent RWE and LWE Narratives’](#), 24-25 November 2020.
- RAN paper [‘Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE’](#), 2021.

Practices

Family support 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. One of the themes they cover is conspiracy narratives.

Rethinking Radicalisation (Community Dialogue) (United Kingdom)

This programme provides 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 (the Netherlands)

This is a methodology that lays out steps, exercises and guidelines that help teachers guide conversations around conflicting values and polarising topics.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Several recommendations have come forward for different stakeholders involved in countering conspiracy narratives. General recommendations are:

- Invest in prevention, for example by enhancing critical thinking and open-mindedness. Once a hoax has spread, it is very difficult to neutralise it.
- Distinguish between different targets when attempting to debunk conspiracy theories. Deeply committed individuals require a different approach compared to trying to reach a more general public.
- Reducing feelings of uncertainty, mistrust, powerlessness and lack of control as well as enhancing the socioeconomic living conditions of citizens in society may help to push back grievances that resonate through conspiracy theories.
- Deepen multi-agency cooperation amongst local authorities, social workers, police, health organisations and more, to create a 360° view of different situations.

⁽⁵⁾ Also see the RAN paper [‘Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE’](#), 2021.

Some important recommendations for practitioners and civil society organisations are:

- Education is important. All first-line practitioners must therefore be properly equipped in media literacy and dealing with topics like disinformation.
- Aim to understand the underlying grievances and the narrative.
- Avoid becoming debunkers of conspiracy narratives, as this can backfire.

Some important recommendations for government and security agents are:

- Invest in credible actors like civil society organisations that can act as messengers (as governments are often seen as not credible).
- Finding a balance between freedom of speech and the necessity to protect society from their divisive poison is crucial (for example, in censoring certain content).
- Cooperate with (social) media companies in (promoting) fact-checking.
- Invest in close relationships with sensitive communities, and protect communities targeted by conspiracy theories.

What needs to be further explored?

The topic of conspiracy narratives is fairly new in the C&N Working Group and therefore needs further examination on how practitioners can deal with conspiracy narratives. Moreover, several recommendations for further research on the topic are:

- Reach a consensus regarding terminology and definitions around conspiracy narratives. This is often still too vague, hampering communication and cooperation on this theme.
- Adopt a systematic comparative approach amongst different disciplines to better capture the broad picture.

Subtheme: Role of video gaming and gamification

In an ever-growing online world, new ways to communicate emerge. Many people are active (online) gamers or are active on gaming adjacent online (social media) platforms and forums. Extremists now make use of several strategies surrounding games and gamification, which poses both challenges and opportunities for P/CVE efforts. Narratives that appear are, for example, conspiracy narratives like the Great Replacement. Moreover, memes, languages and symbols related to RWE are also used.

A) Video gaming and video gaming adjacent platforms

There are several ways in which extremists use video gaming and adjacent platforms to spread their narrative and recruit people. The most important ones are currently:

- **Production of bespoke games:** There are several examples of extremist groups developing their own video game where their narrative is central to the game.
- **Modification of mainstream games:** Some existing mainstream games are easy to “mod”. Extremists can abuse this to create mods that are in line with their narrative.
- **In-game chat grooming:** Chat functions in online games, both text chats and audio chats, can be used by extremists to groom vulnerable individuals.
- **Gaming adjacent communications platforms:** Platforms such as Discord are widely used by games. Extremists now also move to these platforms as they are pushed away from mainstream social media platforms like Twitter.
- **Gaming cultural references:** Extremists sometimes use popular cultural references related to gaming.
- **Gamification:** The use of design elements from games aimed at behavioural change. Also see the next subtopic dedicated to gamification.

Meetings and papers

- [‘Extremists’ Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives’](#), 15-17 September 2020.

- [‘Digital Grooming Tactics on Video Gaming & Video Gaming Adjacent Platforms: Threats and Opportunities’](#), 15-16 March 2021.

Lessons learned and recommendations

Recommendations for practitioners:

- Practitioners need to familiarise themselves with gaming environments by playing games, talking to the gaming community and being present on the platforms to understand the language and symbolism used.
- Practitioners need an overview of innovative products that use gaming mechanisms in prevention work.
- Practitioners need to critically reflect on the assumptions related to the correlation between gaming and radicalisation.
- Engage with youth and parents to raise awareness and resilience of potential grooming by extremists in gaming environments.
- Engage with role models through gaming — for example, popular gamers.
- E-sports can potentially be used for P/CVE efforts, similar to how sports can be used. For example, organising gaming sessions or tournaments can be an opportunity to talk with gamers and youth and discuss certain topics.

Recommendations to strengthen the resilience of the gaming community:

- Gamers need more tools and better access to mechanisms for reporting and notifying extremist content.
- Gamers can be supported by increasing their knowledge and awareness of the narratives and tactics extremists use to radicalise and recruit.
- Education is needed to promote an inclusive, tolerant culture on gaming platforms. Media literacy and critical thinking skills are key elements of this education.
- More responsiveness of the platforms in content moderation and to the spread of extremist narratives is needed.

What needs to be further explored?

- There is potential in developing P/CVE games, but there is a lack of knowledge, skills and budget present among practitioners to realise this.
- Learning about grooming tactics from adjacent fields like child sexual abuse can potentially be helpful to increase the knowledge of P/CVE practitioners.

B) Gamification of violent extremism

Gamification is often described as the usage of game design elements within non-game contexts. It should therefore be separated from the direct usage of video gaming and adjacent platforms. However, as many people are gaming, they are familiar with these game elements. In recent years, extremists have been using gamification, both in “top-down” and “bottom-up” efforts:

- **Top-down** gamification consists of sustained positive engagement, for example by gaining points or earning badges for completing certain tasks and thereby gaining in reputation on a “radicalisation meter”.
- **Bottom-up** gamification is organic emergence of gamified language on online forums, for example giving high scores or keeping scoreboards of body counts by attackers.

As gamification appears to be appealing to larger publics and is already being used by extremists, the challenge that now arises is for P/CVE efforts to also make use of gamification.

Meetings and papers

- [‘Extremists’ Use of Video Gaming – Strategies and Narratives’](#), 15-17 September 2020.
- RAN paper [‘The gamification of violent extremism & lessons for P/CVE’](#), 2021.

Lessons learned and recommendations

If practitioners want to start using gamification for P/CVE, some general lessons learned to keep in mind are:

- Use and build on existing knowledge from digital youth work and P/CVE video games.
- Seek guidance from and collaborate with tech firms, experts in human-computer interaction and game designers.
- Think about ways to use existing tools — e.g. use existing (counter-) narratives as storylines for gamified applications or existing social media channels to “test the waters” with gamified applications.
- Consider potential uses of gamification beyond gaining attention — e.g. to evaluate digital engagement.

Moreover, some specific recommendations on the usage of game elements for P/CVE are:

- Gamified elements should be simple and self-explanatory.
- Gamified elements should not be too challenging and should offer positive feedback early on.
- Only use gamified elements when they have a purpose. Use game elements as tools to nudge users into certain behaviours.
- Try to find out what type of game elements your target audience likes and use them. Think beyond the easiest gamified element of awarding points.

What needs to be further explored?

Awareness of extremists’ usage of gamification is a first step for practitioners in handling this. Moreover, there are opportunities for P/CVE practitioners to use gamification themselves, but this is an entirely new field and there is a general need to increase knowledge on this topic.