

RAN
THEMATIC EVENT

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CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN Thematic event

16 March 2022, Online

Thematic event on 'Conspiracy narratives and anti-government sentiments in relation to (V)RWE and other forms of extremism'

Key outcomes

Despite not constituting a new phenomenon, the spread of conspiracy narratives fuelling anti-authority and anti-government sentiments has increased significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Moreover, conspiracy narratives and elements thereof have started to find expression in anti-vaccination attitudes and opposition to COVID-related restrictions, including protests that in some instances resulted in violence, as well as hate crimes and hate speech. The focus of this meeting was on practitioner strategies and approaches to preventing and addressing the (threat of) violence linked to conspiracy narratives, anti-government sentiment and (right-wing) extremism, and how to keep people from crossing the line from peaceful protest to resorting to violence.

The key outcomes of the meeting are:

1. When addressing the threat of violence arising from (COVID-related) protests, it is crucial to **be careful not to delegitimise and securitise protest as such**. There is no question that criticising and protesting the actions of one's government is legitimate in a democratic society. Policy/political initiative is needed to deal with conspiracies, but policy responses need to be very mindful of the risk of further polarisation and securitisation.
2. There is a need **to better define and differentiate the target groups of protestors joining protests that turn violent**, in order to develop and offer customised solutions to prevention and disengagement. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions, and not everyone joining a protest aims for (inciting) violence.
3. It is **generally not a linear development** from a person consuming conspiracy narratives to them joining protests to committing violence. People who believe in conspiracy narratives may not be extremists themselves, but extremists do exploit conspiracy narratives that fuel anti-government sentiments. Therefore, protests may only serve as an opportunity for extremist groups and actors to commit violence.
4. When it comes to interventions, the focus should be **on identifying the personal benefits gained for a person by believing in a given narrative**, and not so much about addressing the content of a particular

narrative in terms of facts, as the specific contents of conspiracy narratives will change and adapt over time, also playing into local context and recent developments. If someone starts believing in certain conspiracy narratives, they are likely to start believing in others too. The underlying reasons for being susceptible to these narratives should be addressed.

5. When trying to prevent the spread of (potentially harmful) conspiracy narratives, more time can be spent on **focusing on the origins of the conspiracy narrative and which actors are actively distributing them**. This also includes a financial element: if a conspiracy narrative is deliberately and actively spread, is someone financing these efforts?
6. Practitioners need more support to keep up with and make sense of the phenomenon and the constantly evolving threats, narratives, online spaces and actors, as well as to better understand the target groups for prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) interventions and the underlying vulnerability factors, for example through an **information hub**. This includes a need for **up-to-date and actionable research data** on the target groups in order to intervene as per their needs.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting started with a keynote address from the Communication and Narratives Working Group, followed by case studies outlining practical challenges from the field, linked to the issue at hand. These included insights from monitoring the spread of conspiracy narratives on social media and the exploitation of conspiracy narratives by right-wing actors, challenges related to family counselling services and law enforcement, as well as useful findings from the field of neuropsychology and from field research on group dynamics within radical groups. The most important highlights are mentioned below.

- Monitoring of conspiracy-related Telegram channels has shown that the **number of users actively inserting content** can be quite limited as opposed to the often significantly larger amount of more passive users who are merely consuming and sharing content.
 - Nevertheless, members of these groups who believe and share without resorting to violence are contributing to the legitimisation of narratives through visibility. Moreover, the signalling effect might be that the group seems bigger than it actually is and thus contributes to intimidating politicians, civil society representatives and other citizens who experience harassment both on- and offline.
- The discussion highlighted the **limits of current media literacy approaches** often primarily designed for youngsters, to the extent that those believing in conspiracy narratives comprise **different target groups**, including adults of all ages, who are not as easily accessible to practitioners.
- A case study from Norway presented at the meeting has shown that **harassment experienced by politicians** in Norway has increased in recent years and particularly affects younger politicians who are generally more vocal about issues such as countering racism and xenophobia ⁽¹⁾.
 - Harassment is linked to the level of a person's media exposure. The more exposed a politician is, the more harassment they will experience.
 - In terms of gender, male and female politicians experience harassment to the same extent. However, women are experiencing a sexualised form of harassment, which may provoke a higher level of fear.
- While some elements of conspiracy narratives remain the same over time (i.e. anti-Semitic elements of the narrative, a perceived existential threat and, for example, the need to protect children from these threats, fear and insecurity related to the future concerning climate change, globalisation and the overall

⁽¹⁾ Bjørngo, T., Thomassen, G., & Strype, J. (2021). *Trakassering og trusler mot politikere: En spørreundersøkelse blant medlemmer av Stortinget, regjeringen og sentralstyrene i partiene og ungdomspartiene*. <https://phs.brage.unit.no/phs-xmlui/handle/11250/2976766>

complexity of the world), **narratives can change and adapt to local contexts** and recent developments **quite fast**.

- One example of this is the case of Germany, where former PEGIDA protestors were joining COVID-related protests, or the case of New Zealand, where conspiracy narratives related to the Russian attack on Ukraine started to appear in COVID-related conspiracy channels.
- When it comes to COVID-related conspiracy narratives, it was observed that they have interlinkages with right-wing narratives of bodily purity.

The **question** was raised as to how important it is to **respond and adapt to the contents of a specific narrative when engaging with the target group**, as opposed to focusing on possible interventions connected to the personal benefits people receive out of believing in conspiracy narratives, which are often strongly linked to identity and belonging.

- Narratives are *linked to feelings* (for example fear and anger) *more than to facts*. It is for this reason that countering conspiracy narratives with facts has proven ineffective and that highly emotional narratives about children as well as heroic stories seem to have the biggest effect and potential for mobilisation.
- From a neuropsychological perspective, the *physical fear response* of the amygdala is triggered when *core beliefs and group identity are threatened*, in the same way it gets triggered by a physical threat. Since the perception is that the group will help with the perceived threat, the *fear of an existential threat to the in-group is a strong mobilising factor*.
- It should also be considered that conspiracy narratives and groups create a 'bubble' for their subscribers and a similar *feeling of being chosen and privileged* as happens within closed far-right extremist groups. There is also an *addictiveness factor* to being part of a conspiracy group.
- During the initial period when a person 'falls in love' with a narrative and a group, it is extremely difficult to offer them a viable alternative, as they do not need it at this stage. Only when they are increasingly becoming disillusioned by the narrative and their needs for identity and belonging are no longer fulfilled by the in-group do cognitive openings occur that can be used to intervene.
- During this initial time, the only link to the 'former' life is oftentimes the family. For this reason, it is crucial to work with families on how to *not let the connection* to a family member believing in a conspiracy narrative *break off*.
- It is also important to consider that there are significant *feelings of shame* involved in *admitting to having been wrong*, which might keep people from changing their mind.

How to prevent violence?

The primary aim of the meeting was to discuss the challenge of understanding why COVID-related protests have turned violent in the past and how to prevent this in the future.

- During the meeting, there was a strong consensus that protest is an essential and valuable tool in democratic societies. It is legitimate to criticise one's government and its actions. Delegitimising and securitising protest on the grounds of it being anti-government or anti-authority can be critical and should only be done after careful consideration.
- Agreeing that the legitimate voicing of protest and dissent is not what needs to be prevented, the group discussed whether a so-called 'threshold for violence' can be identified. However, it was pointed out that the term threshold gives the wrong impression of a linear development building up to an outburst of violence, while it is much more likely that it is a combination of multiple impacts on people at the same time that can induce this. An important question to further look into is why some of the protestors turn violent and whether this was planned in advance or mostly triggered by circumstances, such as the police response.
 - It was noted that seeing how protests have turned violent in the past, they may be perceived as an opportunity for extremist groups and actors to commit violence.

Recommendations

- When working with the target group or counselling family members, it is helpful to keep in mind that it might be more beneficial to address the feelings connected to a specific conspiracy narrative as opposed to try and counter their beliefs with facts. If they have only just begun to engage with conspiracy narratives and a new group, it might be the best option to try and maintain contact while waiting for a cognitive opening.
 - It can be helpful to ask what someone might 'lose' in terms of identity and connection by giving up their belief in a particular narrative.
 - It should be kept in mind that the target group is not the enemy and personal biases must be checked accordingly. We should **empathise** with our audience (albeit not sympathise).
 - Linked to the above two points, an indirect approach to working with the target group might be tested. Instead of trying to address their belief explicitly and engaging them in a discussion about it, they could be approached on a different subject, such as the feeling of belonging to a group or possible underlying fears of loss of control or bodily integrity.
 - It needs someone really close and trusted to help someone get out of the rabbit hole of conspiracy belief. Timing is crucial.
- A **whole of society approach** is needed, taking into account different target groups. It's not just youth but also older target groups who are susceptible to conspiracy narratives and anti-government sentiments. It can be a colleague, client or friend. Being aware of this and having tools to deal with this needs to be part of this whole of society approach. This also includes preparedness to manage protests and the possibility of violence on the local level.
- It should be kept in mind that **different target groups require different approaches**. Not everyone who believes in conspiracy narratives or is critical of the government and goes to a protest is willing or planning to use violence. If everyone is treated as a potential security risk, they are more likely to be pushed further away.
- The **boundaries for engagement of P/CVE** practitioners should be more clearly defined and reflected upon so as to avoid politicisation. The flood of conspiracy narratives can distract us from what is really important and relevant. P/CVE practice is not about anti-government sentiments or protests but about addressing extremism and calls/actions towards overthrowing the government by non-democratic means and violence.
- Regarding the legitimisation of conspiracy narratives through their widespread distribution, support from tech companies is needed. It is important to prevent the legitimisation of stigmatised knowledge as much as possible. Companies should change their algorithms in order to not push those ideas simply because they generate the most engagement.
- Practitioners need to be capable to **respond both online and offline**. Police, for example, are mostly reactive and need to be better equipped with technical capabilities and also understanding actors and channels of dissemination of harmful narratives. To that end, **trainings for practitioners need to be interactive** and based on real experiences in interacting with the target group to better understand their needs.
- Funding for family counselling should be increased, as this currently seems to be the most promising approach to reaching the target group. Self-help groups for family members can also be a viable solution.

For research:

- A **comprehensive overview of research on this topic**, the terms/language being used and the knowledge that can be useful for practitioners. Practitioners need support to structure and package the phenomenon in order to tackle it, including to better understand why people believe in conspiracies, who are the key actors behind the narratives and what are the main factors behind conspiracies. More actionable research data is needed on the target group so practitioners can properly intervene and respond to their needs.

- Further research could also focus on the **influencers** behind the narratives and the creators and financiers of the material, as the number of people behind the narratives might be quite small.
- To look ahead at what is to come, research should focus on **understanding the role of artificial intelligence** and deep fakes, how to detect and how to deal with these latest technical developments, and their potential for conspiracy narratives.

For policy:

- Practitioners feel the need to remain informed without becoming too entangled and overwhelmed by new/emerging conspiracies and trends. A platform or information hub might help practitioners make sense of – and keep up with – the constantly evolving threats, narratives, online spaces and actors disseminating these narratives.
- Policy initiative is needed to deal with conspiracies and related phenomena. Existing policies should relate to the latest needs and problems. However, at the same time, policy responses should be very mindful of the risk of further polarisation and securitisation.
- Further improve **internet regulation**, preventing big corporations and internet providers from reproducing and spreading extremist and conspiracy narratives while also safeguarding freedom of speech.
- **'Prebunking' approaches**, grounded in inoculation theory, have been applied successfully in the past to make people more resilient to dangerous or misleading narratives. Their potential should be further explored and utilised ⁽²⁾.
- Develop **strategic communication** approaches addressing different target groups in a way that does not push them away. Since the government is perceived as part of the problem, the relation between the government and society needs to be addressed.
- As a part of this, governments should accept that they make mistakes and be transparent about them. Trying to hide mistakes will only enforce conspiracy narratives.

⁽²⁾ Roozenbeek, J., Basol, M., & van der Linden, S. (2021, February 22). *A new way to inoculate people against misinformation*. Behavioral Scientist. <https://behavioralscientist.org/a-new-way-to-inoculate-people-against-misinformation/>

Relevant practices

The Austrian [Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen](#) consults family members of persons believing in and engaging with conspiracy narratives.

The Canadian Centre for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (CPRLV) campaign '[What If I Was Wrong? When we talk, we learn!](#)' aims to raise awareness and does not aim to convince anyone to abandon their beliefs but addresses attitudes that can lead to violent radicalisation, such as ideological convictions, cognitive isolation, and intolerance of alternative ideas, values or beliefs.

The CPRLV has further developed a '[Small Illustrated Guide to Hatred in Quebec](#)', which classifies and raises awareness of hate signs (and underlying ideological positions) to make them easier for everyone to recognise and understand.

The Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab at the University of Cambridge Department of Psychology, Dutch media collective DROG and design agency Gusmanson developed a fake news intervention called [Bad News Game](#). The social impact game exposes users to weakened doses of strategies used in the production of fake news, with the aim of stimulating the production of so-called *mental antibodies* against misinformation.

Follow-up

This thematic event served as an opportunity for practitioners from different RAN Practitioners Working Groups to prepare for the online cross-cutting event on the same topic, taking place on 26 April. Some of the questions it raised include how to meet the emotional needs of persons believing in conspiracy narratives in a different way as well as to look more deeply into the question of where the money comes from that is funding conspiracy narratives.

Further reading

Bjørgero, T., & Ravndal, J. A. (2019). [Extreme-right violence and terrorism: Concepts, patterns, and responses](#)

Lenos, S., & Wouterse, L. (2018). [Police prevention and countering of far-right and far-left extremism](#)

RAN Paper (2021) [Capitalising on Crises – How VRWEs Exploit the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lessons for P/CVE](#)

RAN Paper (2021) [Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE](#)