DIRECT ONLINE DIALOGUE IN CHATROOMS & CHAT APPS

Title:

Direct Online Dialogue in Chatrooms & Chat apps, Guideline for professionals

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1 **Introduction**

What is the aim of this manual?

"Wij zijn terughoudend in het posten van berichten op social media en hebben de reactiemogelijkheid op onze website uitgezet, omdat we niet goed weten hoe we moeten omgaan met de heftige opmerkingen die binnenkomen.» (Kennisplatform Integratie en Samenleving, 2021)
"We are reluctant to post on social media and have turned off the comment facility on our website, as we do not know how to deal with the angry comments that come in."

This statement expresses the feeling of professionals working with young people, as they are confronted with their lack of competences in dealing with extremist statements in an online setting. It's obvious that over a short period of time the (online) world of young people has changed dramatically.

Young people spend a large part of their time on their smartphone or computer. Being online has many advantages for young people. From finding information quickly, to joining groups to hang out with friends. However, there is also a downside, such as being easily influenced by certain ideas. This makes some young people vulnerable to fake news, disinformation, conspiracy myths and extreme views. Online there is also an absence of a shared norm, which makes transgressive behaviour easier and more likely. This context creates immense opportunities for extremists of all sorts to actively try to recruit new members to join their causes in a variety of ways. The internet and social media have proven to be a powerful tool in their arsenal, especially when trying to entice young people to their cause. Extremist groups and their supporters use websites and social media platforms to share propaganda, spread disinformation and misinformation and to stimulate a sense of community for their supporters, which serves to amplify their influence (Alava, Frau-Meigs, & Hassan, 2017).

In order to know what is going on in this area, it is important that teachers and youth workers talk to young people about what is going on online and that they are present in that world. For young people, online and offline worlds merge seamlessly. Accordingly, an increasing number of professionals, such as youth workers, are present online, to reach young people and to understand what concerns and moves them. They also try to make them resistant to conspiracy myths, fake news and online influence. But how do professionals tackle this cleverly? What works and what doesn't? And what dilemmas do they encounter?

Setting up direct online dialogues in chatrooms and on social media is not something you do overnight. Organisations and professionals are called upon to reflect on the necessity and feasibility of this kind of dialogue. It requires vision, choices and investment of people and resources.

This manual is giving a helping hand to professionals working with young people to address the problem of online extremist statements and online threats. After a description of the of the subject, we will go into more detail about what 'online communication in chatrooms' means. We will explain the characteristics of online communication and describe the use and possibilities of online dialogue in chatrooms and in online media. In this way it provides professionals with the tools and knowledge to know when it's appropriate to intervene and how to do it.

TARGET GROUP

- Professionals working with young people dealing with online extremist reactions

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KEY OBJECTIVES

- To offer a method for direct online dialogue.
- To strengthen the direct online dialogue of the target group.

KEY TOPICS

- Direct dialogue in online chatrooms and discussions on social media.
- Dealing with fake news in online communication.
- Dealing with conspiracy theories in online communication.
- Prevention of online radicalization and holding back extremism.

How to use this manual?

> **Target group**:

The manual is designed for professionals working with young people. This manual can contribute to develop a vision, practice and reflection on direct online dialogue of for professionals in online chatrooms and chat apps.

> **Context matters**:

Making a general manual that can be applied in various living and working contexts independent of time and social context is impossible. The adaption always needs to be done by the professional using this manual within their working context. It needs to be adapted to the target group of the organization and it needs to be brought to life with a vision approved by the organization the professional is working in.

Note that there is a difference in the extent to which a professional can respond or intervene in extremist statements made in chatrooms. The extent to which they can intervene depends on the assignment and purpose of the organisation, the available means, and knowledge and qualifications of the professional. Responses to processes of radicalisation vary similarly, and they can include handing over cases to a more qualified expert in case of more extreme cases, intervening directly or intervening in a more indirect way. ('How to do digital youth work in a P/CVE context: Revising the current elements' 19 March 2020)

> **Work in progress**:

This guide is not intended to be a 'set of rules' for the development of 'good' direct dialogue in chatrooms. There is no quick fix and the proposed approach is not intended to be the only possible. This guide can develop a practice based on refection in a process of exploring the possibilities of direct online dialogue of professionals with young people in an effort to prevent or counter violent extremism.

We hope this manual results in ways for professionals to intervene in situations where young people are confronted with controversial issues in online chatrooms.

2 **Basis & background of this method**

Ch@tlas

At the moment the ORPHEUS project started there weren't many sources to rely on and that could help us to develop a method to set up a direct online dialogue with young people. In order to set up this manual, we chose a method that was developed at Artevelde University of Applied Sciences and has proven its efficacy while being used in Flanders by various organisations in online chat help.

Ch@tlas (https://elearning-onlinehulp.be/chatlas/) was developed as a method to set up & support online chat help in Flanders. (The method is written in Dutch.) (Bocklandt, Opgenhaffen, De Zitter, De Coninck, & Declercq, 2021) It is the basis for organisations and professionals and volunteers starting with online chat help. This method is not pure theory, although it has a theoretical foundation, it will always be strongly grounded in practice. It consolidates reliable and effective practical experiences. At the same time, it tracks down new knowledge by looking at this practice in a critical way. This method meets three essential requirements: systematics, goal-orientation and process-orientation.

This method, however, is only 'a method'. It needs embedding in a mission & a vision of an organisation and its professional workers.

In this case it will be adapted and used as the basis for the 'manual on direct dialogue in chatrooms'.
More information on this method can be consulted at: https://www.onlinehulp-arteveldehogeschool.be/in-english/.

Many thanks to the developers of the Ch@tlas for letting the ORPHEUS project use this method as a framework to be implemented in a different context.

3 **Fields of application**

These guidelines can be used in online communication on three levels:

- One on one online communication between professionals and young people in personal messages by means of several chat applications.
- In group chats of chat applications that are set up by the organization.
- In chats as part of a social media used by the organization.

These guidelines are not intended to be used in chat conversations in public or closed groups set up by other parties than the organization the professional is working for.

4 Online youth work & working with young people online – a challenge & background

The challenge

"If youth work fails to embrace digital, it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant" Liz Green, YouthLink Scotland. (Youthlinkscotland, s.d.).
In order to be able to do something about extremist behaviour online, it is necessary to gain insight into what the online world looks like. Young people are mainly on social media or they play games. That is also the place where they communicate with each other and form their identity online. Talking to young people about the online world is the only way to find out what they are doing online. Teachers and youth workers not only need to talk to them. It's very important also to be present in their online world (Jepzine, 2021).

The constant flood of digital and other technological tools adds a new set of competencies especially for professionals working with young people who choose or are challenged to incorporate these tools in their work with the target group. Use of this technology requires a great deal of technical mastery in addition to awareness of, and compliance with, rapidly evolving ethical issues and challenges. (Reamer, 2015)

Since technology changed the way in which young people use the internet, youth work that utilizes digital technology has reached a point of no return. It is therefore no longer appropriate to distinguish digital youth work from offline activities or consider it as a separate method in youth work. In fact, digital youth work should not be defined as youth work done online but should go along with all forms and methods of youth work. Digital youth work cannot indeed exist on its own without the traditional forms of (offline) youth work (Kiviniemi & Tuominen, 2017)

Especially since the pandemic professionals working with young people in the context of youth work and formal education are challenged to be active online, on the internet, in chatrooms and on social media. Schools are forced to provide online teaching and youth work is exploring new boundaries and developing strategies and methods to reach young people online.

As schools experience that offline teaching cannot be copied one on one to an online version, youth work is experiencing the same: offline youth work can't just be copied to an online version. For this reason, professionals find it difficult to do this, or even start with it.

It is important to see the Internet as an environment. As in the offline world it is a place with a culture and dynamics. Of course, there are essential things we need to understand about platforms, but it's mainly about young people's behaviour, and how to respond to it.

Problems manifest themselves online that also exist in offline society. (Jepzine, 2021)

For these reasons online working with young people and digital youth work is still developing.

Online & offline youth work

Digital youth work basically means "proactively using or addressing digital media and technology in youth work". (Directorate-General for Education, 2018). Taking this definition in regard, digital youth work can be a part of any youth work setting. The methodology of youth work still stands in a digital context. Digital youth work supports the same goals as traditional offline youth work. Furthermore, it is based on the same values, principles, and ethics.

New technology also gives lots of opportunities to enhance working with young people, to engage them and amplify their voices in different ways. As digital youth work is not considered as a youth work method, digital youth work can be included in any youth work setting. Furthermore, digital youth work has the same goals as youth work in general. Implementing digital media and technology in youth work should always support these goals. In general youth work contributes to a stronger capacity for young people to act as citizens.

Therefore, youth work creates various learning environments to practice democratic decision-making. Next to this youth work strengthens the growth of young people and support their abilities. Youth work is not simply about organising fun activities or providing entertainment. It isn't just another leisure time services. Furthermore, youth work helps young people to find ways of expressing themselves. It supports activities that are typical of young people. Youth work also supports the prevention of social problems and social exclusion. (Kiviniemi & Tuominen, 2017)

Digital youth work can be implemented in offline face-to-face situations as well as in online environments – or in a mixture of these two. Digital media and technology can be used in youth work in three different ways: as a tool, an activity, or a content (Kiviniemi & Tuominen, 2017).

Youth work used to be (and still is):
- a youth club
- the street
- the park
- …

But it is just as likely to be online:
- A virtual place to meet
- Virtual hanging out
- Playing a game - gaming
- Chatting about whatever comes up
- Chatting about issues that matter to them
- Telling stories
- Sharing experiences
- Playing around - Telling jokes
- Having discussions on topics that are important to them, that matter
- Exploring identity
- Just living your (young) live

5 Online communication - introduction

The focus of digital communication lies in the text and the way it affects the recipient. In chatrooms people cannot see each other. Additionally, only text and signs are used on a screen. Therefor chat is a medium of its own with own dynamics and characteristics.

Online communication – Paradoxes

In online chat help some paradoxes are recognized despite the fact that it can be considered a lean medium. It is described as 'dancing on a tightrope between several paradoxes'. A paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and invites to reflect on the truth that lies in it. In direct dialogue of professionals in chatrooms we can distinguish several paradoxes. (Bocklandt, De Zitter, Ryckaert, & Vanhove, 2013). These same paradoxes are applicable to the context of direct online dialogues in chatrooms & chat apps.

The paradox of intimacy through distance (isolation & connection)

Online text chat creates a seemingly contradictory state of proximity through distance. The distance experienced makes it possible to discuss taboo subjects that are difficult to talk about. Themes and problems such as violence in the family, sexual abuse, suicide, eating disorders, self-harm and sexual functioning can be discussed more easily online. In the context of online activities with young people, the target group is invited by the medium itself to be more open in communication.

The paradox of professional seriousness and friendly lightness

In the context of formal education or youth work this is a well-known paradox. Chat wraps up the seriousness and the frivolity and playfulness of the young people's language and hyperbolic online dialogue in an amicable language and form in the context of youth culture.

The paradox of low threshold (for both parties) and inaccessibility (availability of the professional)

Chatting suggests a low threshold, yet an easy accessibility of the target group cannot be assured. E.g. participants in online care experience more control and appreciate the new possibilities of the digital environment. (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2015) In addition to this, the online availability of the professional is a challenge both for the professional and for the organisation.

The paradox of narrative writing and (in)visible reflection

Writing is different from speaking. It generates other (and sometimes unexpected) effects in communication. Text on the screen only creates the illusion of complete knowledge of the communication. What appears on the screen is only a part of the thoughts and considerations that the people involved make while waiting for each other's reaction.

The paradox of the security of texts and the uncertainty of authenticity.

A screen offers something to hold on to: text and signs can be read and reread and create trustworthiness. At the same time, the doubt about the authenticity of the other party arouses suspicion and reservation. In the context of conversations with young people the professional has to deal with the informality of the statements and have to estimate the seriousness of those same statements.

The paradox of the power of intimacy and the incapacity to intervene.

The use of online platforms clearly has the power to persuade participants to share very personal information, but it creates a challenge to deal with unexpected and alarming statements of young people. (Bocklandt, De Zitter, Ryckaert, & Vanhove, 2013)

Online communication - characteristics

Since this manual is based on the Ch@tlas method we must underline 2 main differences with online chat help: the fact that online chat help focusses on the anonymity of the target group and the fact that online help proceeds in an individual way. (Bocklandt, Opgenhaffen, De Zitter, De Coninck, & Declercq, 2021)

Online communication: difference with online chat help

- Online chat help = anonymous: 'chat is faceless'
  - The youngster / target group is known (or maybe not)
  - The professional is not anonymous
  - Provide opportunities for anonymous discussion? Young people might have concerns or questions they would not want to share with their own name.

- Online chat help = individual-orientated
  - Chatrooms and online fora are public or at least: several young people can participate!
  - Online chat can also be individuals. Young people can communicate in a one on one chat.

In addition to this, online communication is defined by 3 main characteristics. It proceeds almost synchronously; it must deal with channel reduction and decontextualization.

Online communication: (sometimes) almost synchronous

- Sender and receiver may communicate at the same time but not simultaneously.
- The sender summarizes the message in his mind, converts it into text and then writes it down concisely in a few sentences or even words.
- The fact that sender and receiver communicate at the same time but not simultaneously increases the chance of misunderstandings and breakdowns in the communication.
- Between writing down and sending, there is a slight possibility of correction/reflection for the professional.
- In some cases, a statement is written a short while ago. The possibility for the professional to reflect on it or even provide some intervision before reacting in the chat can be a positive element.

Online communication: channel reduction

- Just signs and symbols, moving on the screen.
- The listener's eye (instead of the listener's ear).
- No voice, no intonation, no expression, no tears, no smell.

Online communication: decontextualization

- The professional has no idea of the environment or context in which the reader or target group is situated.

The effect of decontextualization is even more pronounced the more the environment in which the youngster(s) finds it(them)self(s) differs from that of the professional.

Chatting – what's it all about?

Chat is a medium of its own.

- **Young people** are most likely concerned about their / the current situation.
- **Youth workers** are potentially a neutral, yet have familiar faces to confide in.
- Using instant messaging platforms or chatrooms is also a very **low-threshold** way for young people to contact adults with their thoughts.
- It is advisable to **use any available social media** channels to reach as many young people as possible.

Chat & Language

- Professionals & young people use a different language /grammar
- The grammar is influenced by the dynamics and the tempo of chat conversations (aim: to gain time)
  - o Shortening words: vowels and last letters disappear …
  - o Using abbreviations
  - o Shortening sentences
  - o Typing a lot of (writing) 'errors'
  - o Using smileys
  - o Using images
  - o Slang and youth talk

Chat & text

- What is written, stays on the screen and even in the chat history.
- All parties can scroll through the text.
- All parties can quote or refer to something that is written before.
- Mixed messages: sometimes a message comes in while you're typing … storylines get mixed
- Lasso: when an 'enter' is used to divide a long message into smaller parts

Chat & Tempo

Tempo is influenced by:

- Length of the messages
- Speed of typing
- The interval in between the messages
- Active rest by '…' or by empty messages
- Punctuation
- Lasso: sequential short messages (instead of one long message)

Chat & Non-verbal communication

- Punctuation: the use of spacing & punctuation marks
- Emoticons
- Capitals
- Abbreviations
- Sounds: 'hmm', 'waw'
- Empty messages or pauses

(Bocklandt, Opgenhaffen, De Zitter, De Coninck, & Declercq, 2021)

Narratives

Young people may encounter and use a variety of narratives based on e.g. online of Islamist extremists, right-wing extremists and ethnonationalist groups. They use memes, language and symbols based on popular culture that are often sarcastic or ironic in nature. Many of these narratives contain imagery and symbols that require specialist knowledge to understand. Besides this conspiracy narratives that have always been known to be used, have recently gained attraction due to the COVID -19 pandemic. These narratives often have anti-government sentiment. Young people use them to give meaning to the world and to their lives. These narratives have a critical perspective to share that contrasts the in-their-opinion ignorant mainstream. (RAN, 2020)

Though this manual is about online dialogue in general, we also want to highlight the importance of tackling extremist narratives through alternative narratives and how to prebunk and debunk conspiracy theories that circulate online. We have included this information in the **Appendix**.

6 Do's & Don'ts

In this kind of context, it is not possible to be too prescriptive about best practice. This is because the practice of direct dialogue in chatrooms must be tailored to each individual organisation, depending on the vision, the resources, and possibilities of the organisation, and not to forget the specific target group. For this reason, this guide can only be a framework that challenges every organisation to give it an individual interpretation and colouring. Therefore, this framework is in many ways a description that encourages reflection to build better practices in being present in an (inter)active way in online chats and discussions among young people. Nevertheless, there is a list of do's and don'ts that can be kept in mind.

General do's & don'ts in working with young people

- Build up trust.
- Do not judge.
- Know you are a professional practitioner. So be present and available, be part of the group, but keep the reflection of a professional practitioner.

Be innovative and experimental: try new approaches, learn from failure and succeed. Especially youth work has the power to be creative, to set up experiments and to work in an attractive way with young people. Some of these experiments are not always a 100% successful but are the seeds of further investigations and experiments.

Specific do's & don'ts in online working with young people

- Combine online & offline.
- Set up a strategy: investment of time – durability (management).
- Be active on several social media.
- Use different activities to get in touch and interact with young people. (Online gaming, group watch, …)
- See what young people are sharing and talking about.
- Offer chances to discuss issues on social media. (Or even start an online activity: Q&A, set up a (cocreation) story, …)
- Inform young people of available (online) support services.
- …

Recommendations on online presence

- Start small, take your time to set up a regular presence in online chatrooms.
- Be prepared for (too) fast demands of your target group.
- Be available and offer many hours of availability: offer the service during hours when young people are online and, if possible, in the weekend and at school hours. Beware of the fact that your target group can be online at uncomfortable hours.
- Clearly advertise when you will be available and on what channel. Make sure you can be reached on those hours.
- Choose the social media channels where you can find your target group. Be aware of the fact young people move to other platforms very easily.
- Develop procedures, protocols, methodologies, and practices for professionals confronted with difficult or even crisis situations.
- Combine forces and form networks. Limit the number of new and short-term initiatives, so that continuity is preserved.
- Don't just start when you don't have a view on the possible continuity. After all, you create expectations in the target group. Experiments often stop after a short term because of:
  - changes in (priorities in) the organisational management;
  - and/or an unclear long-term vision on online activities in the organisation;
  - and/or the lack of possibilities of cooperation with partners;
  - and/or insufficient (support for the) professionals that have minimum competences;
  - and/or lack of structural funding.

It's important that continuity plans should address all of these points.

- Offer a safe space when online chatting with young people. First, be a listening ear and build trust.
- Invest in (permanent) education, training and coaching of the professionals. The methodology used is continuously being refined.
- Be aware of the fact that the expectations of the target group can rapidly exceed the capacity of the staff.

Follow the ethical and legal aspects of presence of professionals in chatrooms in your country and/or in other countries with which you cooperate.

Reflection on the level of the organisation

As setting up an online presence will have an impact on the workers and the organization itself, a reflection on the organisation of the online presence of professionals is important before starting the implementation. Any organization that wants to develop presence in chatrooms or applications should realize that it involves a unique interaction with the target group and a form of communication with its own rules. Developing and organizing online

presence in chat apps requires a lot of time and energy. Starting up this kind of online activity is one thing, developing it in a professional way will require continuous alertness. Professionals will have to pay attention to further develop the quality of their online presence. It is therefore desirable to regularly evaluate the operation and to adjust or further develop it.

The following questions can help starting up the implementation of online presence of professionals.

- How many and which **staff members** will the organization assign to be present in online chat applications? Will the organization recruit professionals from the existing staff or will it attract new ones?
- What kind of **training** is provided to support professionals in their online presence in different chat apps?
- What **implications** does online presence have for the workplace of employees? Will employees be able to accomplish online presence from home?
- How many and at what hours will professionals be **available online**?
- On which **applications** will the organization be present online? On what basis will the organization choose this application?
- How much money should you provide for the implementation of the online presence? How does the organization guarantee that after a period of experiment, it will not have to shut down its online presence due to lack of **funding**?

(Bocklandt, 2013)

7 Moderation in online communication in chatrooms and apps

In this case moderation is about moderating a chat in an online group or forum owned by the organization and moderated by a professional. Most of the organizations that work with young people run chatrooms or possibilities to chat online with young people on different applications.

Thanks to the ever-expanding world of online communities, it's never been easier for young people to share their lived experiences and concerns with others. There are countless platforms used by young people, most of which allow them to remain anonymous. This anonymity may allow young people to discuss with peers often sensitive information, that they may not feel comfortable discussing openly.

Online forums are often used to communicate with others who may share similar experiences and who may be able to provide information and support. However, there may also be dangers associated with these forums, such as discussions which impact negatively on someone's mood or which trigger harmful behaviours (Ujhelyi, Prescott, & Hanley, 2017).
Specific for this topic on online radicalisation, it is important for professionals to understand the mechanism of echo chambers that thrive on certain social media platforms. This is the case for communities built around conspiracy theories (Van Raemdonck, 2019).

An **echo chamber** is an environment where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own. Echo chambers can create misinformation and distort a person's perspective, so they have difficulty considering opposing viewpoints and discussing complicated topics. They're fueled in part by **confirmation bias**, which is the tendency to favour info that reinforces existing beliefs.

Echo chambers can happen **anywhere information is exchanged**, whether it's online or in real life. But on the Internet, almost anyone can quickly find like-minded people and perspectives via social media and countless news sources. This has made echo chambers far more numerous and easier to fall into.
The Internet also has a unique type of echo chamber called a filter bubble. Filter bubbles are created by algorithms that keep track of what you click on. Websites will then use those algorithms to primarily show you content that's similar to what you've already expressed interest in. This can prevent you from finding new ideas and perspectives online.

Being in a filter bubble means these algorithms have isolated you from information and perspectives you haven't already expressed an interest in, meaning you may miss out on important information.

For instance, a social media site may hide posts from friends with different viewpoints, or a news site may display articles it thinks you'll agree with. **You may not even realize you're in a filter bubble** because these algorithms don't ask for your permission, tell you when they're active, or say what they're keeping from you. In fact, they've become a part of the Internet as a whole, and if you want to go online, avoiding them is **almost impossible**. (GCFGlobal, 2022)

The following tips on how to behave in online communication can help the professional in their own behaviour as it can help the professional to make young people aware of their behaviour and the consequences of it for themselves and others.

1. **Respect.** Always remember that behind every account is a real person. If you wouldn't say it to someone's face, the internet is not the place to say it either.

2. **Be aware of how your comments might be interpreted:** strong language, capital letters, and exclamation marks, but also humour, images and memes can be easily misinterpreted online.

3. **Consider what you share online and draw attention on what young people share online**. Make sure to keep as much of personal information off the internet as possible. Try not to share anything inappropriate that may get you or members of your target group into trouble.

4. **Behave according to the rules of the application and the community rules.** Most online forums, social networks and gaming networks have their own code of conduct or guidelines for a user's online behaviour.

5. (Childnet, 2017)

Specific do's and don'ts

1. To react or not to react?

Intervention is important, in order for people to realise that some expressions are not acceptable. The person addressed to, may feel guilty or be more conscious about what to write online in the future. Even when this guilty feeling is not the effect, it is important to set a social norm that certain expressions are not tolerated on social media. If no one intervenes or reacts, the idea can arise that such statements are normal. Moreover, by intervening, you increase the willingness of others to take action. People are more likely to disapprove when they see that someone else has done it.

2. Set your goal

What you hope to accomplish with your reaction:

- Do you want to undermine the message using humour?
- Do you want to fact-check a claim?
- Do you want to raise awareness about a specific attitude or belief you perceive as harmful?

You might not change the conviction of the writer, but you can still set the record straight and become a positive example for others (Pen America, 2021).

3. Protect yourself: assess the writer

It is important to filter which statements you respond to. As provoking is a characteristic behaviour of young people, some may behave as "trolls". Professionals are familiar with this kind of behaviour. There is no point in engaging in endless discussions.

4. Intervene ASAP

It is important to intervene at the first signals. In an early stage you can still communicate to young people in an effective way. The reasons for extremism (e.g. shame, wanting to belong, ideals, etc.) can still be changed in the treatment goals and a coaching approach (Schilperoord, 2011).

5. Be aware of jargon and symbolism

Being intensively online with the target group assumes a specialist knowledge of contemporary aspects of youth culture and language and symbolism used by young people and extremist groups of different kinds.

6. Countering/altering language and symbolism

Keep intensively in contact with your target group. Be open to their culture and language, without trying to adopt it. This can help to recognise, understand and counter the language and symbolism used, in an effective manner. This is a never ending task due to the fact that the language and symbolism are changing quickly.

7. Familiarise with different platforms

Professionals may need to familiarise themselves with different platforms such as gaming environments by playing games and being present on the platforms to understand the language and symbolism used. Knowing the environment and their target audience is crucial to create effective counter- and alternative narratives and avoid doing harm. Cfr. Appendix.

8. Safe spaces

Stimulate and organise an open dialogue and connect young people with their families, friends and institutions.

9. Grievances

The online behaviour and the statements can reflect a deeper feeling and experience of injustice. Try to bring this feeling and these grievances to the surface and give it recognition. Consider how to support the public expression of these grievances.

8 Online communication in chatrooms & ethical issues

Online communication is dependent on:
- the strategy
- the mission
- the vision

of the organisation the professional is working in.

Therefore, develop a vision as an organization on online presence and direct dialogue in chatrooms and chat apps, so your (ethical) boundaries are clear.

Keep at least the following ethical challenges in mind.

- Maintain professional relationships and boundaries.
- Work in a way that is empowering to young people and helps them defend their rights
- Help young people take control of their relationship with digitalisation, digital media and technology through critical thinking.

In terms of youth work: "digital youth work is underpinned by the same ethics, values and principles as youth work." (Directorate-General for Education, 2018)

A risk assessment is encouraged to identify, assess and mitigate any risks that may occur during online dialogue.

Sample risk assessment for concerns arising from chatting through online tools.

Risk	Young people expressing controversial language or spreading inappropriate or controversial content in online chat applications.
Control measures: what do we have to control this risk?	Agreements in place with young people that they agree on considering and evaluating the content they spread. A code of behaviour for young people. The knowledge of counter- and alternative narratives to
Likelihood score: indication of the likelihood of potential risks of harm occurring by rating them.	Consider the young people you work with, the environment that they have internet access.
Impact score: Indicate the impact of any of the potential risks occurring by rating them.	Consider the type of content that they may be spreading. What their age is and how the ideas and content they involve with may impact them individually or collectively.
Risk owner	Professional worker (with young people)
Future action required	Review the Code of Conduct with young people to ensure they are aware of the agreed behaviour when online and that they know who to report any difficulties or concerns to that they may experience.

Appendix

Recognising extremist narratives (The Commonwealth)

- Extremists tend to focus on a mix of ideological, political, moral, religious and social narratives, based on a range of real or imagined grievances. It's important to recognise that extremist narratives can include the extreme right, extreme left, Islamist and violent conspiracy theories amongst other.
- Delivery methods may vary; however, the main focus today is on a range of multimedia tools and techniques (pictures, video, music) in high volume and spread across a number of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram to name only a few.
- Narratives are comprised of compelling stories and arguments delivered by charismatic individuals designed to influence a generation of young people who use electronic devices as their main source of information and interaction with others.
- The narratives provide a simplistic, unifying ideological structure, which combines facts with half-truths and misinformation. (The Commonwealth, sd)

NARRATIVES OF ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS (RAN 2019)

Double salvation/Hope for everlasting life: 'Join us, the only real community of believers, and you will be "saved". Moreover, if you become a martyr, you will enter paradise before all other believers. This includes family members. The narrative in brief: 'This offers a means of gaining fame and salvation'.
→ Potential alternative narrative: Advance alternative, peaceful means for individuals to reform, make amends and gain agency. - Address and resolve individuals' underlying feelings of shame or inferiority over past misdeeds. - Devise positive ways for individuals to achieve fame (this is a very individual trajectory).

Victimhood/Sense of exclusion ('You will never be accepted'): This narrative addresses emotional needs more than it reflects ideological views. All the hardships and obstacles that individuals face can be framed in a broader narrative: 'Because you are Muslim, you are threatened and denounced'. The 'suppression' of one aspect of religious practice is framed as the suppression of all Muslims. The narrative offers one solution to all these problems: to join/create an umma.

→ Potential alternative narrative: Demonstrate that the contrary narrative is true: make individuals feel that they are accepted and can invest in a sense of belonging, e.g. through audiovisual material reflecting that opportunities are available for all citizens (including Muslims), and reflecting positive or 'regular' situations/developments in society.

Empowerment/Taking control ('You are the chosen one'): Empowering narrative that encourages individuals to take control, i.e. the men to become soldiers of Allah or martyrs, and the women to become wives and mothers (or martyrs as well).
→ Potential alternative narrative: Since many issues are related to ongoing conflicts, enable (young) people to discuss such subjects and form their own opinions (i.e. develop critical thinking skills). Provide them with the opportunity to express these opinions, ask questions and engage with local politicians/experts on these issues (i.e. nurture agency).

Sense of injustice/group grievance: This plays on the injustice felt as a result of foreign policy more than individual victimhood. This narrative refers to the 'hypocrisy of the state'; 'it suppresses violence within national borders, but commits atrocities around the world'
→ Potential alternative narrative: Show an understanding that Muslims do not constitute a homogeneous bloc. - Shift away from the use of words such as tolerance and respect, and towards the acceptance of differences and an emphasis on shared values.

The caliphate': The loss of the caliphate does not mean we have failed. It is only a setback, a way for God to test us. He has given us the fruit but is taking it away from us. The application of Sharia as the model of governance is more important than the physical caliphate itself.'
→ Potential alternative narrative Invest in resilience-building and critical thinking for individuals

FAR-RIGHT EXTERMISTS NARRATIVES (RAN 2019)

Struggle for identity: national identities are under threat., decline in belief in political solutions. FRE political parties are gaining ground following election campaigns based on topics like immigration and perceived 'Islamisation', as well as by defining 'the elite' as a homogeneous corrupt identity that should be replaced.
→ Potential alternative narrative: Focus on justified grievances or understandable fears and highlight the consequences of pursuing a violent path.

Masculinity: societies are under threat because men cannot live 'according to their nature'. Feminists and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) activists are considered traitors, because their activism allegedly influences birth rates. This ideal promotes a sense of male entitlement, but it also reflects a concern for declining birth rates of the white race.

→ Potential alternative narrative: Create a new, inclusive definition of masculinity, in which feminists and LGBTI activists have empowered rather than emasculated society overall.

Victimhood: Governments favour ethnic and religious minorities over the majority white population. Rising immigration results in increasing disadvantages for the majority white population.

→ Potential alternative narrative: Acknowledge the existence of grievances, without repeating the narrative. Educate citizens regarding what they can and cannot expect from their governments.

The loss of self- government: Governments, the EU, NATO and the UN have too much power over us. Another central FRE topic is the perceived loss of self-governance resulting from excessively powerful institutions (the EU, NATO and the UN) and governments taking draconian measures, with negative consequences for civilians. Fostering a distrust of governments and institutions, whose role is ostensibly to keep 'the people' down.

→ Potential alternative narrative: Governments govern with the people, not over them, supporting local engagement via NGOs and civil society initiatives.

The earth is running out of resources: they aren't adequate to meet everyone's needs. Overcrowding is a tangible threat. Not everyone will be able to hold out and we must ensure that 'our people' survive.

→ Potential alternative narrative: Demonstrate your commitment to saving the planet (i.e. you want the same result), without discussing birth rates. (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2019)

Responses to Extremist Narratives (The Commonwealth)

- Advanced digital literacy is essential for young people and vulnerable groups if they are to be able to effectively resist efforts of extremists to propagate their narratives in an online environment. This includes:
- Teaching vulnerable audiences how to spot the use of propaganda techniques by extremists, thus enhancing their resilience to messaging and narratives that are untrue.
- Building and enhancing basic source-verification skills to assess the validity, reliability and authenticity of the information they consume, both online and offline.
- Understanding of the architecture and functionality of the Internet and how this impacts the nature and quality of information presented to users.

- It is essential that users become proactive consumers of information and that they engage with the content and respond with messaging and narrative of their own which serve to refute the inaccuracies put forward by extremists. (The Commonwealth, sd)

Key findings for effective alternative narratives (RAN 2017)

Do no harm; This study indicates that making people, and youth in particular, aware of something that authorities consider inappropriate or harmful may generate (more) interest in the issue instead of dissuading them.

Backfire effect Confrontational approaches (fact-based or emotional) will most likely strengthen the convictions of those you try to 'reason with'. This is especially the case when the target audience feels that their core values or identity are under attack from your campaign.

Don't spread propaganda Misinformation/propaganda should not be repeated unless incorporated as part of a comprehensive pedagogical concept
Beliefs and identity 'People are hard headed about their political beliefs, even when provided with contradictory evidence. Political beliefs are like religious beliefs in the respect that both are part of who you are and important for the social circle to which you belong.

Moral reframing Many conflicts are based chiefly on differing moral preferences, and not so much on detailed political or religious issues. If that is the case, consider reframing your message so it can connect to the moral foundations of the targeted audience. For example, highlight shared morals or values like justice, equality and tradition, and base your argument on those as a bridge that might connect opposing camps.

Identity and values the study finds 'an apparent preference for value over kin by devoted actors (which) provides empirical support for the idea that humans may form their strongest (and potentially most expansive) political and religious ties by subordinating devotion to kin to a more abstract ideal.' The more radicalised the audience is, the more their individual identity, morals and sacred values are 'fused' (identical) with that of the extremist ideology or group, and the less likely it is that confrontational approaches will work.

Identifying conspiracy theories (European Commission)

1.What are they?	The belief that certain events or situations are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent.
2.Conspiracy theories have these 6 things in common	1. An alleged, secret plot. 2. A group of conspirators. 3. 'Evidence' that seems to support the conspiracy theory. 4. They falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears, and everything is connected. 5. They divide the world into good or bad. 6. They scapegoat people and groups.
3.Why do they flourish?	They often appear as a logical explanation of events or situations which are difficult to understand and bring a false sense of control and agency. This need for clarity is heightened in times of uncertainty like the COVID-19 pandemic.
4.How do they take root?	Conspiracy theories often start as a suspicion. They ask who is benefiting from the event or situation and thus identify the conspirators. Any 'evidence' is then forced to fit the theory. Once they have taken root, conspiracy theories can grow quickly. They are hard to refute because any person who tries is seen as being part of the conspiracy.
5.People spread conspiracy theories for different reasons:	Most believe they are true. Others deliberately want to provoke, manipulate or target people for political or financial reasons. Beware: They can come from many sources e.g. internet, friends, relatives.

Prebunking and debunking conspiracy theories

Stopping the spread of conspiracy theories is challenging. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. It depends on the level of exposure. People who firmly believe in conspiracy theories are extremely difficult to reach.

DEBUNKING – Facts and logic matter

DO's

Focus on the facts you want to communicate, not the myth you want to debunk.
Choose your target – the author, source or logic behind the conspiracy theory.
Always state clearly that the information is wrong, before quoting a conspiracy theory.
Provide a fact-based alternative explanation.
If possible, use visual aids to back your argument.

DON'Ts

Don't focus on the conspiracy theory first. Don't reinforce it.
Don't overwhelm with information.

How to talk to somebody who firmly believes in conspiracy theories

Many conspiracy theorists are deeply convinced of their beliefs. Their whole life and worldview are centred around them. When talking to somebody who firmly believes in a conspiracy theory be aware that:

- Any argument challenging the conspiracy theory may be taken as proof that you are part of the conspiracy and reinforce the belief.
- They probably believe in more than one conspiracy theory.
- They will probably argue hard to defend their beliefs.

So, what can you do?

- Encourage open debate and questions.
- Ask detailed questions about their theory in order to trigger self-reflection.
- Enlist trusted former conspiracy theorists who once believed the same thing.
- Be cautious and use a variety of sources around the theme.
- Don't ridicule. Try to understand why they believe what they believe.
- Show empathy. Often the person may be truly fearful and distressed.
- Go step by step. Focus on simple facts and logic instead of covering every detail.
- Don't push. Too much pressure might backfire. Leave them time to process and try again. (European Commission, sd)

This training in the ORPHEUS project

ORPHEUS - Offline and online Radicalisation Prevention Holding back Extremism and Upholding Security

In European cities the threat of violent extremism of all types, such as jihadi, extreme right and hate crimes, is a significant and rising social concern. The Interreg ORPHEUS project will develop alternatives to offline and online prevention of violent extremism. We propose an approach that is not problem oriented but wellbeing oriented. ORPHEUS will develop new integrated and aligned services by extending the prevention service together with private and social institutions, and with young people and their educators as central actors.

1. We enhance the integral prevention model to address violent extremism.
We create a new prevention framework: the ORPHEUS Prevention Pyramid. We combine efforts from general prevention to direct intervention. We target the interplay of different risk and protective factors.

2. We develop safe spaces for and with young people.
In our safe spaces approach, we stimulate and organise open dialogue, connect young people in balanced bonding with family, friends and institutions and support the public expression of their grievances.

3. We build resilience, critical thinking skills and increase confidence of educators.
We enhance key analytical skills within young people. We involve young people and educators as part of the solution. We empower educators to facilitate difficult conversations on sensitive topics.

4. We integrate online work on different levels of prevention.
We develop online alter-narratives to raise critical awareness. We also develop broader internet safety techniques to keep young people safe online.

5. We provide guidance and policy recommendations for adoption of an integrated prevention method in the 2Seas area.

Eight European partners, consisting of professionals, researchers and policy makers, participate: Stad Mechelen (BE) - Greta Grand Littoral (FR) - Portsmouth City Council (UK) - Ceapire (BE) - University of Portsmouth (UK) - University College Roosevelt (NL) - Arteveldehogeschool Gent (BE) - Contourdetwern (NL).

This manual is part of the ORPHEUS project and relates to the key concepts and models in this project.

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