Policy Practice Joint Event

Conspiracy Narratives

Digital Landscapes and the Propagation of Conspiracy Narratives

12 November
Brussels, Belgium

CONCLUSIONS PAPER

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EU Knowledge Hub on
**Prevention of
Radicalisation**

European
Commission

Introduction

The Policy Practice Joint Event on Conspiracy Narratives brought together policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and private-sector representatives to examine the evolving landscape of conspiracy narratives, their propagation through digital technologies, and their growing influence on radicalisation and democratic resilience. Building on the success of two previous Policy Practice Joint Events on the radicalisation of minors and victims of terrorism respectively, the meeting aimed to break down silos between policy and practice. Its discussions highlighted the psychological drivers of conspiracy beliefs, the technological infrastructures that amplify them, the links between conspiracy narratives and political polarisation, and the ways in which conspiracies can contribute to radicalisation and violence.

Conspiracy narratives have become a growing challenge for democratic societies, threatening social cohesion and complicating efforts to prevent radicalisation. Although conspiratorial thinking is as old as human societies, the digital environment has dramatically accelerated its spread, visibility, and potential for harm. Social media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and emerging technologies such as generative artificial intelligence now enable conspiracy narratives to reach broad audiences at unprecedented speed and scale. The event provided a platform to explore these dimensions through keynote presentations, panel discussions, case studies, and breakout sessions. The findings highlighted that effective responses must address both the underlying human vulnerabilities that make individuals receptive to conspiracy narratives and the technological conditions that enable their rapid dissemination. Multi-level coordination, robust regulation, and sustained attention to community resilience are essential to addressing these intertwined challenges.

Highlights of the Discussion

Setting the Scene: Current trends in Conspiracy Narratives

On **<u>Why Conspiracy Theories Polarise and Radicalise</u>**, the speaker explained that conspiracy theories polarise because they intensify perceptions of division between groups. They described how such narratives **reinforce identity-based thinking** by making individuals feel morally superior to outgroups and by providing simple explanations that deflect blame for failures. Conspiracy theories act as **harm-based signals**, warning people that other groups intend to cause them damage. This **perception of threat can motivate radical actions** and justify the rejection of democratic norms. Drawing on examples ranging

from COVID-19 rule-breaking to election fraud narratives and even reactions to FIFA World Cup officiating, the speaker demonstrated how conspiracy theories shape behaviours across contexts. They concluded that these narratives not only reinforce ideological boundaries but also increase the likelihood of violence and extremism when they are rooted in perceived existential threats.

On **Gender Dynamics and the Great Replacement**, the speaker explored how the Great Replacement conspiracy theory is **deeply intertwined with far-right demographic anxieties and gendered narratives**. Such narratives frame declining birth rates as an existential crisis and depict migrant men as hypermasculine threats to European women. Far-right movements **strategically leverage gender roles** to reinforce these fears. The role of female far-right influencers in mainstreaming conspiratorial ideas was highlighted, using their online visibility to normalise previously fringe beliefs. The concept of "remigration" was explored, a call for the mass deportation of non-white immigrants, which has emerged as a proposed solution within these circles. While remigration is gaining traction in political discourse and online spaces, its euphemistic framing masks its extreme implications. In terms of future challenges, technological trends such as deepfakes, lifestyle-driven conspiratorial content, AI-generated misinformation, and the use of conspiracy theories as part of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) were mentioned, all of which reinforce belief systems rather than change them.

Panel 1:   Policy, Practice and Research perspectives on responding to conspiracy narratives

The panel discussion explored the **emotional and psychological appeal of conspiracy narratives**. Panellists agreed that these narratives often provide individuals with a sense of coherence and stability in uncertain times. They emphasised that effective prevention requires **trust-building and human connection** rather than solely relying on fact-checking or *debunking*. Practitioners stressed that individuals drawn to conspiratorial thinking are often seeking personal validation, and it is therefore essential to address their emotions, relationships, and personal experiences. Panellists also examined the role of technology platforms, noting that **business models based on engagement amplify conspiratorial content**, whether inadvertently or not. They argued that although AI can contextualise misinformation, **systemic reforms and robust regulatory frameworks** are needed to ensure safer digital environments. Further, they highlighted the value of **community-level initiatives** such as early interventions, financial counselling, mental health support, and opportunities for dialogue, which together help address the broader grievances that can drive individuals toward conspiratorial ideologies.

Case Studies

The **first case study** from the United States highlighted the **heightened susceptibility of older adults to conspiracy narratives**. The speaker explained how factors such as isolation, cognitive or psychological fragility, and increased exposure to social media create conditions in which individuals may become deeply immersed in conspiratorial thinking. The case study further illustrated how family-based interventions can help restore social connection, reduce anxiety, and limit isolation.

The **second case study** examined a **Dutch conspiracy narrative** that escalated from claims of recovered memory of childhood sexual abuse, into real-world harassment, doxxing, and threats. The speaker described how authorities had to adopt a coordinated, multi-legal strategy, combining criminal, administrative, and civil law, to mitigate harm and protect individuals targeted by the conspiracy. This case highlighted the importance of timely recognition of early warning signs and collaborative institutional responses.

The **third case study** explored how **conspiracy narratives contributed to democratic disruption in a town in the UK**. The speaker described how socio-economic marginalisation, social segregation across ethnic lines, and historical institutional failures created fertile ground for conspiratorial beliefs. Extremist groups exploited these grievances, undermining trust in local governance and weakening social cohesion. The case highlighted the need for national-level strategies to address the rise and mainstreaming of harmful conspiratorial narratives.

Breakout Sessions

Participants split into smaller groups to discuss and **identify key ideas and best practices around three topics.**

Nothing Matters: How Nihilistic Conspiracies Fuel Violence

Nihilistic violent extremism is emerging as a form of violence driven not by traditional ideology but by despair, misanthropy, and conspiracy narratives that portray the world as collapsing and meaningless. Online networks such as '764' and 'No Lives Matter' use these conspiracies to justify violence for its own sake, making perpetrators harder to identify through existing frameworks that look for clear ideological motives. Recent cases in the UK and Finland show that attackers often consume a mix of conspiratorial content without adhering to a specific ideology, echoing 2025 PREVENT statistics indicating that many referrals now involve vulnerable individuals with no defined extremist belief, highlighting the need to adapt detection and prevention strategies.

Conclusions

- Nihilistic conspiracies thrive on despair, misanthropy, and fatalistic perceptions of societal collapse.
- They can provide a perverse sense of meaning, justify violence, and be exploited by extremist actors.
- Risk factors include psychological fragility, potential victimhood, isolation, institutional distrust, and a need for control.
- The term "conspiracy theory" can be useful academically but may stigmatise individuals; practitioners should focus on emotional needs and personal contexts.

Recommendations

- Strengthen cross-sector leadership and collaboration.
- Build partnerships across disciplines.
- Enhance European intelligence-sharing tools for rapid detection of harmful narratives.
- Leverage AI and technology to support early detection and analysis.

The sovereign citizen movement

Sovereign citizen movements across Europe have grown from fringe anti-tax groups into a fast-evolving, anti-system ecosystem whose members reject the legitimacy of state institutions and claim individual "sovereignty" in their place. Blending conspiracy narratives, pseudo-legal theories, populist rhetoric, and even esoteric beliefs, these groups form a hybrid phenomenon that cuts across political lines and increasingly overlaps with disinformation and extremist networks. Austria's *Staatsverweigerer* scene illustrates this trend, with adherents issuing their own documents, filing pseudo-legal claims, and at times intimidating officials, a dynamic that intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, effective responses must pair security measures with broader efforts to strengthen institutional trust, transparency, and public confidence in democratic authority.

Conclusions

- Emotional vulnerability, perceived loss of control, and social isolation significantly increase susceptibility.
- Online environments amplify societal risk by facilitating recruitment and reinforcing radical messages.

Recommendations

- Strengthen collaboration between institutions, communities, and platforms to identify at-risk individuals.
- Promote participatory prevention campaigns that improve resilience.
- Push platforms to reduce algorithmic amplification of extremist content.
- Cut off financial resources used to promote or monetise conspiracy content.
- Integrate regulation, public policy, and evidence-based prevention to reduce online radicalisation.

The Roll of private tech companies in conspiracy narratives

Private technology companies sit at the centre of the conspiracy ecosystem, acting as both the main channels for dissemination and the primary actors expected to curb harmful content. Engagement-driven algorithms used by platforms such as Meta, YouTube, TikTok, and X can unintentionally funnel users toward more extreme material, while alternative platforms like Telegram and Rumble provide spaces where banned content resurfaces. Although companies have introduced measures such as AI-assisted moderation, fact-checking partnerships, and *prebunking* initiatives, these efforts struggle against the scale of online content, the commercial incentives that favour emotionally charged material, and the rapid evolution of conspiracy narratives, now accelerated further by generative AI.

Conclusions

- Content moderation or reporting alone is insufficient in an AI-driven information ecosystem.
- There is tension between free expression and safety; European regulatory tools (Digital Services Act, competition law, media freedom mechanisms) are critical.
- Structural forces, such as platform incentives, algorithmic design, data opacity, are more consequential than individual pieces of content.
- Greater transparency around who controls algorithms and their societal impact is essential.

Recommendations

- Enforce the Digital Service Act robustly and ensure access to platform data.
- Combine criminal law, administrative law, and civil law to tackle conspiracy-based harms.
- Establish cross-functional task forces linking tech companies, law enforcement, and civil society.

- Prioritise systemic interventions over content-specific takedowns, with attention to bot networks and malign influence campaigns.
- Address psychological vulnerabilities and promote ambiguity tolerance and media literacy.

Conclusions

The Policy Practice Joint Event highlighted that conspiracy narratives are not merely fringe ideas, but part of broader socio-digital ecosystems shaped by emotional needs, institutional trust, technology design, and geopolitical dynamics.

Effective prevention requires:

- Strengthened cross-sector collaboration
- Evidence-based and psychologically informed interventions
- Focus on risk and protective factors rather than labels or personal characteristics
- Regulatory frameworks that address the structural drivers of online harm
- Efforts to rebuild trust, resilience, and social cohesion
- Develop AI tools and engage with them more systematically in P/CVE practice.

As emerging technologies reshape the information environment, the need for coordinated, multidisciplinary action is more urgent than ever. The event highlighted promising practices and pathways forward, while emphasising that countering conspiracy narratives requires sustained engagement from policymakers, practitioners, researchers, communities, and the tech industry alike.