Committee: Social, Cultural and Humanitarian
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Combating growing extremism and polarization online

Background

Media have always influenced the minds and opinions of their followers. Whether pamphlets, newspapers, or the TV, whether used to deliver truthful information or to manipulate, it isn't hard to find numerous examples on history.

Today, in the age of the Internet, media (and especially social media) have gained an even more prominent role. As the Internet is open to almost anyone, it is often misused to spread disinformation, hate speech and radical opinions. This plays a major role in polarizing and radicalizing the society. Available data agree. For example, the number of Americans who see the opposing political party as a threat to "the nation's well-being" has doubled since 1994.[1]

Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and others, have a great impact on this phenomenon, as their news feed algorithms often show such harmful (but controversial, and therefore attractive) content to their users. Because this content attracts the users, they are more likely to spend time on social networks, which allows them to make an enormous profit from advertisement. This might also be the reason why Facebook decided not to use a new news feed algorithm, which would show less radical content. The company even published a "playbook" for its employees with instructions, how to react to accusations that social media promote spread of polarization and extremism.

The company claims that there is little evidence for such statements, and adds that polarization may be even a positive factor (to support this argument, it gives the example of the rights' movement success in the 1960's).

However, we can also see the devastating outcomes of such polarization and extremism spread. The terrorist attacks of radical Islamist groups in

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[1] https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_political_polarization

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many European cities and the attack on Capitol Hill from 6th January 2021 are just few examples to mention.

International/UN involvement

The United Nations, especially UNESCO, have been actively seized on the matter since the 1980's. Since that time, it has been developing programs and strategies of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) implementation, which can be used by governments and pedagogues all around the world. The first document where MIL is specifically included is the Grünwald Declaration of 1982[2]. Other important milestones include the Fez Declaration (2011), creation of the Global Alliance for Partnership in MIL (GAPMIL) and the year 2007, when UNESCO joined forces with the UN Alliance of Civilisations (UNAoC). The aim of this alliance was to make MIL part of intercultural dialogue and work with migrants, refugees and minorities[3].

In 2016, the UNESCO published Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (MILID) Yearbook 2016, called *Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism* in reaction to recurring terrorist attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

The European Union has also been active in this field. In reaction to Charlie Hebdo incident, the Paris Declaration of the EU education ministers promoting citizenship and values like freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination was published in 2015. Later on The Council of the EU came to conclusions on developing MIL and critical thinking in education. The Year 2020 is also considered a crucial milestone for the EU, as the first version of the Digital Services ACT (DSA) has been proposed. One of its key points is the social responsibility of social media companies. Even though it does not ask them to check the entirety of the content they host, it urges them to act immediately when notified. It also demands assessment of the risks linked with their content moderation and

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[2] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382

[3] idem

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advertising systems and acceptance of audit/scrutiny[4]. The DSA, however, remains to be a legal proposal, and isn't legally binding yet.

Questions to consider

1. What is my country's position? What has it done so far to address this issue?
2. Is MIL part of the education curriculum in my country? Should it be modified somehow?
3. Are social media owners (Meta, YouTube etc.) held responsible for content on their platforms? Is my country somehow restricting the content of them? Does it agree with such restrictions?
4. If a member of the EU, does it support the DSA? Why (not)?
5. Are there any other ways to counter polarization and extremism online used in my country or proposed by the government? What are those? If used, how effective are they?

Useful links and resources

https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/07/13/why-facebook-really-really-doesnt-want-discourage-extremism/
an explanation of how polarizing content creates an important part of business strategies of social media owners
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/is_social_media_driving_political_polarization
an article on the influence of social media on polarization
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260382
a document by the UNESCO on the topic (it is long, chapter 6 and further are most relevant)
https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-12-03/EU-s-new-digital-strategy-demands-responsibility-from-social-media-VTZiT2VCSs/index.html
Statement of the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on the DSA – may be useful if your country is a member of the EU

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[4] https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2020-12-03/EU-s-new-digital-strategy-demands-responsibility-from-social-media-VTZiT2VCSs/index.html

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