LmunA 2023

Research report

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Addressing the Impact of Social Media and Other Digital Technologies on Freedom of Expression and Reducing Polarisation in Online Discourse

Student Officer: Andi Raniah Hana Geraldine Faisal

                          Nina Horst

Position: Head Chair

                          Deputy Chair

Introduction

In an age where the digital landscape is an integral part of our daily lives, the issues surrounding the impact of social media and other digital technologies on freedom of expression and online discourse have gained unprecedented significance. The evolution of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms have reshaped the way we communicate, share information, and engage with diverse perspectives. While these technologies have empowered individuals to express themselves, connect globally, and access vast amounts of information, they have also brought to light complex challenges.

This Model United Nations (MUN) study guide delves into the multifaceted topic of "Addressing the Impact of Social Media and Other Digital Technologies on Freedom of Expression and Reducing Polarization in Online Discourse." This topic is not just a matter of digital innovation but a pivotal aspect of the broader human rights agenda. It underscores the delicate balance between upholding freedom of expression as a fundamental right and mitigating the harmful consequences of online polarization, hate speech, and disinformation.

As members of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)'s responsibility is to navigate this intricate terrain, recognizing the implications of digital technologies on the enjoyment of human rights. The UNHRC, tasked with promoting and protecting human rights worldwide, plays a critical role in shaping the global response to the challenges posed by the digital age.

In this study guide, you will find comprehensive insights into this vital issue, including definitions of key terms, an exploration of the major parties involved, historical context, current challenges, international agreements and resolutions, and proposed solutions. We encourage you to delve deep into research, engage in thoughtful debate, and work collaboratively to develop pragmatic and principled solutions to the challenges posed by the digital age.

Definitions of key terms

Freedom of Expression:

The fundamental right to express one's opinions, thoughts, and ideas through any medium, including digital platforms, without censorship or interference.

Social Media:

LmunA 2023

Online platforms and applications that enable users to create and share content, engage with others, and connect with a broader audience.

Polarization

The process of creating or deepening divisions, ideological or otherwise, among individuals or groups.

General overview

The digital age has ushered in a transformation of the global information landscape, profoundly impacting the dynamics of freedom of expression and online discourse. As individuals increasingly turn to social media platforms and digital technologies to communicate, share ideas, and access information, the question of how these technologies influence the exercise of freedom of expression and contribute to online polarization has become a matter of global concern.

The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram has provided a powerful medium for individuals to express themselves and engage with a global audience (Zuckerman 2014) These platforms have democratized content creation, allowing anyone with internet access to share their perspectives and opinions. However, this democratization has also raised concerns about the spread of hate speech, disinformation, and echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs (Tufekci 2018).

Algorithmic systems employed by tech giants to curate content and tailor recommendations have played a pivotal role in shaping the information users encounter online (Gillespie 2014). These algorithms can inadvertently create filter bubbles, where individuals are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs, reinforcing polarization (Pariser 2011). The emergence of online echo chambers, where like-minded individuals engage in self-reinforcing conversations, further exacerbates this phenomenon (Sunstein 2017).

Governments around the world have implemented various approaches to address these challenges. Some have implemented strict content moderation policies to curb hate speech and misinformation, while others have engaged in censorship and surveillance, raising concerns about freedom of expression and privacy (Foer 2017). Balancing the imperative to safeguard online discourse with the principles of freedom of expression remains a complex and contentious issue.

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a holistic and collaborative approach. International organizations, governments, tech companies, and civil society organizations must work together to strike a balance between preserving freedom of expression and reducing the negative consequences of online polarization and hate speech. In doing so, they can foster a digital landscape that is both inclusive and respectful of human rights (UNESCO 2017).

LmunA 2023

Major parties involved

In the complexity of addressing the impact of social media and digital technologies on freedom of expression and online discourse, various parties with diverse interests and positions play pivotal roles. Understanding the positions of these major actors and blocs is essential for effective deliberation and negotiation in the UNHRC committee.

A. Regional Bloc Positions:

Western Bloc (including the United States, European Union member states): Typically advocates for stronger measures to combat online hate speech and misinformation while also emphasizing the importance of protecting freedom of expression.

Eastern Bloc (including Russia and some Eastern European countries): Often takes a more cautious stance on digital regulation, emphasizing national sovereignty over online spaces.

African Union (AU) Member States: Varies, but generally emphasizes the importance of addressing online hate speech and misinformation, while also calling for respect for national laws and cultures in digital spaces.

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Member States: Focuses on addressing online hate speech and discrimination, particularly concerning religious issues, while also considering concerns about freedom of expression.

BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa): Diverse perspectives within this bloc, with countries like China and Russia advocating for stricter online censorship, and others, like India and South Africa, emphasizing a balance between freedom of expression and regulation.

B. Key Actors:

United States: As a major player in the technology industry and a proponent of free expression, the U.S. often seeks to balance concerns about online regulation with the protection of digital freedoms. It may push for self-regulation by tech companies.

China: Known for its strict internet censorship policies, China may advocate for stronger control over online content and platforms to maintain political stability and prevent dissent.

European Union (EU): Often at the forefront of digital rights regulations, the EU may emphasize data privacy, content moderation, and combating online hate speech.

LmunA 2023

Tech Companies (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Google): These influential entities can significantly impact online discourse. They may support self-regulation efforts while also facing scrutiny over their content moderation practices.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Civil society organizations like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Access Now actively advocate for protecting freedom of expression online and combating online hate speech.

United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteurs: These experts appointed by the UN Human Rights Council focus on digital rights and freedom of expression. Their reports and recommendations can influence UNHRC discussions.

LmunA 2023

Timeline of Key Events

2018   - **Cambridge Analytica Scandal (March 2018):** Reports emerge that the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica obtained and used Facebook user data without proper consent for political profiling and micro-targeting.

- **Facebook Data Breach (September 2018):** Facebook reveals that a security breach compromised the accounts of approximately 50 million users, raising concerns about data security and privacy on the platform.

- **EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Enforcement (May 2018):** The European Union's GDPR comes into effect, introducing stringent data protection rules and hefty fines for companies that fail to comply. It has a global impact on data privacy regulations.

- **Twitter Purge (July 2018):** Twitter initiates a crackdown on fake and suspicious accounts, resulting in a significant drop in follower counts for some users, highlighting issues of fake engagement and bots on social media.

- **U.S. Congressional Hearings (2018):** Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other tech industry leaders testify before the U.S. Congress, facing questions about data privacy, election interference, and content moderation.

2020   - **COVID-19 Misinformation (Throughout 2020):** The COVID-19 pandemic leads to a surge in online misinformation and conspiracy theories, challenging tech companies' content moderation efforts and public trust in information sources.

- **Twitter Labels (May 2020):** Twitter introduces fact-checking labels and warning labels for certain tweets, including those from public figures, to address the spread of false information.

2022   - **Proposed Digital Services Act (January 2022):** The European Union unveils the Digital Services Act (DSA), proposing stricter regulations on tech companies' content moderation, data handling, and online advertising practices.

- **Tech Company Antitrust Actions (Throughout 2022):** Governments and regulatory bodies worldwide investigate antitrust issues related to tech giants' market dominance, raising questions about competition and user privacy.

LmunA 2023

Previous attempts to solve the issue

A. Resolution 32/13: Combating Hate Speech Online (June 2016):

In June 2016, the UNHRC adopted Resolution 32/13, which recognized that the spread of hate speech and incitement to violence online poses threats to human rights, including freedom of expression. The resolution called upon states to take measures to address and combat online hate speech while respecting freedom of expression (UNHRC 2016)

B. Resolution 41/2: New Information and Communication Technologies and the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (July 2019):

In July 2019, the UNHRC adopted Resolution 41/2, emphasizing the importance of upholding human rights in the context of new information and communication technologies. The resolution recognized the potential of these technologies to facilitate the exercise of human rights while acknowledging challenges related to privacy and security (UNHRC 2019)

C. The UN Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (June 2020):

In June 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the "Roadmap for Digital Cooperation," outlining the UN's efforts to address digital challenges, including those related to freedom of expression and online polarization. The roadmap emphasizes multi-stakeholder cooperation and the need to ensure that digital technologies serve the common good (UN Secretary-General 2020)

D. UNESCO's Framework on Internet Universality Indicators (2018):

UNESCO's "Internet Universality Indicators" framework, although not a UNHRC resolution, provides a comprehensive approach to assess internet development while respecting human rights. The framework encompasses four fundamental principles: openness, accessibility, multi-stakeholder participation, and human rights (UNESCO 2018).

LmunA 2023

Possible solutions

A. Strengthening Digital Literacy and Media Literacy:

Promote digital and media literacy programs to help individuals critically assess and navigate online content, enabling them to identify and respond to disinformation and hate speech effectively.

B. Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:

Encourage collaboration among governments, tech companies, civil society organizations, and international bodies to develop and implement comprehensive policies and guidelines addressing online content moderation, data privacy, and the promotion of online spaces for constructive discourse.

C. Transparency and Accountability:

Advocate for increased transparency from tech companies regarding content moderation practices, algorithmic decision-making, and data collection. Calls for accountability mechanisms to ensure fair and unbiased enforcement of content rules should also be explored.

D. Ethical AI and Algorithmic Fairness:

Encourage the development and adoption of ethical artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithmic fairness principles to mitigate bias in content recommendation systems and reduce filter bubbles.

E. Regulation and Legislation:

Consider the creation of international agreements or regional regulations that set clear standards for content moderation, data protection, and the accountability of tech companies while upholding freedom of expression.

F. Online Dispute Resolution Mechanisms:

Promote the development of online dispute resolution mechanisms to address conflicts and disputes related to online content and discourse, ensuring timely and fair resolutions.

G. Protection of Whistleblowers:

Advocate for strong legal protections for whistleblowers who expose unethical or harmful practices related to digital technologies and online platforms.

H. International Digital Bill of Rights:

Explore the possibility of drafting an international digital bill of rights that enshrines the principles of freedom of expression, privacy, and responsible digital citizenship in the digital age.

LmunA 2023

I. Long-Term Educational Initiatives:

Implement educational initiatives that instill critical thinking, media literacy, and digital citizenship from an early age, preparing individuals to navigate the complexities of the digital world.

J. Strengthening International Cooperation:

Promote diplomatic efforts to foster international cooperation in addressing cross-border challenges related to digital technologies and online discourse, recognizing that the issue is global in nature.

These possible solutions aim to strike a balance between safeguarding freedom of expression and addressing the negative consequences of online polarization and hate speech. Delegates should consider these options, adapt them as needed, and work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive and principled approach to the issue.

Further reading

A. Books:

Sunstein, Cass R. #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton University Press, 2017.
Tufekci, Zeynep. Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest. Yale University Press, 2017.
Foer, Franklin. World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech. Penguin Books, 2018.
Gillespie, Tarleton. Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media. Yale University Press, 2018.

B. Reports and Publications:

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development." 2017.
Human Rights Watch. "Race to the Bottom: Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship." 2006.
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). "Who Has Your Back? Government Data Requests 2021."

C. Articles and Essays:

Zuckerman, Ethan. "The Internet's Original Sin." The Atlantic, 20 Aug. 2014.
Pariser, Eli. "Beware Online 'Filter Bubbles'." TED, May 2011.
Rosen, Jeffrey. "The Deciders: Tech CEOs and Their Gatekeepers." The New Yorker, 30 Nov. 2020.

D. Academic Journals:

LmunA 2023

"Journal of Digital Media & Policy" (Scholarly Journal)
"Information, Communication & Society" (Scholarly Journal)

E. Online Resources:

Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University - "Digital Platforms & Democracy Project."
Center for Humane Technology - "Our Work."
Data & Society Research Institute - "Publications."

Bibliography

Zuckerman, Ethan. "The Internet's Original Sin." The Atlantic, 20 Aug. 2014,
www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/08/advertising-is-the-internets-original-sin/376041/.

Tufekci, Zeynep. "YouTube, the Great Radicalizer." The New York Times, 10 Mar. 2018,
www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html.

Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Relevance of Algorithms." Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society, edited by Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot, MIT Press, 2014, pp. 167-194.

Pariser, Eli. "Beware Online 'Filter Bubbles'." TED, May 2011,
www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.

Sunstein, Cass R. #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton University Press, 2017.

Foer, Franklin. "The Death of the Public Square." The Atlantic, Oct. 2017,
www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-death-of-the-public-square/537931/.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development." UNESCO, 2017,
www.unesco.org/commemorations/worldpressfreedomday/2017/report/en.

United Nations Human Rights Council. "Resolution 32/13: Combating Hate Speech Online." UN General Assembly, 4 July 2016, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/RES/32/13.

United Nations Human Rights Council. "Resolution 41/2: New Information and Communication Technologies and the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights." UN General Assembly, 12 July 2019, www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/HRC/RES/41/2.

United Nations Secretary-General. "Roadmap for Digital Cooperation." United Nations, June 2020,
www.un.org/en/content/digital-roadmap.

LmunA 2023

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). "Internet Universality Indicators: A Framework for Assessing Internet Development." UNESCO, 2018, www.unesco.org/new/en/internetuniversality.