

Media and Information Literacy: Educational Strategies for the Prevention of Violent Extremism

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On behalf of UNESCO, we are delighted to be taking part here. Let's talk about how to be more effective.

The UN Plan for preventing violent extremism states clearly that it is more cost-effective to allocate resources to prevention than to reaction. The self-evident logic is: invest in prevention now, and save your society extra costs later. These costs are of course financial, but if you think about them further, they are also enormous costs to the fabric of society and to affected individuals and their families. They are costs to international peace. So the UN plan is spot-on in its guidance. We have to adopt the perspective of the medium-term horizon and give full attention to prevention of violent extremism, even while countering the immediate actual phenomenon that is afflicting many of our societies. To fail to do so, will condemn us to short-sightedness, to remain only at the level of continuing indefinitely of addressing symptoms, and ultimately to failure in regard to eradicating this scourge which so threatens our agreed global development agenda.

Part I: WHERE UNESCO FITS IN

UNESCO's part in the UN plan is fully focused on reinforcing preventative measures:

- Through education, we facilitate the development of global citizens capable of fulfilling both their personal goals and the sustainable development goals of their societies.
- In culture, we promote mutual understanding, tolerance and dialogue.
- Through our work in communication and information, and we advance free expression and access to information, which are key to having credible journalistic narratives in the context of prevention. We combat hate speech, and we promote media and information literacy.

These three thrusts, all conducted with a strong gender-sensitive dimension, constitute a powerful package that helps to take the wind out of the drivers of violent extremism. We would like all actors to work with us in ramping up, in amplifying and multiplying our programmes in these areas.

This indeed is part of cost-effectiveness. Because combining forces in preventing violent extremism enables greater scale and more concerted impact. This is why it makes sense for UNESCO and UNAOC to work as close partners in promoting Media and Information Literacy. Together, we have been key actors in developing the Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy – a coalition of over 500 organizations around the world. Together, we have supported the UNITWIN network for Media and Information Literacy and Inter-cultural Dialogue – which harnesses the research power of 22 universities. This you can see in the joint publications here today: "Opportunities for media and information literacy in the Middle East and North Africa" and "Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism". This second one contains articles by 32 authors spread across 15 countries. Let me also signal here various UNESCO initiatives

which also benefit from the support of UNAOC – our country readiness-assessment tool, our curriculum for teacher training in Media and Information Literacy, and our MIL-Clicks social media campaign.

Part II: INTERNET AS A FACTOR IN PVE

Cost-effectiveness also means that prevention activities in general need to be guided by evidence, by science, and not by assumption or supposition or political expediency. Indeed, let us look at this in relation to the phenomenon of huge increases in Internet cut-offs, and in filtering and blocking of online content worldwide.

The first evidence we have is that the predominantly legitimate use of the Internet and enjoyment of rights to expression and privacy, as well network security, are too often casualties of these interventions.

The second evidence is that despite all the efforts at online control, the Internet is still certainly not a place where you see no evil, hear no evil, and indeed where actors refrain from speaking evil. Hate speech still abounds and multiplies online, providing fertile ground for additional discourse that legitimizes and encourages acts of violent extremism. Communications that glorify acts of terrorism pop up as soon as they are removed. Covert recruitment and organizing of such acts continues to make extensive use of digital platforms.

This is not to say we just have to live with these abuses of the Internet, but to say that it is mistaken if we think we can fully stop these without overstepping on human rights and without stopping the Internet altogether.

This inconvenient truth means we have to think about other strategies – including how to adapt to a degree of misuses of the medium, to move beyond a paradigm that only prioritises protection of societies against abuse online, and consider better how to prepare our young people to respond to what they encounter in cyberspace. The evidence tells us that Media and Information literacy needs to enlighten all of us about the limits of a restrictive approach, and that this needs to be taken into the calculation of cost-effectiveness and resource allocations in preventing violent extremism.

How do we do this? First, we must recognize that where online communications play a role in facilitating violent extremism, our research review of the evidence suggests that this is generally less significant than the role of offline communications such as in families, peer groups and prisons, and that both are also less significant than people's direct life experience.

Second, to the extent that the online realm is used for radicalization, it is apparent that what makes it distinct is the extent of its reach, and its ability to offer a versatility of communications transactions: 1:many; many:many, 1:few; few:few, and 1:1 communications transactions. These characteristics of the digital communications enable malicious actors to spread intolerance, reinforce emotions, promote populism, groom and cultivate individuals towards violent extremism, and co-ordinate violent actions.

Part III: NARRATIVES – AND JOURNALISM

At the same time, we should also note that the same characteristics of the Internet that are exploited for violent extremism can equally be used for different narratives. And they are indeed used – including for counter-narratives. These have their important place in preventing violent extremism. But one narrative that stands out distinctively from both pro- and counter-narratives is that of journalism. Journalism is a narrative whose preconditions are freedom, independence and professionalism - these are a sine qua non for authenticity, credibility and impact. When a society enjoys this kind of

journalism, then – over time - facts and reason have a chance of prevailing over emotions, misinformation and manipulation. We need therefore to respect, defend and support journalism's specific contribution to communications, online and offline, because of its vital role as both a partial antidote to violent extremism and as a factual check on the effectiveness and human-rights compliance of a society's efforts to fight violent extremism.

In short, credible journalism online can help to challenge myths and gut reactions, can help the head to guide the heart, and can enable us to orient ourselves in the cacophony of Internet messages. It is trustworthy journalism that can provide evidence of the contradictions in radical appeals, of the inhumanity and hypocrisy of extremist icons, and of false promises made. It is journalism that can tell the stories of the human cost of victims of violent extremism. It is journalism that has the power to be convincing, and to be a reference point for the public to assess the various narratives they encounter. And if there are restrictions on free, pluralistic and independent journalism, then we are missing out on a highly important contribution to the prevention cause.

But here it is relevant to make a caveat. Even given the critical value of journalism as a narrative different from the strategic pro- and anti-narratives around violent extremism, we also have to recognize that free and independent quality journalism is not always allowed or is evident in online environments. Apart from imposed distortions of journalism caused by political, commercial and personal influences, there are also other challenges. These include faked news posing as journalism and which is spread by bots, algorithms and opportunistic or indiscriminate sharing. Further problems include that too much journalism falls short of the ideals of professionalism, or representing the full range of sides to a story, and loses its value accordingly. In addition, there is also the problem of information bubbles and echo-chambers online – whereby individuals become insulated from science, verifiable news and informed commentary based upon facts.

These complexities mean that having quality journalism to serve as a reference narrative is, in other words, just half the solution. The other half has to be the empowerment of Internet users to recognize, to call for, and to make use of credible journalism. To criticize bad journalism, and demand that standards of professionalism should be lived up to. And to vote with their attention – to ignore media with discredited journalism, and to engage with that which has proven itself a credible brand. Conversely, this also means empowerment for being able to understand the mass of non-journalistic narratives online. Such empowerment means nothing less than the ongoing work of building up media and information literacy capacities of everyone, not least children and young people.

Part IV: THREE FOCI OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY

Three key areas can be signalled for educational strategies in this endeavour, covering where, who and how. Media and Information Literacy needs to address all of these, not merely one or two, and it has to intersect closely with wider life-skills:

1. Literacy about **where** you are – the knowledge to understand what it means when you're on the Internet, who else is on it (and who is not), what's behind the presence of actors and messages encountered there, what data and identity trails you are leaving. You need to know about issues of belonging, and you need to know that involvement in the world of online representations, of imaginary and virtual communities, is not the same as real community. It is literacy if you know that you cannot be sure that your experience on the Internet is authentic and corresponding to direct experiences of reality, and it is literacy to have the skills to sift truth from lies in the narratives available.
2. Literacy about **who** you are – which means being able to recognize attempts to persuade you, often through emotions, for purposes as diverse as consumer preferences, cyber-grooming by sexual and other predators; political-, gender- or personality-based intimidation, through to

attempts to radicalize you and others for violent extremism. To spot these manipulative efforts, you need media and information literacy. You need the competence to define your own identity, to be the real master of who you are, with your internal sense of what is right and wrong, and not to become unknowingly played by someone else seeking to enlist you to their agendas and to become one of them. If you are

3. Literacy about **how** you respond to all this. Your identity of who you are is not solely a function of what you consume on the internet; you also have the potential to produce your own content and to develop your own identity. So you need to know how to use the technology to communicate optimally, especially if you wish to join humanity with the identity of a global citizen. You need to know how to do journalism – credible reporting and comment informed by facts – on the Internet. In addition, you need to know how your human rights are faring online – your rights to expression, to information, to protection, to reputation amongst others. You need to know how you can defend and promote these human rights for yourself and for all other Internet users because these rights are universal or nothing. You need to know how to recognize and deal with misinformation, hate speech and trolls. And how to stand up to hatred, intimidation, and calls to violence online.

Knowing where, who and how are essentials for Media and Information Literacy in the digital age. There is a lesson in all this which applies not only to countering violent extremism, but also to society's reactions to this phenomenon. Media and information literacy is needed for both resisting violent extremism and in the face of fear-mongers who exploit the existence of violent extremism for their own ends. Media and information literacy, combined with quality journalism, can help us to both forestall radicalization and avoid the pitfalls in how we respond to it.

SUMMING UP

To conclude: Media and Information Literacy is about empowering users about where they are, who they are, and how best to act in relation to online challenges. Alongside supporting free, pluralistic and independent journalism, promoting this kind of Literacy is what can help us deal with the deeper challenges of radicalization for violent extremism.

The endeavour of Media and Information Literacy is a clear imperative for our times. It informs the slogan for World Press Freedom Day on 3 May this year – “Critical minds for critical times”. Still, our biggest challenge today is to see these insights translated into policies, practice and budgets. To take one example: do we give our school systems worldwide on a scorecard in regard to teaching learners how to be critical and aware in digital space? You know the answer – it is “can do better”. And that is not good enough for what we would like and it is not what our societies need in this historical period.

In other words, it is clear that much more still needs to be done. We have to sensitise more stakeholders to the importance of Media and Information Literacy and its value to society, including values beyond dealing with violent extremism. We have to rally government, educators, media, internet companies, civil society and users to create or improve systems, mechanisms, programmes for these purposes. We have to expand and deepen our partnerships.

In this critically important quest, UNESCO will continue to do its utmost, with close links to UNAOC, to see calls for Media and Information Literacy turned into practical realities of empowerment for peace, human rights and sustainable development. This indeed is a cost-effective value proposition for the prevention of violent extremism. Let us invest today and avoid costs tomorrow.