Countering online disinformation and hate speech to foster Peace

Social Media 4 Peace and #CoronavirusFacts projects

Conference
21 September 2021 | 10:00 – 16:30 (CET)

On the occasion of the International Peace Day and ahead of the Universal Access to Information Day, UNESCO is organizing a conference to discuss the critical role that social media play in promoting peace and enhancing access to information, contributing the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 16.10 which calls for ensuring public access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms.

A year and a half of global crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic has put lives, public health, livelihoods, economies and in extension also political systems and social fabrics under unprecedented strain. The pandemic and associated movement restrictions have also accelerated the evolution of digital information sharing patterns and use of digital communication tools.

Through the angle and experience gained from the implementation of two EU-funded projects spanning this period of challenges and change, this conference will examine pressing global issues of social media content governance to counter online hate speech and disinformation and the need to develop common principles for a global online space. It will further discuss the role of the European Union and the United Nations in setting global standards and the need to act at local level to tackle challenges of disinformation and hate speech in context.

Background information

Each year the International Day of Peace is observed around the world on 21 September. The UN General Assembly has declared this as a day devoted to strengthening the ideals of peace, through observing 24 hours of non-violence and cease-fire.

Recognizing the significance of access to information, the UN General Assembly has also proclaimed 28 September as the International Day for Universal Access to Information (IDUAI).

Across the world, Web 2.0 innovations in technology have changed the way people seek, receive and impart information and connect with each other. Social media, in particular, enables people to become producers of content and information rather than just passive consumers. While there is little doubt that those changes are significant, the consequences can vary. The role and power of social media in shaping social and political changes, violent or non-violent, have therefore come under increasing scrutiny in recent years.

On the one hand, social media is being used to increase civic mobilisation and to facilitate access to information, empowering citizens to organize major peaceful political movements across continents, either on political issues or on specific thematic topics. On the other, it is also being used to polarize society, manipulate with micro targeting, spread and amplify disinformation, misinformation and propaganda, increase intolerance and even to fuel hate and conflicts, contributing to new threats to stability and peace.

Times of change, hardship and crisis have always brought with them increased risks of social tensions and the spread of disinformation and hateful narratives. Such patterns are for example observed during times of elections and connected to migration flows but the COVID-19 pandemic, which has introduced layers of global crises and brought a massive wave of global disinformation in its wake, has demonstrated in an unprecedented way, the necessity to build resilience to such phenomena and conflict triggers that are adapted to the new global digital information ecosystem.

To address those new challenges and curb online harmful content while protecting freedom of expression, UNESCO and the European Union have partnered on two global projects: #CoronavirusFacts and Social Media 4 Peace. Both projects have the ambition to tackle harmful content and disinformation. Both projects face the complexity of addressing online, potentially harmful content because of the impossibility to define the boundaries of the type of content covered without context. This is why, in addition to using human rights principles as a universal baseline, it is necessary to take social, cultural, and linguistic nuances into account when developing solutions for content moderation, curation rules and tools in a localized manner.

- The project "#CoronavirusFacts: Addressing the 'Disinfodemic' on COVID-19 in conflict-prone environments" leverages the pivotal role of freedom of expression and access to information to address information needs in times of COVID-19 and to tackle the massive wave of disinformation which threatens to impact democracy, sustainable development and stability around the world. The project which has activities both at the global level, in four regions and in nine countries; supports professional, diverse and independent media's capacity to report on the pandemic; strengthens local fact-checking organisations to debunk misinformation; and empowers youth and other citizens to critically process what they read and hear linked to COVID-19 through training in media and information literacy.

- The project 'Social Media 4 Peace' is meant to strengthen the resilience of conflict-affect societies to potentially harmful content spread online, in particular hate speech inciting violence, while enhancing the promotion of peace through digital technologies, notably social media in 3 pilot countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia and Kenya.

The conference has the following objectives:

- To exchange on the challenges of social media content governance to foster peace and democracy.

- To take stock of the achievements, lessons learned and ways forward from the project #CoronavirusFacts.

- To present the Social Media for Peace project.

- To foster dialogue between various stakeholders on the contextualization of harmful content.

Format

Given the Covid-related sanitary restrictions, the event will be an online event for participants and speakers to tune in remotely. We are also providing the opportunity for moderators and speakers based in Brussels to join a studio where the event will be hosted.

The event uses online conferencing systems to facilitate registration and networking of participants. Live streaming platforms will be used to expand participation in real time.

Agenda

High Level Opening Session
10:00 am – 11:00 am

This session will gather high level representatives from the European Union, United Nations, UNESCO, social media platforms and governments to discuss the critical role that social media platforms play in promoting peace and access to information. It will in particular examine pressing global issues of social media content governance to counter online hate speech and disinformation and the need to develop common principles for a global online space. The session will in particular allow to discuss the potential global impact of the new regulatory and co-regulatory framework suggested by the EU and how those are in lines with the principles to enhance the transparency of internet platform companies launched by UNESCO at the 2021 World Press Freedom Day and the United Nations Plan of Action and Strategy on Hate Speech.

Panel Session: Presenting the "Social Media 4 Peace" Project
11:00 am – 12:30 pm

The first session will be dedicated to the project entitled "Social Media 4 Peace". The project launched in early 2021 is meant to strengthen the resilience of conflict-affected societies to potentially harmful content spread online, in particular hate speech inciting violence, while enhancing the promotion of peace through digital technologies, notably social media in 3 pilot countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia and Kenya. Speakers will include project stakeholders and representatives of social media platforms to discuss why and how the project intends to increase knowledge on the impact of online messages on offline behaviours and conflict dynamics and how it could pilot new tools at local level to curb harmful content. Speakers will also address how to maximize digital technologies' potential to become a critical element of peace-building.

Panel session: Lessons learnt of the project "#CoronavirusFacts, Addressing the 'Disinfodemic' on COVID-19 in conflict-prone environments"

1:30 pm – 3:00 pm

The second session will take stock of achievements and lessons learnt from the #CoronavirusFacts project, coming to an end mid-October 2021. Project stakeholders and partners from across the world will share

insights on how project actions contributed to enhance access to information and mitigate the spread of online disinformation and hateful narratives at a critical time during the pandemic. The panel will reflect on how resilience against conflict and tensions exacerbated by crisis has been strengthened as a result of the project during the COVID-19 pandemic but also on what legacy impact project actions will have for stakeholders, target countries and regions to face future crisis and what areas of challenges that have emerged during the past year and a half that will require further engagement and action.

Panel session: Contextualization of online harmful content to foster peace
3:15 pm – 4:15 pm

The moderation and curation rules of online, potentially harmful content are mostly discussed at the global level in a "one size fits all" fashion. Yet, the complexity of addressing online, potentially harmful content lies in the impossibility to define precisely the boundaries of the type of content covered irrespective of the context. This is why, in addition to using human rights principles as a universal baseline, take into account social, cultural, and linguistic nuances it seems necessary to develop and review content moderation and curation rules and tools in a localized manner. Speakers of this last session will address the contextualization of online harmful content by sharing local experiences and exploring how to best curb online harmful content while protecting freedom of expression and enhancing the promotion of peace.

Closing session
4:15 pm – 4:30 pm

Working languages

English and French with simultaneous interpretation available.

Contact

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