

Background note

Social media and youth radicalization in digital age

Summary

The Internet offers significant possibilities for supporting the realization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and advancing all human rights including access to information, freedom of expression and on-line privacy. UNESCO also recognizes that unchecked certain forms of Internet use and internet-related effects may lead to undesirable outcomes. The Organization therefore seeks to promote awareness amongst all stakeholders, promote debate, reflection and solution finding so as to mitigate adverse outcomes and amplify the widest disseminate and uptake of benefits. Part of this efforts involves exploring Internet-related phenomena, understanding their evolution in different regions, their application and impact across various user groups and societies. Such an understanding grounded in an empirical basis can support more effective policy responses and enhance our efforts towards attainment of the international targets.

It is often taken for granted in popular discourse that the Internet and social media play significant roles in radicalizing youth, rather than as a source of positive change. The loss of life, insecurity and other major social disruptions that occur when radicalization escalates into extremist behaviors makes understanding of the triggers and factors for the escalation of radicalization an important public policy concern. UNESCO is therefore commissioning research to gain greater insight into the linkages between radicalization and social media. With a view to preserving beneficial aspects and fundamental freedoms that the Internet offers, the study will also seek to understand how counter-measures may impact on the exercise of human rights both on-line and offline.

The aim is therefore to provide a global mapping of research into the roles played by social media in radicalization processes in all regions, to assess related counter-steps being taken against social media content seem as contributing to radicalization, and providing an in-depth analysis on how these may impact on online freedoms. On the basis Based of the empirical findings, the study should provide policy recommendations for appropriate responses that could be taken by various stakeholders such as state actors, Internet companies, news media and researchers as well as individual users amongst others.

Background:

The Secretary General of UN, Mr Ban Ki-Moon, in his remarks on 29 May 2015 expressed the UN's concern on increase of foreign fighters joining terrorist groups and confirmed that there has been an estimated 70 percent increase in foreign terrorist fighters worldwide between the middle of 2014 and March 2015¹. According to the UN estimates, over 25,000 foreign citizens from more than 100 countries have joined self-proclaimed ISIS and other groups. The UN SG has suggested in his Plan of Action to Prevent Extremism to "(b) Encourage more research on the relationship between the misuse of the Internet and social media by violent extremists and the factors that drive individuals towards violent extremism."²

¹ Source: <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=8689>

² <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N15/456/22/PDF/N1545622.pdf?OpenElement>

Terrorist groups have led a global social media campaign to take their cause to every computer and mobile phone. They are increasingly adept in using the Internet and social media to propagate their hateful messages and support their recruitment and terrorism activities.

According to a recent report “Jihad Against Journalist” by RSF (Reporters Sans Frontiers)³, the self-proclaimed ISIS (Islamic State) central media command supervises seven media divisions with separate specialties (video, text, photo, radio and translation) and collects the information from 38 “media offices” worldwide, mainly in Iraq and Syria but also Afghanistan, West Africa, the Caucasus, Algeria, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia.

Some 50,000-70,000 Twitter accounts support self-proclaimed ISIS today⁴, each with an average of one thousand followers. And according to a study⁵ by the Center for Middle East Policy published in March 2015, the success of the terrorist group on social networks is dominated by a hyperactive 500-2000 accounts that tweet intensively. Though reprehensible it is not clear however, how effective these media efforts are in engendering sympathy for their cause or recruiting followers.

Nevertheless, the tragic events unfolding around the world add urgency to the task of countering Internet-based activities that may foment radicalization and extremism, facilitate terrorism with horrendous off-line and on-line consequences. There is an urgent need to gain a thorough understanding about social media’s role in the radicalization process, and the challenges and successes on combating radicalization without compromising Internet related freedoms. At the same time, the processes by which young people may come to embrace violence are not restricted to Jihad and religious-based causes, as indicated in the examples above. Understanding the mechanism/process of radicalization is also equally relevant to less publicized issues such as violent homophobic and anti-immigrant actions.

The challenge for governments and all stakeholders is to understand the range of factors in which social media may play a role in this, so that responses are not misplaced or based on unsupported assumptions. On this basis, it may be possible to identify appropriate steps to counter radicalization activity online and to ensure appropriate legal, institutional, administrative and educational frameworks to respond to the threat, in full compliance with the international human rights law. Steps should ensure that freedom of expression and privacy are free from arbitrary, unlawful or disproportionate interference, and are able to preserve the characteristics of the Internet being open, inclusive and contributing to sustainable development and prosperity of modern society.⁶

Goal 16 of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda launched in late September 2015 draws attention to the prevention of violence as a critical factor in realizing sustainable living. This points to the need to prepare all citizens, in particular youth, to utilize on-line engagement and leverage ICT and digital networks as a pillar for building peace and realizing sustainable development. Reflection is therefore required on what it means to promote the Internet’s virtual community as a space for citizens to practice their citizenship and rights online and offline. At a minimum, this requires an enabling social, technical,

³ https://gallery.mailchimp.com/5cb8824c726d51483ba41891e/files/RAPPORT_DAECH_FR_WEB.pdf

⁴ Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-31760126>

⁵ <http://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/high-tech/20150317.OBS4764/cyber-terrorisme-un-recrutement-en-4-phases.html>

⁶ <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/70/674>

policy and educational environment, the ability to access networks as well as individuals equipped with the appropriate skills, attitudes and competencies to use the Internet judiciously. More than that, it requires understanding the extent to which social media can be abused, and where this fits into the variety of factors that can promote or threaten peaceful behaviors.

Why UNESCO

UNESCO is the UN agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression, instructed by its Constitution to promote “the free flow of ideas by word and image”. In 2013, UNESCO’s General Conference of 195 Member States adopted Resolution 52, which recalled Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/20/8, “The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet”, affirming that the same rights that people have off-line must also be protected online.

Such rights are relevant across UNESCO’s areas of competence and are critical for sustainable development, peace and dialogue. UNESCO holds that the negative dimensions should not overshadow the advantages of the Internet and social media, especially their potential contribution to building inclusive Knowledge Societies and achieving the 2030 Development Agenda, as well as advancing all human rights including freedom of expression and privacy online and offline.

UNESCO’s Director General, Irina Bokova, said in a recent article on the Huffington post: “We need to disarm the process of radicalization, to undo the mechanisms of influence that can place young people on the path to violent extremism. We must teach peace.”⁷

Following the international Conference, “Youth and the internet: Fighting Radicalization and Extremism”, held at UNESCO’s Paris Headquarters from 16 to 17 June, 2015 and within the framework of UNESCO’s intergovernmental Information for All Programme (IFAP), UNESCO has launched its integrated Framework for Action – Empowering Youth to Build Peace: Youth 2.0 Building skills, Bolstering Peace. Drawing on the Organization’s transdisciplinary competencies, this initiative seeks to empower youth to leverage the influential role of information and communication technologies (ICT) and networks to promote processes harmonious, inclusive and equitable participation on-line and off-line in pluralistic societies. The Framework reaffirms the decisive role of values, knowledge and skills that strengthen respect for human rights, social justice, mutual understanding and contribute to sustainable development and peace.

Subsequent events point to the continued relevance and need to address Internet-related dimensions of youth radicalization and extremism. At the UN General Assembly High-Level Forum on a Culture of Peace, held in New York, on 9 September 2015, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon drew the attention of global leaders to the UNESCO Conference and Framework for its contribution to preventing violent extremism.

Following its 38th General Conference’ adoption of the Connecting the Dots conference Outcome Document, UNESCO’s concept of internet universality⁸, inclusive knowledge societies⁹, media and

⁷Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/irina-bokova/stop-radicalization_b_8590060.html

⁸ UNESCO ROAM Principles for Internet universality advocate for an internet that is human rights based, open, access to all users and driven by multi-stakeholder participation.

⁹ Knowledge Societies “are societies in which people have the capabilities not just to acquire information but also to transform it into knowledge and understanding, which empowers them to enhance their livelihoods and contribute to the social and economic development of their communities” (UNESCO, 2014:19).

information literacy, and IFAP's six strategic priorities¹⁰ are of particular relevance. They provide an overarching conceptual frame for exploring the comprehensive empowerment of citizenship in digital age.

UNESCO attended the special meeting of the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee and technical sessions of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), entitled "Prevent terrorists from exploiting the Internet and social media to recruit terrorists and incite terrorist acts, while respecting human rights and fundamental freedoms," at UNHQ in New York in December 2015. UNESCO moderated the session on Freedom of Expression and Privacy, and shared UNESCO position that combating terrorism should be made compatible with protecting human rights and respecting international standards on freedom of expression and privacy. UNESCO also presented its publications on intermediaries and hate speech, and share its projects related to Media and Information Literacy, empowering youth for peace, and global citizen education as key social response to fighting youth radicalisation.

In 2015, UNESCO Director for Freedom of Expression and Media Development addressed European Parliament's expert hearing on the role of media and Internet in countering hate speech and promoting intercultural dialogue. UNESCO advocated free flow on the basis that pluralistic information enables people to identify propaganda for violence and war, and choose peaceful alternatives. Any mechanism for protecting vulnerable persons from clearly inciteful information must meet international standards for legitimate limits on speech and be complemented by a preparedness paradigm. On the same occasion, the Director highlighted the intersections of news media as an original source of credible information, and social media as a site of secondary information that plays in a context of interpersonal communications that are particularly resonant at an emotional level. The question this prompts is the extent to which news may impact on social media, or be absorbed into social media processes, as relevant to radicalization and counter-radicalization processes which may include online dimensions.

Literature review

In the past decades, there has been a great number of books, research papers, reports and articles on the subject of social and youth radicalization.

Social media was initially deemed as a major danger to bring youth radicalization, for example, with one writer stating that "there is a real danger in social networks for young people, for teens, for individuals who are seeking, seeking an identity and seeking a community because these people will fall very often precisely to the most radical."¹¹

But more and more recent in-depth studies have showed the complexity in the issue: "It is highly unlikely that an individual can only be radicalized by using the NSM (les nouveaux médias sociaux). The "danger" can not only be found online, but exposure to violent extremism offline must be taken into account."¹² and "the majority of radicalized individuals come into contact with extremists' ideology through offline socialization prior to being further indoctrinated online."¹³

¹⁰ IFAP's priority areas are Information Accessibility, Information for Development, Information Ethics, Information Literacy, Information Preservation and Multilingualism in cyberspace. www.unesco.org/webworld/ifap

¹¹ La fabrique du djihad : radicalisation et terrorisme au Canada (2015) by Stéphane Berthomet, Edito.

¹² Comprendre et expliquer le rôle des nouveaux médias sociaux dans la formation de l'extrémisme violent Une recherche qualitative et quantitative, by Nele SCHILS and Julianne LAFFINEUR.

http://www.belspo.be/belspo/fedra/TA/synTA043_fr.pdf

¹³ Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and how to counter it (2014) by Ghaffar Hussain and Dr Erin Marie Saltman, Quilliam

Regarding some of the current counter radicalization measures taken by governments, their effectiveness is strongly questioned in several studies. One states that “negative measures, including government-backed censorship and filtering initiatives, are ineffective in tackling online extremism; they tackle the symptoms rather than the causes of radicalization. Motivated extremists and terrorist affiliates can evade such measures easily through the dark Internet, virtual private networks (VPNs), and even video game platforms. Blocked materials consistently reappear online and there is no effective way for ISPs or social media companies to filter extremist content.”¹⁴

58 NGOs recently called on the UN Human Rights Council to consider serious concerns around certain initiatives around “countering and preventing violent extremism”. As Article 19 has pointed out, “Some of these initiatives risk significantly negative impacts on human rights, particularly the right to freedom of expression”¹⁵.

Online hate speech is another hot research area related to youth radicalization. UNESCO has published a study¹⁶ Countering Online Hate Speech in 2015 which goes beyond a protection paradigm and proposes a comprehensive social response including monitoring online hate speech, creating civil society coalitions, fostering Internet companies’ role in countering online hate speech, promoting media and information literacy and mobilizing news media to counter online hate speech. The study also noted the “fear speech” and “dangerous speech” concepts, which have different resonances in terms of understanding whether offensive expressions of hate can transition to illegal expression of advocacy of incitement to violence, hostility and discrimination.

Many scholars are also concerned that restricting online access can lead to limitation of legitimate civil liberties and online freedoms, and have suggested that “government must ensure that it avoids forgoing human rights norms in counter-terrorism legislation, counter-extremism policy, foreign policy and domestic policy”¹⁷.

They have also commented on measures such as governmental censorship and filtering, arguing that these are can be ineffective, costly and even counter-productive, and have assessed alternative measures such as steps to “develop counter-extremist content and popularizing online initiatives that fight against extremism more effective in challenging extremist ideologies.”¹⁸ It is also often pointed out that there are currently not enough materials – news or persuasive communications - that counter extremist content online, allowing extremists to monopolize certain issues.¹⁹ There is also a discussion on counter-speech versus alternative speech and some scholars have proposed “instead of perpetually searching for a non-

¹⁴ A White Paper for UNESCO and the United Nations Community – Youth Led Pathways from Extremism, 2015 by Mark Brennan, Pat Dolan, Haras Rafiq, Colleen Connolly-Ahern, Rosemary Jolly, and Sarah Eissler, A Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Children, Youth, and Communities White Paper

¹⁵ <https://www.article19.org/resources.php/resource/38248/en/un-hrc:-58-ngos-warn-of-harmful-impact-of-%E2%80%9Ccountering-and-preventing-violent-extremism%E2%80%9D>

¹⁶ Gagliardone, I. et al. 2015. Countering Online Hate Speech. UNESCO Series on Internet Freedom. Paris: UNESCO. <http://www.unesco.org/ulis/cgi-bin/ulis.pl?catno=233231>

¹⁷ Countering Islamist Extremist Narratives – A Strategic Briefing (2016), Jonathan Russell and Haras Rafiq, Quilliam

¹⁸ Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and how to counter it (2014) by Ghaffar Hussain and Dr Erin Marie Saltman, Quilliam

¹⁹ Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and how to counter it (2014) by Ghaffar Hussain and Dr Erin Marie Saltman, Quilliam

existent catch-all counter-narrative, we must seek an alternative narrative".²⁰ The risks of instrumentalising news so that it becomes a propaganda weapon in an information war, instead of a credible and convincing resource that can carry weight with citizens.

It is widely agreed in the literature that the gender aspect should be addressed. A comprehensive counter radicalization strategy must have a focus "on combating gender extremism, which we define as ideologies that significantly and negatively impact the human rights of one gender by control, coercion, violation, or the systemic promotion of the superiority of one gender over another."²¹

Taking into consideration the latest trends and evolving patterns and means in radicalization processes as well as the work undertaken by the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), the European Commission has adopted a Communication titled "Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU's Response". This focuses on ten themes²², in which EU particularly encourages young people to think critically vis-à-vis extremist messages and also research into trends in radicalization and evaluation of existing practices."²³

In addition to scholarly articles and studies, it is notable that a number of research institutions, think tanks and NGOs have explored the subject and conducted various research projects, such as Quilliam Foundation (UK), Centre for the study of De-radicalization at King's College (UK), the Brookings Institution Markaz (US), the Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN) by EU, Centre d'étude et de recherche sur le monde arabe et méditerranéen (France), Institute for National Security Studies (Israel), International Observatory on the Study of Terrorism (Spain), Center for Democracy and Technology (US), US Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication, Institute for Strategic Dialogue (UK), Radical Middle Way (UK), GNI (Global Network Initiative), RSF (Reporters Sans Frontiers, France), and the Research Centre of Capacity Development for Emergency Management, Fudan University, China.

However, most literature and studies are limited to the radicalization process in the context of Europe and North America. There is a need to widen the current study and provide a global perspective about research on social media's role in radicalisation processes which are taking place in different context of all regions, particularly in the developing world. A more detailed analysis on quality of the research into the role of social media as one of the agents for online radicalisation process should be given. The existing literature tends to look at social media in isolation of other media, whereas it exists in an interactive ecosystem of news and entertainment media where different media play different roles. Hence, there is a need to place social media in a more holistic context, with due regard to the different theories of media effects – both social and news media - in relation to different kinds of information and communication functions, and varying effects on knowledge, attitudes and behaviours.

²⁰ Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate' (2015) by Charlie Winter, Quilliam

²¹ Caliphettes: Women and the appeal of Islamic State (2015) by Haras Rafiq and Nikita Malik, Quilliam

²² RAN Collection Preventing Radicalization to Terrorism and Violent Extremism (first edition),

<http://docplayer.fr/819934-Comprendre-et-expliquer-le-role-des-nouveaux-medias-sociaux-dans-la-formation-de-l-extremisme-violent-une-recherche-qualitative-et-quantitative.html>

²³ Renforcer l'action de l'UE face à la radicalisation et à l'extrémisme violent, by European Commission, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-18_fr.htm

There is also a need to assess the human rights implications of current counter-radicalisation measures taken by governments such as law enforcement agencies, social media companies including Facebook, Twitter and also other alternative ones.

Last but not the least, it is worth noting that several distinct but related concepts are being used in the current discussion, such as terrorism, radicalization and extremism, which are lack of agreed definitions. So it would be useful to look into the literature review on these definitions and prepare a glossary for the various terms that are being tossed about in the future research.

Objectives:

The study proposed will focus on below three areas:

1. *Global mapping of research into the role of social media in radicalization process in all regions.*

Given that radicalization is a global phenomenon, the study will firstly give a global mapping of research findings about the roles that social media, in the context of the wider media ecosystem, are assumed to have played in the radicalization process in different regions. An empirical and evidence based approach should be taken in order to assess the quality of the research, collect materials and cases from all regions, and build an extensive review into diverse literature and existing studies in multiple languages and regions. The category of social media will include both global platforms as Facebook and Twitter, as well as alternatives in some regions. The function of social media and racialization will be analyzed in terms of its specificity and interaction with news and entertainment media and their diverse effects.

2. Updates on related counter-radicalization measures and analysis of the challenges to online freedoms

The study will update information about the current efforts and various counter-radicalization measures (both negative and positive) being taken by governments, social media companies and other actors in different parts of the world. The study will focus the analysis on the challenges of protecting privacy and freedom of expression online and offline including on issues like removing content, blocking websites, requesting data from intermediaries, creating and disseminating counter-speech and narratives, provision of alternative platforms, etc. The analysis will examine various elements at stake and discuss challenges for different stakeholders including governments, judicial system actors, the private sector, civil society, media organizations, etc, in combating radicalization and terrorism and protecting human rights.

3. Recommendations

The study aims to provide recommendations for governments, judicial systems, law enforcement agencies, Internet companies, news media, civil society and researchers in balancing de-radicalisation measures and the protection of human rights, especially with regard to online expression and privacy issues.

Time Frame: 12 months

Process and events:

The study will be commissioned through a public bidding process, and formulated by an expert meeting to be held at UNESCO in June 2016. The research will inform the forthcoming events in 2016:

1. International conference “Les Jeunes et les Médias Sociaux: Lutter contre la Violence et l’Extrémisme”, to be held at the Centre international des Sciences de l’Homme (CISH) in Beirut from 17 to 19 May, 2016.
2. A follow up 3-day conference in Montreal in Autumn 2016.
3. RightsConference in San Francisco, April 2016,
4. Eurodig in Brussels, in June 2016
5. WSIS Forum in Geneva, in May 2016
6. Internet Governance Forum in Mexico, in late 2016
7. World Press Freedom Day Celebrations in Helsinki, in May 2016
8. UNESCO IPDC (International Program on Development Communication) Council Meeting in Paris, in 2016
9. Other meetings organized by stakeholders including the CoE, OSCE, etc.

UN and UNESCO related References and resources:

1. UNESCO publication: [Countering Online Hate Speech](#)
2. [*A White Paper for UNESCO and the United Nations Community – Youth Led Pathways from Extremism* \(2015\), by Mark Brennan, Pat Dolan, Haras Rafiq, Colleen Connolly-Ahern, Rosemary Jolly, and Sarah Eissler, A Global Network of UNESCO Chairs on Children, Youth, and Communities White Paper](#)
3. UNESCO Conference: [Youth and the Internet: Fighting Radicalisation and Extremism](#)
4. UNESCO Publication: [Fostering freedom online: the role of Internet Intermediaries](#)
5. [The Rabat Plan of Action](#)
6. [Media, violence and terrorism \(WPFD 2002\)](#)
7. UNESCO document: [Internet Universality](#)
8. UNESCO project: [Networks of Mediterranean Youth](#)