

Forum: United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD)

Issue: Measures to address the behavioral influence of online media on international audiences

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Introduction

Social media is an online platform that creates a virtual community and creates social networks where people around the world are able to share content publicly. It plays an essential role in the day-to-day activity in the lives of over 4.6 billion people (58% of the world population) meaning that content can easily become viral and influence most of the world. Social media can be used for all purposes, whether it is social interaction, access to news and information, entertainment, advertisements, and decision making. Its purposes can be used to have a positive impact on the world by helping individuals build relationships, offer support, build a business, and establish authority. At the same time, digital media may have negative effects on populations by creating addiction, depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, FOMO (fear of missing out), and unrealistic expectations. All of the impacts of social media are on a big scale due to the number of people that use these platforms on a daily basis, causing massive behavioral changes both in the long term and in the short term with its strong influence on individuals. For this same reason, the internet should have regulations and restrictions to limit certain behaviors that may cause a negative impact.

Definition of Key Terms

Internet

A global online network that facilitates the communication of information between its users. The development and standardization of technology has resulted in the worldwide adaptation of the internet by individuals.

Social Media

A medium of social networking in which users have the freedom to share information through the sharing of different types of media. The lack of control of what information can be shared poses a threat to the consumption of unbiased media.

Behavioral Influence

The impact of something on how people act. In the context of this issue, this behavior relates to how people act online, as well as how this online presence affects their physical state and mentality.

Bias

One's favor towards a certain idea or thing as compared to other available options. Results in the deception of one's decision-making process due to the inclination to oppose something that goes against their ideology.

Personalization

A system behind social media in which the information available to the users are tailored to their personalities and beliefs. Many platforms use data from user patterns in order to 'recommend' certain news or posts that would trigger their interests. For this reason, it is also very common for information to conform to their personal biases.

Algorithm

A set of instructions that a computer follows to perform a certain task or calculation. These processes are what identify the personal interests of individuals, and send out information that would guarantee the profitability of the social media firm.

Validity

The question of whether something is logically or factually true. Social media has given rise to the need to verify the truthfulness of the information found online.

Xenophobia:

The fear/hatred against something that is foreign. In most cases, this applies to strangers or foreigners, and this concept of hatred occurs transnationally.

General Overview

Social media has become the conventional way of communication between local and global audiences with its facilitation of the ability to share information online. Many platforms have gained an exponential increase in popularity throughout the past 2 decades, resulting in more than half of the global population being active users of their services. The significance of social media in the daily lives of contemporary citizens raises the question of whether it is truly a safe place for these people.

Misinformation

As the usage rates of social media grows, the decision to utilize these platforms as a source of gaining information is growing proportionally. Along with this, distributors of information around the world have started to grow an uncontrollable desire for profit, fulfilled by a simple action from their users: *clicks*.

These originators purposefully create a biased/popular alteration of the information.

This is highly effective due to the tendency of people to 'approve' of information that aligns with their personal opinions, resulting in further sharing or 'likes' that guide the online algorithm into exposing the post to further users. This creates a system of an unimaginably fast spread of information, regardless of its validity. The true danger, however, comes in the type of disinformation spread through these platforms. News containing propaganda, politics, and conspiracy is prone to be altered into misleading the audience, potentially causing negative international implications.

Hate Speech

Closely related to the spread of misinformation, hate speech can arise due to the formation of biases and opinions. Although this issue is not exclusive to the online atmosphere, they are further extremized by the way information is spread on social media. Hate speech refers to the expression of hatred or disapproval of an idea or a group of people based on factors such as race, religion, or gender. Although various social media platforms have means to combat the spread of hate speech, the irregularity of their methods means this issue is still prevalent online. The lack of control results in the public exposure of these harmful ideas that can affect society as a whole, posing a threat to the harmony of the international community. A conflict between races, gender, nationalities, and religion are repercussions that open the potential for unnecessary violence.

COVID-19 Pandemic

A recent event that exemplifies the behavioral influence of social media is the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the world. Along with the spread of information and speculation around the virus, misinformation spread simultaneously. This

so-called 'Infodemic', A compound word between 'information' and 'pandemic', has resulted in the slowing down of progress to recover from the pandemic. An example of this is the misinformation regarding vaccinations. Certain claims, such as the untested adverse health effects of vaccination, have resulted in a negative influence on people's attitudes towards participating in global immunization. Hate speech has also been a growing issue due to the pandemic, especially related to xenophobia. The fear of being affected by the virus has been amplified due to the information online, resulting in the need to blame certain groups of people. Although the pandemic is a temporary issue, it effectively presents how our society's behavior towards a global issue has significantly changed due to the presence of social media.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

China

Being the country with the most social media users (1 billion), China is an advocate for the strict control of media consumption, with many restrictions from US platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat. Millions of users have reported less sleep, more anxiety, less time to work, as well as more shopping scams thus creating a massive impact on the output and productivity of the country as a whole.

India

India is another nation that takes up a significant portion of the international social media population. The prominence of online presence has caused frauds and scams that take over 28 billion dollars a year from innocent people around the world according to the new york times. Also, thousands of reports are filed about misinformation, fake news, and spammers in the Indian social network, which has been found to affect many events such as elections.

USA

Cyberbullying, hate, misinformation, fake news, are just a couple of the repercussions of having a population where more than 70% are active users. A [research](#) has found that around 64% of the social media users in the US believe that it has negative effects on themselves and society. Online media has greatly contributed to the decrease in the stability of the political stance of the nation, by forming an internal conflict among its people.

North Korea

There are NO social media in North Korea due to the laws created by the supreme leader that prohibit citizens from having any internet or social media to prevent north Koreans from having any connection to other countries making them easier to manipulate.

Philippines

Philippines has the highest social media use per capita in the world with an internet average rate over 60% higher than average country usage. Filipinos spend on average 4-5 hours a day dedicated to social media.

Timeline

- 1997** The beginning of the wide-spread use of social media, due to the rapid development of internet, allowing for the communication between multiple people. A site called Six Degrees kickstarted this process and gained around 1 million users on their service.

- 2004** The creation of Facebook. Launched by Mark Zuckerberg, this platform started an era of quick and simple communication between international users, quickly gaining users throughout the years. It has grossed almost 3 billion users internationally, making it the main source of not only communication, but also information for many of its users.
- 2004-2011** Following the success of Facebook, companies have taken advantage of the popularity of online activity to create new ones. Youtube, Instagram, Whatsapp, Reddit, Twitter, etc, were all platforms created during this time period. The wider range of platforms has allowed for people to regularly consume media in much simpler and quicker ways. As a result, the manipulation of information (fake news) has started to arise.
- 2019** Global Covid-19 Pandemic. Due to the immobility of the population, the dependency on social media for information has grown. This has led to multiple repercussions, ranging from xenophobia to disbelief of the current situations, as well as political conflicts.
- 2019** China, India, Iran all ban whatsapp, Tik Tok, Facebook, and 58 other apps due to strict foreign social media censorship that the countries impose to have a safer online presence in their country.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

With the rise of the use of social media globally, the UN and other peace institutes have made multiple actions to combat possible negative repercussions that may arise from the misuse of the technology.

- The UN Human Rights Council issued a call for input regarding 'Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression' during the 47th session of the committee's annual assembly.
 - Acknowledged the impact of social media in the acceleration of disinformation around the world, as well as the oppression of the freedom to speech
 - This was mainly tied to the growing issue of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict of 2022.
- UN has issued a [Strategy and Plan of Action of Hate Speech](#) in 2019
 - Urged the effort in controlling the misuse of the Internet and Social Media for the spread of hate speech.
- UNESCO has conducted a [study](#) on "Countering Online Hate Speech", published in 2015. Focuses on the threat (violence, hate speech, fear) certain online activities have on democratic ideals.
- The Toda Peace Institute, along with other institutions, have issued an [extensive report](#) about the 'weaponization' of social media, and its threats on the peacebuilding of the international community. It mentions the main ways in which social media is being misused as a tool of harming or manipulating groups of people, especially through political intentions. Gives possible solutions to the issue.

Past Actions

Germany:

Since 2018, Germany created the NetzDG law that consists of regulation for all companies that have over 2 million online users where they are forced to create

sustainable procedures that review complaints about the content that is being uploaded in their network and remove anything inappropriate or illegal within 24 hours. Furthermore, companies have to publish how they are doing every six months. By breaking the law, individuals can be fined up to 5 million euros and companies up to 50 million euros.

China:

China has particularly harsh measures to regulate social media use such as banning social media apps that are not from China such as google, twitter, and whatsapp and replacing them with chinese apps such as Baidu, Wechat and Weibo. Also, China successfully restricted millions of websites that the government believes that may impose some danger to the Chinese population such as gambling websites. Additionally, China has hundreds of thousands of cyber police that monitor all social media and websites in the online world.

Possible Solutions

Determining a solution for the spread of information and behavioral influences from social media is difficult simply due to the high dependency international citizens already have on online activity. The complete prevention of these repercussions will be a slow but necessary process for the protection of digital citizenship.

Solutions need to consider a balance between government control of what information is available to the public and the freedom of users to receive and interpret information personally. The intervention of international cooperatives is necessary to prevent the spread of misinformation and malicious ideas. However, too much intervention will violate the rights of its users.

Large corporations of major social media platforms are notorious for their use of algorithms for the sole purpose of profit. Although beneficial for the companies themselves, this poses a threat to its users, as they are manipulated into receiving personally biased information. The source of issues of social media stems from this lack of transparency from large corporations. With the growth of technology, the role of artificial intelligence in amplifying these effects increases dramatically. Working with these companies to form a healthy international community will be a key start to hindering the spread of negative behavioral influences.

It is also important to come to a conclusive agreement between nations to determine the extent to which governments control the media consumed by the citizens. As digital media has become the norm of modern life, the impact of changes in the use of technology must be considered. Some nations would be open to the total transparency of information spread to the public, while others are not. This disparity must be addressed, especially as the solution to solving behavioral influences of social media will depend on how information is given to the public.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

One of the many goals within the 11th SDG, Sustainable cities and communities, is to make human settlements equal, inclusive and safe. Social media has a big impact on this specific goal as it may help or damage equality, inclusivity and safety, it all comes down to how social media is being used. Unfortunately, there will always be users that hurt communities and have negative impact on other individuals so it comes down to the software companies as well as governments

to regulate and control how social media is being used and sensor or delete uploads that hurt communities.

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Appendix

- I. <https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media>
 - A. Graph of the growth of the use of different social media platforms throughout the past 2 decades. Also includes various data about digital citizenship, such as average hours spent per nation, countries with the highest usage rate of social media, and usages per age/gender.
- II. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/471240/perceived-objectivity-mass-media-usa/>
 - A. Graph of the change in the levels of how much the population ‘trusts’ mass media in the communication of factual information in the US.
- III. https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/advising-and-mobilizing/Action_plan_on_hate_speech_EN.pdf

- A. UN's report regarding the actions that must be taken against hate speech
- IV. <https://reliefweb.int/attachments/7b35c6a6-3505-3acc-9ea7-ae60a689afe4/Social-Media-Discussion-Paper-12172021.pdf>
- A. A report on the weaponization of social media. Outlines how growing online activity has caused global negative repercussions along with recommendations on how it could be combatted.